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Résumé de l'article

Au dix-neuvième siècle, l'Ontario accueille une armée de "remittance men", les fils rebelles d'aristocrates et de membres de la classe moyenne supérieure britanniques qui sont envoyés dans les colonies, soutenus par leurs familles, pour éviter la disgrâce dans leur pays d'origine. C'est le cas de W.E. (William Edwin) Hamilton (1834-1902), dont le père, le brillant mathématicien irlandais Sir William Rowan Hamilton, l'a envoyé au Nicaragua, puis en Ontario, pour éviter que son fils ne soit embarrassé par son incapacité à gagner sa vie. Hamilton était autodestructeur à bien des égards, mais il a fini par trouver le succès en tant que journaliste dans les communautés de l'Ontario, où il s'est installé pendant les trente dernières années de sa vie. Il s'efforce de répondre aux attentes de sa famille, mais beaucoup le considèrent comme un échec et les biographes de son père l'ont pratiquement rayé de l'histoire. Néanmoins, il s'est taillé une carrière haute en couleur, malgré ses démons personnels et ses excentricités.

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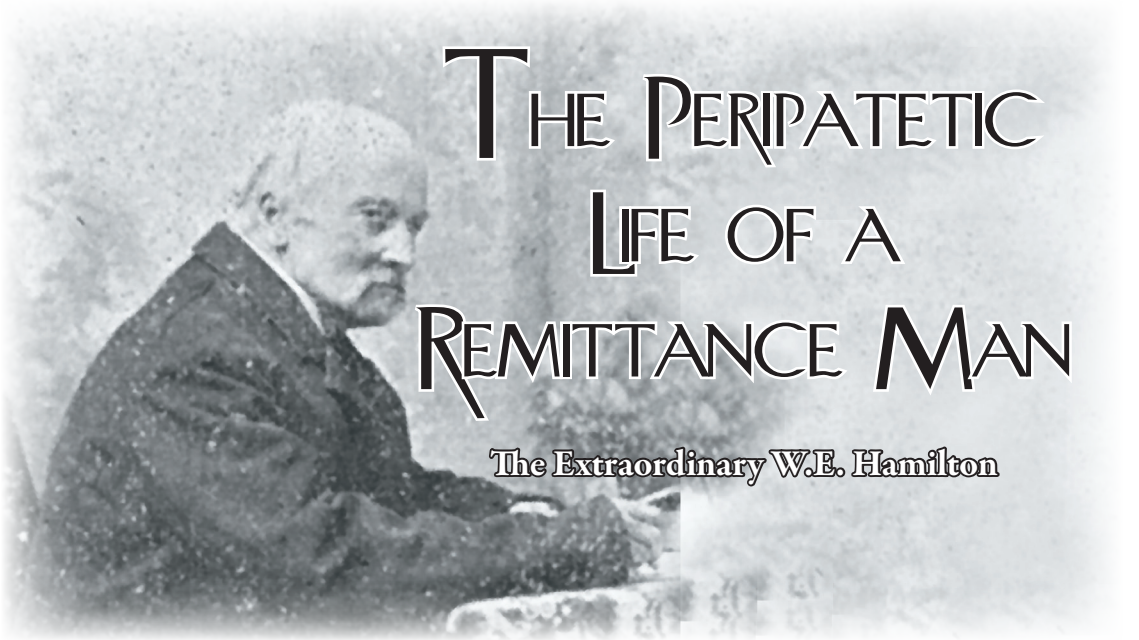

The Peripatetic Life of a Remittance Man

The Extraordinary W.E. Hamilton

by Donna E. Williams

"The life story of the late W.E. Hamilton, editor and proprietor of the Market Guide, is one of the oddest ever told."—*Chatham Daily Planet (1902)*

The life of W.E. (William Edwin) Hamilton (1834-1902), son of the renowned Sir William Rowan Hamilton, Ireland's most brilliant mathematician of his time, was virtually written out of the historical record by his father's biographers. As a remittance man in Nicaragua and Canada in his younger years, he was scorned primarily for not living up to his father's sterling reputation and for his dependency on his father's financial support as he moved aimlessly from place to place. And yet, Hamilton demonstrated that he could be relatively successful when left to his own devices. This is a biography of a man who carved out a space for himself in Ontario's growing small communities as a journalist, until he succumbed to his personal demons and eccentricities in his later years.

