Alexander Somerville (1811-1885)
Whistler at a New Plough

ELIZABETH WATERSTON

Near the end of a tumultuous career, Alexander Somerville edited the Toronto Church Herald, from 1874-6. The front pages of that Anglican paper - surely one of the most pallid journals ever published - suddenly glowed with the passions that had made Somerville legendary. Politics, economics, army regulations, British Columbian prospects, Indian aspirations: topics tumbled from that untired pen. Somerville, always a bonnie fighter, had found an incongruous last battle field.

Soldier, reformer, spy, journalist, Somerville in his early career had stirred British hearts and consciences. He had been famous as the last soldier in the British army to receive public flogging, he had been notorious as an informer, using his connections with trade unionism to break up Chartist insurrections. He had told the truth about Ireland in the 40's, and about the Peace League in the Crimean-conscious 50's. And now here he was, a mountainous aging man, writing about Louis Riel, about American imports, flinging a last blast of the old powerful rhetoric into the pages of the humble organ of Anglican establishment.

What a long and tangled path he had come, from his Scottish boyhood! To trace that path is to stir again some of the fascination of

a character notorious in his own time both in Canada and in the British Isles. And reexamining the Canadian part of Somerville's story raises some trenchant questions about immigration and adaptation, and clarifies some important by-ways in Canadian journalism and politics.

I

The story began in East Lothian, near Lammermoor. Alexander Somerville was the eleventh child of a landless agricultural laborer. Eight children still alive when Alexander was born in 1811 put terrible pressure on father and mother to survive in the "dark" years of the Napoleonic era. We must not here dwell on the accounts of boyhood in the border counties; but no one interested in Scottish life - its customs, dialects, religion, educational system, laboring conditions - should neglect the early chapters of Somerville's Autobiography of a Working Man. The zest and charm of the style is perhaps suggested by one chapter heading: "1829: Much Hard Work - a Little Poaching and Some Love." Details of recruitment in Edinburgh and of training at Brighton in the Scots Greys (the Royal North British Dragoons) follow details of the earlier life of plough boy, sawyer, drainer, quarryman; and all are mixed with books, friendships, and adventures to produce the image of a sturdy bony young soldier of twenty-one. He was nearly six feet tall, handy with horses; he was an unlikely candidate for martyrdom. But in the army mess Somerville had become a leader of political discussion. He had become agitated over the Reform Bill furor, and he wrote anonymously, to the Birmingham Weekly Dispatch: "The Scots Greys would not fire on a peaceful gathering," he assured civilian readers, and he wrote encouragingly about reform sentiments among his fellow soldiers.

Libel on the regiment! Military treason! Offended officers, on trumped-up charges, found Somerville guilty of disobeying orders, and sentenced him to two hundred lashes by the cat o'nine tails. The commanding officer halted the proceedings after a hundred lashes: "Stop, take him down, he is a young soldier."

Two months later, this punishment had become a cause célèbre in newspapers and in parliament. A Court Inquiry found the commanding officer "injudicious" in punishing so hastily a soldier whose real offence was the expression of radical political opinions. Somerville, who had conducted his own defence with hammering consistency, won the case - but his military career seemed closed. He purchased his discharge from the army, and proceeded, after a brief visit to London, home to Scotland. There he lost his money, and lost
the girl he had long hoped to marry. London, stirring still with reformist agitation, even two years after the passage of the Reform Bill, called him back from Scotland. There once again Somerville became dramatically involved in public revolutionary political affairs, but this time on the side of the establishment.