The phenomenon of remittance men, the army of sons of well-off Britons who were basically paid to stay away from their own country, has been romanticized in literature by such authors as Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, and the Canadian poet Robert Service. But academically, the subject has largely been ignored.

Abstract

Nineteenth-century Ontario was home to an army of remittance men, the wayward sons of aristocratic and upper-middle-class Britons who were sent to the colonies, supported by their families to avoid disgrace at home. One such man was W.E. (William Edwin) Hamilton (1834-1902), whose father, the brilliant Irish mathematician, Sir William Rowan Hamilton, sent him to Nicaragua and later Ontario to avoid the embarrassment of his son's inability to earn a living. Hamilton was self-destructive in many ways, but he eventually found success as a journalist in communities across Ontario, where he settled for the last thirty years of his life. He strived to live up to his family's expectations, but was seen by many as a failure and was virtually written out of the historical record by his father's biographers. Nevertheless, he carved out his own rather colourful career, despite being dogged by his personal demons and eccentricities.

Résumé: *Au dix-neuvième siècle, l'Ontario accueille une armée de "remittance men", les fils rebelles d'aristocrates et de membres de la classe moyenne supérieure britanniques qui sont envoyés dans les colonies, soutenus par leurs familles, pour éviter la disgrâce dans leur pays d'origine. C'est le cas de W.E. (William Edwin) Hamilton (1834-1902), dont le père, le brillant mathématicien irlandais Sir William Rowan Hamilton, l'envoyé au Nicaragua, puis en Ontario, pour éviter que son fils ne soit embarrassé par son incapacité à gagner sa vie. Hamilton était autodestructeur à bien des égards, mais il a fini par trouver le succès en tant que journaliste dans les communautés de l'Ontario, où il s'est installé pendant les trente dernières années de sa vie. Il s'efforce de répondre aux attentes de sa famille, mais beaucoup le considèrent comme un échec et les biographes de son père l'ont pratiquement rayé de l'histoire. Néanmoins, il s'est taillé une carrière haute en couleur, malgré ses démons personnels et ses excentricités.*

Perhaps such men haven't seemed worthy of prolonged research. Usually, they were wastrels, gamblers, debtors—men of questionable reputations. Many were from aristocratic families in Britain, second sons who were denied their first-born brother's inheritance, and unsuited for a military or ecclesiastical career. A disgrace to their families, they were pensioned off to the colonies to avoid disgrace at home. Some reached success, but many more led indulgent, impetuous lives, attempting to re-create their aristocratic past in the wilderness of their new homes.

There have been some notable studies of remittance men, most pertinent Mark Zuehlke's *Scoundrels, Dreamers & Second Sons* (Dundurn, 2001), which provided lively profiles of colourful remittance men who settled in Western Canada. Zuehlke pointed out that when Britain's military became more sophisticated, well-off Britons were no longer welcome to buy a military appointment, and were being replaced by the well-educated middle class. Public schools such as Eton and Winchester focussed on rather career-unfriendly subjects such as classic Latin and Greek literature, hardly suiting

them for any kind of profession. Zuehlke's profiles of these men show them enjoying hunting parties and lavish entertainments as they languished in the backwoods supported by their families' remittances, scorned by their hard-working Canadian counterparts. If they did attempt to farm a bit of land, they were woefully inadequate for the task at hand.

William Edwin Hamilton as a younger man. (Family photo).

Monica Rico, author of *Nature's Noblemen: Transatlantic Masculinities and the Nineteenth Century* (York University, 2013), did not exactly focus on men like Hamilton, but she suggested that the elite classes in Britain and America were seen to be lacking masculinity, and profiled men like "Buffalo Bill" Cody and Theodore Roosevelt, who posed as frontiersmen with their buckskins and rifles in the American West, facing down what was then perceived as a savage and uncultured land. Unlike these men, Hamilton was not fond of life in the wilderness; he much preferred to visit the nearest library or to seek the comfort of a public house for a quick tipple with his friends. And yet, Hamilton *did* leave the comfort of his father's home in Dublin for harsh climes, whether in steamy Nicaragua or in Ontario's frigid northern backwoods.