As a young man marked by the libertarian drama of his army career, Somerville had become privy to a conspiracy. Under cover of trades union plans to march, thirty thousand strong, to London, radicals plotted a political coup: seizure of the King and Queen, murder of Lord Melbourne. Somerville secretly disclosed and thus defused the plot. Neither Lord Melbourne nor the King would meet the Unionists and the great march fizzled into a disorganized gathering.5

After that, perhaps it was self-preservation that took Somerville out of England. In 1835 he joined the Auxiliary British Legion to fight in Spain against Don Carlos. (Years later he would sneer at Major John Richardson’s account of this peninsular campaign.)6 Somerville had not longed for military glory. He had “taken the shilling” and joined the regular army because of bad times in the early 1830’s. Now in Spain he served as a mercenary (as many a Scot had done), but he did reestablish his claim to the soldier’s virtues. As a colour sergeant he disarmed a mutiny, and then led his fellows into battle at Venta Hill. After being wounded in the arm, and struck glancingly also on the head, he was given an honourable discharge in 1837. He returned to England to prepare his first major publication, a narrative of the British Legion and war in Spain. This he sold for one hundred pounds and published in 1839.7

New agitations: Chartism was gathering rebellious force in Britain. In Newport, for instance, a “Welsh Rebellion” occurred in 1838. Civilian mobs were dispersed by trained troops. Somerville, appalled by the division between working-class soldiers (such as he himself had been) and the working men protesting the injustice of their lot, published a pamphlet titled Dissuasive Warnings to the People on Street Warfare (1838). In it he disavowed Chartism as a hopeless scheme in reform, and in letters to the public press he enunciated his own hope for less radical progressive movements such as Cobden was now beginning to urge. In Public and Personal Affairs (1839) he clarified his new political position. From this point on we see Somerville firing not bullets but Anti-Corn-Law pamphlets and newspaper articles, for roughly a nine year period (1838 to 1847). At the same time he tried his hand at fiction and experimented with a series of stories in Paul Swainston, “Pseudo-biography” (1839), and Jerry Queen the Toy Maker (1840). Later Somerville was to claim that Dickens cribbed the idea of pseudo-biography from him – and also incidentally that Thackeray, the other rising star of the day, stole the idea of a “novel without a hero” from Somerville’s Eliza Greenwood (1841).

In 1841 Alexander Somerville married a London girl named Emma Binks. He had known Emma since the days when he returned to London, 1834, bruised by his Scottish failures in love and business. He had then been notable in the Binks family as a visitor who spoke “the broad Scotch.”8 He had waited for Emma to grow up from a “happy, healthy, kindly” childhood. “Every day and year since,” he was to write a decade later, “has ripened our confidence and affection.”9

On the heels of his marriage came an opportunity to work and write for the Anti-Corn-Law League, and to serve as Agricultural Advisor to Cobden, leader of the League. Steam-presses had brought a new age of popular journalism. Writing as “A Whistler at the Plough,” Somerville addressed country people in the language of a farm worker, arguing against the Bread Tax and against the Protectionism that fattened the landed proprietors but kept farm hands hungry. The Manchester Examiner, The Morning Chronicle, and Morning Advertiser all published his “Whistler” letters. The strongest of these were re-issued as A Cry from Ireland (1843).10 This little book dealt with the wrongs of Irish industry, and the sufferings of the tenantry. It was praised by Peel and by Lord John Russell. In the 40’s Somerville also worked in Fleet Street as an agent placing news items which might influence opinion in favour of the Cobdenite position of Corn-Law repeal. He thus established a wide chain of acquaintances in the newspaper world which he would continue to touch long after he had left the League, and indeed long after he had left the British Isles.

He was becoming more interested in economics than in politics. He wrote on the way potato blight affected the balance of trade in Britain. He wrote on the “free sea,” on reciprocity, on Trade Guilds. He conferred with American firms on the way public banks worked. He moved still between London, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Dublin, sending effective dogmatic articles back to the Manchester Examiner and to other English papers including the new Illustrated London News. Somerville’s experience on this innovative paper, founded 1842, became very important in his later life. At intervals Somerville would collect groups of his articles and republish them in book form: On the Economy of Revolution, With Warning on Street Warfare (1834); Free Trade and the League: A Biographic History (1843, 1848); The O’Connor Land Scheme Examined (1848).11
This period of exhausting travel and hectic productive journalism came to a climax in 1847. Stricken by a deadly fever in Dublin, Somerville decided, first, that he should put on paper a death-bed account of his part in the trades union conspiracy against the King and Queen of 1834. Next he began (still in the belief that he was dying) a long account of his own youth and of the drama of his flogging. This Autobiography was written for the information of his infant son, but an expanded form of it was presented to the public in 1848.