A vivid Canadian diary by Frederick de la Fosse, *English Bloods* (Graphic Publishers, 1930), described de la Fosse's experience as a remittance man in Muskoka, where he was sent by his British guardian to learn farming. He had not done well academically at his British public school, but he excelled at athletics, which his guardian thought would augur well for life in the backwoods. To de la Fosse's dismay, his teacher was totally inept at farming practices, although de la Fosse managed to learn enough to carry on with his own farm upon graduating. He described how his fellow remittance men strived to replicate their aristocratic social lives deep in the bush, to the bemusement of their rough-and-ready Canadian compatriots.

And so where does Hamilton fit into this definition of a remittance man? In some ways, he was a textbook example. Sent first to Nicaragua and later to Barrie, Ontario, he was supported by his disapproving father but admonished constantly for not earning his own living. Despite Hamilton's misery, his pleas to return home to Dublin were refused, as such a move would be seen as a disgrace in his community. However, Hamilton's experience deviated somewhat from that of other remittance men: he was well educated, having earned an engineering degree from Trinity College Dublin, and although his father was a knight of the realm, he expected both of his sons pursue careers and to be self-sufficient. But

as we shall see, it simply wasn't in Hamilton's nature to be independent until the time came when the remittances dried out. Throughout the years, Hamilton was an engineer, teacher, journalist, and memoirist. Despite his struggles to keep a job, he carved out an eccentric, peripatetic existence that suited him. Never a "great" man of history like his father, Hamilton was a not-so-great one, but I submit that he deserves his place on the historical record. He was an astute observer of others' lives, using his keen wit and wisdom to record the peculiarities of those around him. When motivated, he honed his sharp journalistic skills for newspapers and government journals. Hamilton was an ordinary man who led an extraordinary life.

Hamilton was born in 1834 in an upper bedroom of Dublin's prestigious Dunsink Observatory, his family home, for his father was the Royal Astronomer of Ireland. Despite this appointment, Sir William Rowan's first love was mathematics: he famously invented quaternions, a complicated algebraic formula that is today used in 3-D graphics and spacecraft control. As this genius's firstborn son, the younger Hamilton was encouraged to follow in his illustrious father's footsteps. A tall order.

In his quirky 1895 book, *Peeps at My Life*—an odd combination of memoir and business directory of Chatham, Ontario—Hamilton reminisced about his school days; his memories were mainly

William Rowan Hamilton near the date of his son William Edwins birth. Drawing by John Kirkwood, after a Charles Grey etching, 1837 or after. National Portrait Gallery, London PG D37806

focussed on his fellow students' hijinks rather than his aspirations for the future. At the age of twelve, he spent a year boarding at a grammar school in London, then was privately tutored before entering Trinity College Dublin, his father's alma mater, where he studied engineering. His father was well aware that his son was not an attentive student. In a letter to a friend, he confided: "[William] is no prodigy, but a good and sensible and *reasonably* industrious boy, and may yet do very well."[1] It was likely that the younger Hamilton, wary of being judged as less intelligent than his father, would rather his average performance in school be put down to a mere lack of diligence.

At the age of twenty-three, Hamilton became a surveyor under the tutelage of George Willoughby Hemans, a prom-

[1] Thomas L. Hankins, *Sir William Rowan Hamilton* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 366.

inent Irish railway engineer. Hemans was the son of Felicity Hemans, author of "Casabianca," the edifying poem that began "The boy stood on the burning deck/Whence all but he had fled." Sir William Rowan had paid the considerable sum of £350 for the benefit of his son's apprenticeship, but it was to no avail, for the young Hamilton disliked trailing through bogs and marshes in harsh weather. "I did not like it. A man will go through this and more when deer-stalking, but this was work."[2] Whether he quit or was fired made no difference, Hamilton's father was furious. Following the job with Hemans, the young Hamilton journeyed to France, Belgium, and Germany, the epitome of the Victorian Grand Tour. In *Peeps*, he was vague about the timing of his journey, and he did not mention whether or not he was employed at that time, but it seems unlikely.

In 1862, Hamilton embarked on the first of his seven crossings of the Atlantic. The catalyst was his father's sister, Sydney Margaret Hamilton, who had recently learned that there was an abandoned observatory in Bogotá, which was built in 1803 and was notable for being at the highest elevation than any other observatory in the world. In May 1862, Sydney sent an impassioned letter to Sir William Rowan, informing him of her plan to travel to Bogotá, where she hoped to obtain a free land grant and restore the observatory. Having assisted her brother at the Dunsink Observatory while helping care for the three Hamilton children, she had gained solid astronomical experience. She asked, or rather demanded, her brother's permission for her nephew to be her escort, offering to pay all his expenses, although eventually Sir William footed the bill. No one seemed to have consulted the twenty-eight-year-old Hamilton for his opinion.