Somerville recovered from his terrible illness. But his loyalties shifted. By 1852 Cobden and Bright were intent on a new campaign, for the Peace League, against war with Russia. Somerville wrote a letter to Lord Palmerston (which Palmerston read in parliament) repudiating his old hero Cobden, and in 1854 brought out a denunciatory pamphlet titled Cobdenic Policy the Internal Enemy of England. Naturally Cobden and Bright retaliated and used their influence to cut away the market for Somerville’s articles. Somerville felt they were “hounding” him. They did indeed bring him to financial ruin. He embarked on feverish projects, trying to support his growing family: a study of electromagnetism; research into witchcraft and animal migration; analyses of Scottish folk customs. For a short time he edited a daily newspaper in Edinburgh (1856). He had become obsessed with a sense of persecution by the Peace League people. Working Man’s Witness Against the London Literary Infidels (1857) is manic, and so to a lesser degree are Biography of The League Leader (1857) and Bowring, Cobden and China (also 1857). By June of 1857 Somerville’s delusions were so extreme he was committed for mental illness to St. Bartholomew’s. He now determined to emigrate, but became convinced that there was a conspiracy against him in Australia precluding choice of that country. In May, 1858, he bought passage to Toronto, “driven to America against my desire.”12 The unwilling emigrant was now forty-seven, father of six, husband of a woman pregnant again and ill. His nerves and his mental health were still shaky. He was leaving a world whose very crowdedness and tumult meant opportunities for him as a journalist. He was going to a new world whose institutions, economic affairs, politics, and customs all reflected a vastly different world of empty spaces, slow growth, and provincial self-absorption.

II

Somerville was hardly off the boat in Quebec when he began turning his thoughts and his pen to Canadian politics. Quebec City had furnished an area for many Scottish journalists; Neilson, Christie, Stewart, Middleton, and many others had helped build rival anglophone papers. Now the Mercury and Chronicle jostled the Gazette for readers. All used and adapted the skills of old country newsmen. When Alexander Somerville arrived in Quebec he was in desperate need of a job. His first career had dealt him a military flogging. His second life in Canada began with less endurable blows. The sea voyage had been disastrous.13 Emma his wife had given birth prematurely and was now ill with consumption. There were six children. Somerville endured the crowding, the feeling of alienation and poverty which many an immigrant faced in Quebec city. But he was unable to move beyond this port of entry. Emma’s illness lasted nine months.

Somerville began to write to Quebec papers. He misjudged Canadian sentiments at first. A letter to the Quebec Chronicle on the 1832 crisis drew hostile comments from the Mercury.14 It was withdrawn. Further letters to the Mercury on conservatism appeared and then an interesting résumé of the history of Canadian administrations. Somerville was now doing his homework.

He had made friends. A.C. Buchanan, the famous chief immigration agent helped him. He was befriended also by Mr. Pope, the mayor of Quebec. When Emma died in 1859 other Scottish members of the Quebec community rallied round to help the Somerville family. Somerville was invited to give a series of lectures. Somehow he eked out a living, and he hoped to augment his means by sales of Canadian reprints of his earlier books: Biographic History of the Pioneers, Free Trade and the League, and Whistler at the Plough. He was now working also at an extension of his autobiography. By 1860 he had ready the manuscript of Conservative Science of Nations, Being the First Complete Narrative Account of Somerville’s Diligent Life in the Service of Public Safety in Britain. (The Diligent Life included the letters which he had written in Quebec City.) Canadian publishers agreed to bring it out; Lovell in Montreal, and Miller in Toronto expected a Canadian audience for this tale of coercion in England, this exposé of British power politics, this groping toward economic principles. Thousands of Canadian readers had endured some share of Somerville’s kind of experience. The Diligent Life was thus a Canadian book both in its place of publication and in the sense that it voiced common grievances against the elements of life in the old country that formed a pressure for emigration. It covered working-class problems in a unique way. Opinionated, fluent, Somerville wove ideas about free trade, strikes, banking, the army, into the story of his own strange career. The Montreal Herald reviewed it very kindly in 1860.
By the summer of 1860, a year after Emma’s death, Somerville began to move toward Toronto (his original destination). It was a slow but important journey. He went first to Brockville, then up the Rideau to Perth and on to Arnprior. His observations on the building of the railways, on water power, prices of goods, local businesses made his reports in “Letters from Canada” and “Occasional Notes” very valuable. These were published at the time in a number of journals including The Montreal Gazette and The Hamilton Spectator and they would be re-issued in Hamilton two or three years later. They offer a picture of ordinary life in Canada unequaled except perhaps in Gourlay’s Statistical Sketches or MacTaggart’s Three Years in the Canadas, both published thirty years earlier. Like Gourlay’s, these sketches are shot through with personal bias and obsessions, but lit by sympathy and humor. Indeed Somerville read and wrote about Gourlay; but the Canadian society observed by Somerville was more complex and tougher than the pioneer settlements of the thirties. Kingston, Edwardsburg, Presqu’ile were visited next in 1861. They were stirring with economic growth, largely connected with canal and lake transport, but were also swelling with political discussions about possible confederation of the British possessions in North America. There was a heated talk about defense also, and tension over relations with the United States. Somerville saw signs of intimate dependence on American commerce in 1861, and warned in his letters “There is nothing to gain by hostility.” This warning was written from Windsor, where he travelled in 1861. He pushed across the border to Detroit and doubled back, pausing briefly in Brantford and other small commercial centres in south western Ontario, finally settling in Hamilton. Somerville of course had become a seasoned traveller in his years of British journalism. But this was strange territory and of course he had the sole responsibility for his young family. Nevertheless the letters about his travels were and remain of very great interest.

Canada, A Battle-Ground was the title of a major statement issued in May 1862, a summary of his observations. This book, published in Hamilton by Donnelly and Lawson, focuses on Canadian-American tensions. Somerville writes of the antagonisms he had noted in his travels, and he counsels justice and sympathy. He felt the danger of a “newspaper-made war” erupting. British attitudes to American politics were dangerous, Somerville believed. He saw America moving towards the horrors of civil war, and Britain becoming involved, with dreadful consequences. Canada, A Battle-Ground presents a powerful double vision: the apocalyptic terror of war, and the possible reign of peace and prosperity, if the United States, Great Britain and Canada move toward co-operation.

At the same time as he was publishing Canada, A Battle-Ground, Somerville was sending to Canadian and British newspapers letters every week, indeed “almost every day, against the impolicy of British and Canadian sympathy for the south.” His name, his views, were becoming once again famous internationally as in 1832 and 1844.

A side-line interest in Canada, A Battle-Ground is its comments on Canadian militia. Somerville cast an old soldier’s eye on the demoralization of militiamen in a time when economy imposed cuts although patriotism and fear urged expansion.

His second profession (journalism) dominated him still, however. In November, 1862, he had the satisfaction of seeing the first issue of The Canadian Illustrated News roll off a Hamilton press. The first issue, November the 8th, announced a policy of using wood-cuts by local artists. Every issue was to combine international news with a high content of Canadian material. The new journal was to show many of the fine qualities graphic and journalistic of The London Illustrated News. In January 1863 a first “Letter from Canada” appeared, signed “Alex Somerville.” It dealt with the problems of the militia and called also for aid to immigrants – “a truly conservative philosophy.” The third issue contained an article on local government by Somerville and a historical réprise of immigration policy, 1815-17. Number four ran “Where is Canada Drifting?”, a prophecy of the danger of battle. This was signed “A.S., Whistler at the Plough.” In it Somerville presented the view that because it was a railway centre Hamilton was now the key to Canada west. Invasion from the States was possible – probable – and military self-reliance would be essential for self-defense, yet such moves might push Canada closer to suicidal war, a war against her own best interests.