And so, in September 1862, he and his fifty-two-year-old aunt set sail. However, it soon became apparent that Sydney's plan had fallen through, as the conservatory was occupied by the local army at that time and she was unable to obtain a free land grant. This was a major setback, but Sydney came up with another idea. In the early spring of 1863, she and Hamilton headed for Nicaragua, settling in Greytown on the southeast coast of the Caribbean, where Sydney planned to tutor young girls and Hamilton could perhaps find work as a surveyor or engineer. When Hamilton and his aunt arrived, they were dismayed at this desolate community's oppressive equatorial heat and humidity.

The two of them were unable to find employment in Greytown, and were constantly badgering the family's Dublin-based property manager, as well as Hamilton's father, for money. With time on his hands, Hamilton turned to writing to amuse himself. A few specimens are included in the family archives at the Trinity College Dublin library. Among them was a fifteen-page short story titled "Sketches in the Life of a Planter's Daughter," an amusing tragic romance. Although not

[2] W.E. Hamilton, *Peeps at My Life,* 7.

particularly well written, the story was published in Dublin in 1865.

By June 1863, Hamilton was desperate to return to Ireland. Chronically short of funds, he appealed to his father for a loan, emphasizing his sufferings in the intense heat of Greytown. But his father was unmoved. As so often happened to remittance men like Hamilton, his father advised his son not to return home to Ireland, as such a move "would have too much the air of an admitted *failure*."[3] Sir William Rowan did suggest, however, that if his son travelled to a healthier climate, he might send financial aid for the move. And so, in January 1864, Hamilton made his way to Canada, leaving Sydney behind.

His choice of Canada was, once again, not his alone, for the move was engineered by his family back in Ireland. The Hamiltons were close to Lady Hamilton's wealthy niece and nephew, John and Kate Rathborne, to whom they often turned for favours. The Rathbornes' brother-in-law, Irish-born Walter William Keating, was by then a resident of Barrie, Ontario. We don't know if Sir William Rowan requested that his son stay with the Keatings or if the Rathbornes made the offer, but the situation was yet another indication that the young Hamilton had lost control of his destiny.

He shouldn't have found it difficult to find work in his field as a surveyor, his last occupation. In Barrie, a small town about eight-five kilometres north of Toronto, he was well placed, as the province was building colonization roads throughout the region north of the town with the intention of luring settlers with free grants of land. But as we have seen, Hamilton wasn't fond of the hard work surveying entailed, and the conditions in northern Ontario would be far harsher than in the more temperate Irish countryside.

From the beginning, his stay in Barrie was yet another disaster. Keating charged him a boarding fee of one dollar a day, which was far beyond Hamilton's means. When Keating sent the bill to Sir William Rowan, the latter was incensed at what he considered to be an unreasonable amount. In January 1864, he wrote to his son that although he was willing to pay his debts, he was furious that he couldn't find employment after all the money spent on his education, not to mention the £350 paid to Hemans.

By April, Sir William Rowan was obviously growing weary of handling his son's affairs, and in a letter to his younger son, Archibald, he suggested that perhaps it was time for Hamilton to come home. However, likely unaware that his father was vacillating on his order for him to remain in Canada, Hamilton had already left the Keatings' home to seek work in Toronto. It was likely an awkward leave-taking; in fact, it is possible that Keating himself showed him the door.

By July, Hamilton's frustration was evident. But rather than take responsibility for his dire situation, he chose to blame the very nature of Canada. In a rambling letter to his father, he explained

[3] Hankins, *Sir William Rowan Hamilton* (Chatham, Ont. : Banner Print. Co., 1895), 374.

Sir William Rowan Hamilton and Lady Helen Maria Hamilton Bayly.

that Canada was a fine place for capitalists and tradesmen, but "too little advanced in civilization to encourage literary or highly educated men...."[4] He was obviously feeling very hard-done-by: he hadn't the capital to make a success of himself, and, like many remittance men, he obviously considered himself above the class of mere labourers. An educated man does not dirty his hands.