Subsequent articles in The Canadian Illustrated News show an intriguing balance. Somerville was commenting on contemporary Canada in the light of his own experience in Great Britain. At the same time he was expanding his experience as a new Canadian: reading Canadian history, visiting near-by towns, observing the growth of railways, roads, smelters, shops in Hamilton, the city he had chosen as his Canadian home. In April of 1863 for instance he ran two items: one was a soldierly assessment of Wolfe’s Cove, a reminiscence about army life; the other was a résumé of the war of 1812, with comments on the present powers of the Canadian Government regarding militia. In May he wrote of the alternative to war – the “Blessed Purposes of Commerce . . . Perpetual Peace.” June 6, 1863 focused on immigration. “Immigration will become a branch of Economic Science,” he announced, and he showed how help for immigrants could serve the defense of Canada.
The Canadian Illustrated News was becoming a richly readable journal, one of the most interesting in the history of Canadian journalism. Besides running Somerville's colourful reminiscences, it ran pictures of very recent news events, reproduced plates of the latest fashions, mingled opinions from the London Westminster Review with others from The Montreal Witness, and added such domestic statistics as the number of dozens of eggs sold in Canada West in 1862. The columns of the News carried very important descriptions of local scenery - of the country around Guelph for instance - essential comments for regional historians. Somerville also interested himself in practical science and wrote, for example, speculations on the effect of light and on photography.

What caused the demise of the Illustrated News? Perhaps Somerville fell prey to the old affluence that had led him to believe in his own prophetic powers, to the endangerment of his practical safety. In December 1863 for instance he predicted severance of Canada from Great Britain. The next issue brought apologies from the proprietors: "to seek independence would be madness." The paper had changed ownership, from Brown and Howie (January 1863) to Ferguson and Gregory (October 1863), to H. Gregory (December 1863). The new owner decided in February 1864 to move his offices to Toronto for a more metropolitan milieu. Final issues from Hamilton ran Somerville's accounts of the Fenian raids and a critical account of Canadian failure to adequately supply aid to the Canadian volunteers. No known copies of Toronto issues have survived.

Alexander Somerville stayed on in Hamilton. He had found here a group of people very much interested in military affairs and he had become fascinated by the efforts made by Canadians to protect themselves against the threat of Fenian raids from south of the border. He now began to write as a "war correspondent" for The Hamilton Spectator. He was sent to Niagara and to Lake Erie and reported vividly the militia's action at Ridgeway. His account of the campaign is memorable for its realism. It contains priceless details such as the description of the Fenian raiders riding their horses "dreadfully" - to the dismay of the farmers. It also records the Fenian Colonel O'Neill's order that no cows be injured. Somerville also worked in a rather brave tribute to the Irish even though he discounted their claims of injustice. But Somerville's fierce independence once again led to a run-in with authority, curiously reminiscent of his earliest role as "martyr of military reform." As a "war correspondent" he reported on the mismanagement of certain aspects of the resistance to the Fenians. He named Colonel Booker. Partly because of this, a Court of Inquiry was set up to examine the charges against Colonel Booker. It turned out that enemies of the Colonel had engineered the innuendos.22

Nevertheless in spite of the ill feeling that was the aftermath of Somerville's work his reports on the scrimmage at Ridgeway combined graphic and precise details of manoeuvres with sweeping comments on international politics. He was one of the very few reporters in modern times who combined military expertise with an informed political vision. His Narrative of the Fenian Invasion (collected from columns in the Spectator and enlarged), was published in June 1866 by John Lyght of Hamilton, and printed by Lawson. It was widely circulated - for instance the copy of the book in the Thomas Fisher collection in Toronto is signed by Dan Lizards, and dated Goderich, November 1866. The preface to this little book contains a haunting phrase: "My life has been a battle," Somerville states, and adds "and my battle has been the rights of Man."23

III

The next phase of Somerville's life constituted an ironic defeat. He planned to return to England, to publish a volume on the Dominion of Canada, "its manufacturers, its education, its gospel ordinances." He was promised support by the Minister of Immigration, D'Arcy McGee. Citizens of Hamilton gathered to bid him farewell in 1868. The Mayor, the Member of Parliament, the Wardens and all presented him with an address expressing the city's gratitude for his "loyal and patriotic services." The assassination of D'Arcy McGee brought a disastrous end to Somerville's expectations. Assistance for travel and for publication was cut off. Somerville went to Ottawa, visited the Departments of Agriculture and Immigration; but although his work was endorsed by John A. Macdonald he could not collect the pay promised by McGee. He stayed around Ottawa, collecting stories of successful immigrants, again with the hope of a subsidized publication, and again with no fulfillment of that hope.

Finally in 1868 he moved to Montreal. He lodged in the St. Andrew's Society Home, where a strange group of drifting ex-Scots had collected. One of the inmates for instance was William Scott, nephew of Sir Walter. Somerville converted this experience, as he had done with all his adventures, into a bit of journalism. He contributed it to a new rather grand enterprise just starting in Montreal, The Canadian Illustrated News.25 This paper, run by G.E. Desbarats, has always been assumed to have no connection with the earlier Hamilton production of the same name. The appearance of articles by Somerville in both, however, certainly constitutes a link. Did
writing on the current financial panic introduced reference to the example of Hamilton. There, said the still unsigned editorial, American goods at "sacrifice" prices were inundating the Canadian market, flooding and paralyzing the city of Hamilton.31 This issue also contained an article on proper handling of guns: accidents, it claimed, could be avoided by following British army rules. Reminiscences about the Duke of Newcastle further extended the range of this April issue. April 9th brought comments on Louis Riel, surely an unpopular topic with the paper's constituents. Let Great Britain confess the Imperial oversight in 1870, the editor pleaded; and he urged readers to demand a "Complete Imperial Amnesty." Debate on Riel continued in the April 23rd issue. So did discussion of a Lake Huron-Lake Ontario canal. And the same issue added reminiscences about Philemon Wright, the colourful pioneer of the Ottawa Valley, and a discussion of Indian history, featuring comments on Joseph Brant.32 These details are mentioned here to suggest the scope and the local, provincial, national, and international interests of the editor. Best of these Church Herald columns is one in which Somerville begins with a docile intention of attending (at the insistence of the Church of England women's campaign) a meeting to be addressed by Charles Kingsley, that doughty Christian Socialist. Suddenly swept along by the church-going crowd, Somerville remembers other days, other meetings - and swings into a vivid reminiscence of Lord Shaftsbury at a meeting in Wiltshire, and Lord Ashley battling John Bright over the Factory Act.33 It is an interesting footnote to history, a fascinating dip into a stream of consciousness, years before James Joyce invented that technique, and a vivid glimpse of the mix of interests and stimuli of the times.

The story of Somerville's work on the Church Herald ends in a way familiar to Canadians. The journal announced, first, its alliance with a New York paper, then the decision to centre in the New York office because of cheaper postal rates. News stories in the paper now emphasize activities in Alabama and Minnesota. Poems now featured were by the Americans Bryant and Taylor. Soon "A.S., late editor of the Church Herald"34 was submitting only occasional columns, on his journeys to Nova Scotia and his visits to parishes in Yarmouth and Shelbourne. Somerville next appears as a mere "correspondent."35 In 1876 the Church Herald disappeared.

In 1877 Somerville was at work on an Emigrant's Guide, writing a new and lively introduction to the old Government publication. "Why emigrate?" the guide book asks; and the answer covers the system of Government, the economic advantages, the advantage for working-class families in schooling, cost of living, job opportunities.36 In
return for his long-term literary services, the Immigration Department awarded Somerville a pension in 1876 when he reached the age of sixty-five.

He went on working, writing weekly letters to British papers; writing his memoirs. Five thousand pages had accumulated by 1880, when he moved from the City Hotel, Toronto, to a York Street boarding house. Here table and bed became piled so high with papers that Somerville slept on the floor. Finally in 1882 he closed the door on that room, and moved into a woodshed for his last two years. The long story of Somerville's colourful and varied life ends ignominiously, ludicrously. "Penniless and discredited" according to his modern editor John Carwell, he moved through those last years, grotesquely ponderous, subsisting on a diet of oatmeal and raw onions. He still listed himself in the Toronto directory as "correspondent... 'Whistler at the Plough.'" He died June 7, 1885, in Toronto.