Finally, totally exasperated, Sir William Rowan arranged for his son to come home at the end of 1864. Although aged only fifty-nine, Sir William was suffering from ill health and financial difficulties. His son's return probably buoyed his spirits, as Hamilton managed the family's household finances and for once proved to be quite useful. Sir William Rowan's health rapidly deteriorated, and he died on 2 September 1865, at the age of sixty. Soon after his death, the Hamilton family was forced to leave the observatory, which had been their home for almost forty years. Archibald returned to Ireland, where he was a curate, and Lady Hamilton and Hamilton's sister, Helen, lived with various friends and family members.

Hamilton stayed on for a time in Dublin to edit and complete the manuscript of his father's final masterpiece, *Elements of Quaternions*. *Elements* was a highly complicated mathematical text, but he rose to the occasion, successfully bringing the book to publication. But once that task was completed, his life was yet again at a crossroads, and the question of his future must have troubled him. But there was one family member he could depend on—his aunt Sydney—and so he returned to Nicaragua sometime in the fall of 1866.

Tensions soon grew between Hamilton and his aunt, and he stayed for only a few months. By June 1867, he was in Cape Vincent, New York; in a letter from there to Helen he indicated that he planned to move on to Kingston, Ontario. By December 1867, he turned up in Liverpool, presumably on his way to Dublin to conduct business for his

[4] *Ibid.,* 374.

father's estate. For whatever reason, he chose to return to Canada shortly after.

This time, however, his choice of destination was far more successful: for the first time, he would become a productive and relatively happy man. He settled in Marbleton, a small town in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, where he found steady work through teaching and lecturing, as well as contributing droll poems to local newspapers. Hamilton also wrote the lyrics for a national song titled "The Maple Leaf" in 1869, two years after the publication of Alexander Muir's song, "The Maple Leaf Forever." Hamilton's version was published in British and Quebec newspapers, and he boasted that Sir George Cartier, a Father of Confederation, had written him a complimentary letter.

In the spring of 1869, Hamilton's sister, Helen, wrote to him concerning her upcoming marriage to Archdeacon John O'Regan. She was concerned that her marriage might be seen as inappropriate during a time of mourning. The date is almost indecipherable, but it seems to be July, which was just a month after the death, in June 1869, of their mother, Lady Hamilton. In the letter, Helen also suggested that her brother return to Ireland at some date to wind up their father's estate and to deal with family properties. In spite of her concerns, in September1869, Helen married O'Regan and soon became pregnant. In May 1870, she gave birth to a son, but, due to complications during childbirth, her health failed rapidly. Tragically, Helen died on 21 June 1870, just one month after her son's birth.

When Hamilton learned of her death, he was devastated. On 11 July 1870, he wrote to John O'Regan:

> My dear sir, I got your and Arch's joint note last Saturday. I did not notice at first the black envelope, thinking that it was one of the old ones for my mother—on opening it I read the joyful announcement of your son's birth and then looking lower down was horrified by Arch's postscript announcing poor Helen's death. Coming so suddenly after the first it gave me a great shock, which has not diminished but seems to intensify more and more every day. I know it is a duty to consider every such bereavement as a dispensation of Providence to be borne patiently, but it seems so hard that she should be cut off in her prime of life and usefulness that I cannot feel at all reconciled or able to offer consolation to others which I do not feel myself....[5]

For all his irresponsibility, Hamilton continued to show a heartfelt compassion for his family.

Back home, Archibald, a curate in Clogher in what is now Northern Ireland, had taken the parishioners' side in accusations that the dean was a secret papist, and at one point he quit his curacy. In his biography of Sir William Rowan, Thomas L. Hankins described a letter Archibald wrote to John O'Regan in 1870 as "a jumble of odd sketches, Latin expletives, wild stories in Irish dialect, and the like."[6] In March 1871, Sydney wrote, possibly to

[5] Sir William Rowan Hamilton archive, Trinity College Dublin, IE TCD MS 1734 (99).

[6] Hankins, *Sir William Rowan Hamilton,* 380.