IV

Biographers of Somerville have referred to his years in Canada as "a long decline," "a footnote to the history of Canadian Journalism." This is a view from England. From the Canadian point of view it seems that Somerville's work in the Confederation years was very important and is now wrongly forgotten.

His career in Canada though baffled and obscure represents an important extension of his earlier concerns, and a flamboyant continuation of his colourful personal quest for truth, justice, liberty, and also for recognition and for an audience. He brought to Canada the eye, the experience, and the readiness to travel of his years of work as a provincial correspondent. He brought also the technical knowledge of a worker in experimental journalism, as developed in the London Illustrated News. He also brought an economist's awareness of the realities of wages, prices, and costs. These realities had been relegated to the commercial columns by earlier Canadian reporters, obsessed as they were by personal politics. Somerville caught for his own age, and for later historians, aspects of reality otherwise unrecorded. The frontispiece from his British book showed the kind of news he found fit to print. As "Whistler at the Plough" he compared life in England and Scotland. The small type under the two pictures read as follows:

A plough as seen at work in Buckinghamshire in 1842. The soil a stiff clay, unameliorated by science. The solid manures wasted in the sun; the liquid manures utterly neglected; fences bad; fields foul with weeds; as little economy in every department of the farm as in that of the plough. The farmer, a tenant-at-will, paying in rent and tithes two pounds ten shillings per acre. Says he must have sixty-four s. a quarter for wheat, to give him a profit; and not less than sixty s., to pay his expenses. Believes the repeal of the Corn Laws would ruin him.

A plough as used in the Lothians of Scotland. When the soil is a stiff clay, it is ameliorated by other materials. Manures are augmented by artificial means, and carefully preserved. Fences and corn fields are kept in the best order; and economy is observed in all kinds of labor, while more people are employed for each acre than in England. The farmers have leases of nineteen years, and pay rents according to the prices of grain; in 1841 they paid from four pounds to six pounds per acre. If they paid the same rent for the same quality of land as in Buckinghamshire, they could sell wheat at forty s. a quarter, and have a good profit.

Somerville's "Letters to Canada" and the series of columns run in The Hamilton Canadian Illustrated News reported Canadian working life in comparable terms. Work habits, prices, rent, profits, attitudes - all are specific and all are presented clearly, tersely and with interest.

Why has his work not been collected and reprinted? One reason is that the working-men's papers to which he mostly contributed have not survived. In Toronto for instance there were at least eight papers in the 1860's, but the only survivors in present-day libraries are those with a long run, or those with literary attractions for gentlemen and librarians. The working-men's papers disappeared; very occasionally sheets survived as drawer liners or as insulation stuffed into walls. Somerville also had the misfortune - or fortune - to write for Hamilton papers in his best Canadian years rather than for Toronto ones. He recognized the commerical importance of the smaller city; too few social historians have followed his lead. Toronto, mecca of those who governed, has consistently attracted more attention, and its journals have been treasured and consulted at the expense of the more peripheral press. The survival of the last bits of Somerville's writings in The Toronto Church Herald seems almost a fluke. Almost by chance that pale ecclesiastical paper, which suddenly flared into interest when Somerville edited it, has survived, when perhaps dozens of other papers in which he wrote as well and as vividly have left no trace.

Somerville's writings deserve the same kind of attention as Gourlay's Statistical Sketches, for they cover the same aspects of
Canadian life. They probably of course should be treated with the same kind of reservation, for Somerville remained as prickly and as opinionated as Gourlay had been. Yet Somerville as 'The People's Journalist' of his day had an incalculable effect on public opinion of the 1860's and 1870's. Henry Morgan and James Rattray, including biographies of him in their work in 1867 and 1882, recognized that his importance in Canada was not just an after-glow of his early notoriety. Alexander Somerville was indeed a maker of opinion among the common workers of Confederation Canada. His reports on the Fenian raids, his role in establishing illustrated newspapers, his editorials on American relations, even his diatribes on church politics, all contributed to the vitality of Canadian journalism.

NOTES


3 Autobiography, pp. 164-5.

4 Ibid., p. 197.

5 Ibid., chs. 22, 23.

6 Canadian Illustrated News, Hamilton, 7, 1863.

7 Narrative of the Auxiliary British Legion in the War in Spain, also published as History of the British Legion.

8 Autobiography, p. 259.

9 Ibid., p. 260.

10 The title-page of another of the "Whistler" pamphlets is reproduced as Figure 1: A Letter to the Farmers of England, London, Ridgeway, 1843.

11 These were mostly published as sixpenny pamphlets by a variety of small publishers, including Cousins of London.

12 Conservative Science of Nations, Being the First Complete Narrative of Somerville's Diligent Life in the Service of Public Safety in Britain. Also published as First Complete Account, and as Somerville's Diligent Life, Montreal: Lovell, 1860; Toronto: Miller, 1860.

13 There is an account of it in Canadian Illustrated News, Jan. 31, 1863.

14 Quebec Mercury, June, 1859; Quebec Chronicle, June, 1859.

15 Canadian Illustrated News, 1, Jan. 31, 1863, and 5, March, 1863.

16 Ibid., Dec. 5, 1863.

17 Somerville may also have had a hand in the 10th edition of the very widely circulated Letters from Canada, Quebec: Morning Chronicle, 1862. This book, first published in 1854 as "Letters to Wyndham," from an Immigrant, was constantly revised. Chapter V of the 10th edition, on Quebec, sounds like Somerville in style; so does the "Appendix, 1862," on Information for Emigrants, attributed to A.C. Buchanan, the Chief Agent, and Somerville's friend.

18 Church Herald, Toronto, June, 1874.

19 "This ambitious weekly appeared for only fifteen months (November 1862 to February 1864) before succumbing to financial difficulties. It was one of a number of North American imitators of the Illustrated London News, founded in 1842, but true to its name it stressed the Canadian news and scenes. Illustrated weeklies provided work for large numbers of anonymous craftsmen: this issue carries an advertisement for "five first-class wood engravers." Elizabeth Hulse, Engravers and Lithographers in 19th Century Canada. Catalogue for an Exhibition at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, May, 1980, p. 9.

20 Canadian Illustrated News, May 16, 1863.

21 Ibid., Dec. 12, 1863.

22 George S. Denison states that near the end of his life, Somerville wrote to Colonel Booker to apologize for the comments, which he said were inserted into his account without his knowledge: Soldiering in Canada, Toronto: Morang, 1901, p. 117.

23 Narrative of the Fenian Invasion, Hamilton, 1866, iv.

24 Hamilton Spectator.

25 The "second, more celebrated Canadian Illustrated News" Hulse, op. cit., p. 12.

26 Information on the later careers of Somerville's children appears in Hamilton Spectator, Dec. 21, 1918; Hamilton Herald, Sept. 22, 1923, (clippings in News Clipping Folder, Hamilton Public Library, and in the Tinsley Scrapbook and the Gardiner/McCulloch Scrapbook, Hamilton Public Library).

27 Toronto City Directory, 1875-1885.

28 Ibid., 1875.

29 Toronto Church Herald, Feb. 5, 1874. A run of this journal is held in the Baldwin Room, Toronto Public Library.

30 Ibid., Feb. 15, 1874.

31 Ibid., April 9, 1874.

32 Major Norton is also mentioned, July 27, 1874.

33 Ibid., April 30, 1874.

34 Ibid., Feb. 11, 1875.

35 Ibid., March 11, 1875.


38 Ibid.

39 We badly need a volume on Upper Canadian, Canada West, and Ontario newspapers, comparable to André Beaulieu, et Jean Hamelin, Les Journaux du Québec de 1764 à 1964, Québec, Laval, 1965.