Helen, "The account of Archie is too terrible. God grant that he may not destroy himself or anyone else, for no one can say how mental derangement might end."[7]

If indeed Archibald was somewhat of unsound mind at this time, it explains his exasperation toward Hamilton following the latter's final visit to Dublin, probably around December 1871. Infuriated at his older brother's handling of various family properties, a disapproving Archibald wrote to John O'Regan:

> In consequence of what William Edwin wrote to [Aunt Sydney], I shall certainly recommend her strongly [to] withdraw the money from whatever investment he put it in, and to invest in some other way... I also think she ought not to answer any letters on the subject which William Edwin may write... I fear that he is totally unfit to be trusted in money matters of that kind. He fancied himself a man of business and has entirely lost the property my father left him... I think now that the sooner and the more plainly he is made to feel how contemptible as well as wicked his conduct has been, the better. It is possible his eyes may yet be opened in some degree to see himself as others see him.[8]

Archibald's letter marked the beginning of Hamilton's estrangement from his family. If what he wrote was true, it could have been that Hamilton, fed up with his brother's carping, decided to sell the properties quickly in order to return to Canada as soon as possible. Another possibility was that Archibald, with his diminished mental abilities, was simply wrong in his accusations and that Hamilton had actually conducted the business honestly and successfully.

For the next while, Hamilton, supported by his $1,500 inheritance, led what seems to have been an aimless, peripatetic life. He returned to Canada, and after a spell in Toronto, he settled, in June 1872, in Fredericton, New Brunswick. There is no indication that he had a job while in Fredericton, which he described a "slow, dull town." In a very muddled letter to John O'Regan in July 1872, the last of Hamilton's personal correspondence in the Trinity College file, he seemed desperate to prove his intentions to better his prospects. One suspects he grew increasingly inebriated soon after he began his eight-page correspondence, for although the heading and greeting were in clear copperplate handwriting, the remainder of the letter was scrawled, many times illegibly, in blotchy ink, and was pure gibberish in many sections. In the letter, Hamilton compared various free-land-grant schemes offered across North America, then dismissed their viability one by one. What O'Regan made of this very odd correspondence remains a mystery. And what was going through Hamilton's rather addled mind is yet another mystery. It is doubtful that the two ever corresponded again.

Cut off from O'Regan, Hamilton must have felt truly abandoned. His last family connection was his aunt Sydney, who would return to Ireland from Nica-

[7] *Ibid.,* 380.
[8] *Ibid.*

ragua in 1874, but there is no indication that they kept in touch. For the next year or so, he was on the move, perhaps the only remedy for the sadness he must have felt. Although he had seemed healthy and productive in Quebec, his letter to O'Regan suggested he had been drinking heavily, a problem that would torment him for the rest of his life. He returned to Toronto some time in 1873, where he freelanced as a journalist and public speaker, although he only managed to scrape by.

And then, suddenly, an arbitrary event finally turned Hamilton's life around: his career as a journalist was about to take off. In *Muskoka Sketch,* his 1884 memoir, he explained his reason for his sudden decision to move north:

> Ever since the Free Grant Act was first published, Muskoka had tickled my curiosity... Here was a chance to become a landed proprietor of one hundred acres free grant. Just fancy owning, in fee simple, being absolute monarch of over four millions of square feet of the earth's surface, to say nothing of the unknown mineral treasures beneath.[9]

With those words, Hamilton demonstrated the common trait of remittance men who wished to re-create their aristocratic pasts, or, in William's case, perceived aristocratic past, in a new land.

The Free Grants and Homestead Act of 1868, to which Hamilton referred, was enacted by the Ontario government to entice emigrants to farm the districts of Muskoka and Parry Sound, the southern parts of the region being about 150 kilometres north of Toronto. These lands were originally inhabited by the district's Indigenous population, but they were gradually forced onto reserves that skirted the area. Unfortunately, the land on offer was rocky and swampy as it lay on the Canadian Shield, and most of it was unsuitable for farming. Ironically, the land had sustained the Indigenous people for thousands of years, yet they were shamelessly displaced by far less knowledgeable settlers.

Hamilton was concerned about negative comments from detractors of the scheme. His mind was made up, however, by a rather random circumstance. "[S]trolling along Queen [S]treet in Toronto, I saw in the window of a little fat Dutch druggist, who owned a Muskoka farm, a huge round red beet... My last scruple vanished, conquered by a root, and I made up my mind to seek the Northern wilderness of milk, potatoes and honey, at the first convenient opportunity."[10]

In the fall of 1874, Hamilton reached Parry Sound, a town on the shore of Georgian Bay in the northwest corner of Muskoka. In his *Muskoka Sketch,* he brought to life the everyday goings-on in this rough frontier district. He wasn't interested in hardy pioneers, or in the stalwart town fathers, unless it was to expose their quirkiness. Perhaps due to his own fondness for the odd tipple, he was especially intrigued by William Beatty, a man who practically ran Parry Sound. Beatty and his family had amassed a

[9] W.E. Hamilton, *Muskoka Sketch* (Dresden, Ont.: "Times Printing Company, 1884) 2.
[10] *Ibid.*

good amount of property, which they parcelled out to settlers, but insisted that they sign a pledge of sobriety before they could claim ownership. Hamilton found this quite amusing. "[T]he purchaser of a Beatty lot was bound not to sell or in any way traffic in liquor during his life and the lives of Her Majesty and of the Royal children and grandchildren, and a year and a month and a day after the decease of all these great persons."[11]

At one point in Parry Sound, Hamilton met up with a jolly band of remittance men from the old country who stayed at Kirkman's hotel, and was surprised to find men who had held "excellent positions" back home now inhabiting this small village in the backwoods. He spent some time with one "fashionable" man from London, England, whose main hobbies were to play the banjo and to fire his revolver at the landlord's daughters' underclothes that were pegged to the clothesline. Funny as this scenario is, it demonstrates the pointless, wasted lives of such men, languishing in the bush with too much time on their hands.

Rather than claiming a free grant, Hamilton was convinced by a rather shady character he called "happy Jack" to buy his land from a settler who no longer wanted it. Happy Jack assured him it was a good plot and helped conduct the transaction, then Hamilton located his "free" grant at the Crown Office in Parry Sound. But having impetuously purchased the land, he then just as impetuously abandoned it: "After residence in Toronto and Meaford, I migrated to Parry Sound, took up a free grant, got sick of it and settled in Bracebridge."[12]

Before reaching Bracebridge, Hamilton spent the winter at the home of a prosperous businessman, George Kelcey, who resided in Dunchurch, a town northeast of Parry Sound. It was one of the few times that Hamilton described the Indigenous people of the region. He reported that two different bands of Indigenous people lived in harmony in the immediate district. In order to let one another know their whereabouts, they sketched accurate maps on birch trees. Intrigued by those maps, Hamilton and Kelcey were able to locate an encampment deep in the bush. "The camp was cunningly constructed to escape the biting N.E. blast. The tent was to the S.E. of a huge [boulder], between which and a rock, the fire was flaming so that the tent enjoyed not only its direct heat but that reflected from the rock. They were actually warmer in the bush than we in our hewed log house."[13]

In March 1875, Hamilton arrived in Bracebridge, a small but lively village that had recently granted licences to five taverns, a point in its favour by his standards. As an unconventional newcomer, Hamilton made quite an impression on his new neighbours. The town clerk, James Boyer, described him in a 1905 ar-

[11] *Ibid.,* 5.

[12] Hamilton, *Peeps at My Life,* 11.

[13] Hamilton, *Muskoka Sketch,* 13.

ticle in the *Muskoka Herald:* He "was a fine scholar and a genial soul, although rather absent-minded and eccentric... He had a penchant for making writing paper and envelopes, also shirt collars and cuffs, from the inner bark of the birch tree, a custom which had gone out of fashion, even in Muskoka."[14]

An observation by Bracebridge schoolteacher Anthony McGill is a little more revealing. In 1916, he wrote:

> In rooms above the Gazette office dwelt, or more correctly nested, W.E. Hamilton, a personality sufficiently well marked to deserve recognition... [He] was a profound thinker when he thought at all, but at the time I knew him, he had become so dependent on the cup that cheers but also inebriates, as to make prolonged mental excursions distinctly fatiguing.[15]

However, despite his idiosyncrasies, Hamilton immediately became an active member of the Bracebridge community, volunteering his time in various capacities. The town, with a population of about 600 in 1875, lies about 200 kilometres north of Toronto. In Hamilton's day, it was a rough-and-tumble centre whose main street rose steeply from the roaring falls in the Muskoka River. Despite his initial doubts, Hamilton claimed that over the next five years, the town began to prosper, and even drew the attention of a celebrity. The British Lion Hotel had had the honour of being visited by the Duke of Manchester, who had taken an interest in emigration and visited the free grant lands. Hamilton was amused that the townspeople were given a tour of the duke's hotel bedroom:

> Here the Duke of Manchester, after having walked up the hill, pursued by the brass band who were determined to serenade him, actually slept. The rumpling of the sheets the next morning showed that notwithstanding his exalted rank, he went to bed like ordinary commoners, and the couch was fondly glanced at, and shown to the curious, as a link joining Bracebridge to the House of Lords.[16]

Though Bracebridge was a small town, Hamilton was pleased to find "cultured society" and befriended various learned gentlemen. He became an Anglican church lay reader and conducted services at small hamlets in the area. Before long, he was appointed by E.F. Stephenson, a license inspector and owner of the *Free Grant Gazette,* as an emigration agent, and later as an assistant editor of the *Gazette,* a local paper that Stephenson had launched in 1871. As the *Gazette* focussed on local news, information for settlers and amusing little tales, one can imagine it kept Hamilton agreeably occupied.

Finally, he seemed to have reached a measure of financial stability. After years living in other people's accommodations, he claimed to have built a small house near the centre of town. He had a rather odd housemate:

> In the winter, I had a companion, a huge snowy owl... [which] was given to me by a

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[14] Undated clipping from W.E. Hamilton file, Bracebridge Public Library.

[15] Robert J. Boyer, *A Good Town Grew Here: The Story of Bracebridge* (Bracebridge, Ont.: Herald-Gazette Press, 1975), 28.

[16] Hamilton, *Muskoka Sketch,* 17.

> lady friend. The huge bird would fly across the room, dodging books and tea-cups without making the least sound. One very cold night in winter, I was coiled under a buffalo-robe, dreaming of the sunny south, when I felt something furiously shaking and striking the 'buffalo,' which I threw to the bottom of the bed, lit the lamp, and realized my narrow escape from strangulation by the owl's claws.[17]

In 1878, the Department of Crown Lands published a just-under-300-page "pamphlet" titled *The Undeveloped Lands in Northern & Western Ontario,* a comprehensive compilation by several contributors of statistical and analytical information on the various underpopulated regions of the province. By far, the longest chapter was the one focussing on Muskoka and Parry Sound, and that chapter was written by Hamilton. He must have pored over a multitude of sources, including government publications, statistical reports, surveyors' findings, as well as books and pamphlets with geological, meteorological, agricultural, and manufacturing information.

In Hamilton's hands, the report on Muskoka makes surprisingly entertaining reading despite its rather dry subject matter. At the time, many similar government pamphlets included "hints to emigrants," which usually contained sensible lists of items they would require in the bush, and advice on how to sow crops, build houses, and care for livestock. But Hamilton embellished this topic, suggesting "old bachelor immigrants were particularly at risk of taking to drink," and assured them that "there is [*sic*] a goodly number of celibate ladies, who might be induced to enter the matrimonial paradise."[18] Of course, Hamilton was essentially describing himself, and one wonders if during lonely nights he turned to the bottle, longing for female companionship and regretting that his undisciplined, peripatetic nature hardly suited him for the constraints of marriage.

Hamilton deserved to be proud of his achievement, and it must have cemented his reputation in Muskoka. How he must have wished his father could see the work he was now able to achieve. The *Undeveloped Lands* book was much worthier than the amusing poems he wrote for the newspapers in the Eastern Townships of Quebec: this was a serious government document that necessitated discipline and concentrated thought.

It is little wonder that the following year, he was the editor of the *Guide Book & Atlas of Muskoka and Parry Sound,* one of many atlases being published around that time by the various provincial governments across Canada. These atlases were handsome public relations efforts not just to entice settlers but also to educate them on the advantages of each region, as well as to lure prospective tourists to the districts. Each had a lengthy preface, followed by maps of settlers' lots across the district.

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[17] *Ibid.,* 28.

[18] Alexander Kirkwood and Joseph J. Murphy, *The Undeveloped Lands in Northern & Western Ontario* (Toronto?: 1878), 85.

Hamilton covered a variety of topics, including Muskoka's scenery, hunting and fishing opportunities, history, and navigation. His free-and-easy style makes for good reading, and his frequent mental excursions are especially amusing: in the midst of this informational government text, he suddenly embarked on a droll fishing tale. Such an anecdote was entirely inappropriate, but it does reveal his irrepressible need to entertain rather than educate his readers. After the fish tale, Hamilton pulled himself together and continued, "Now for some dry statistics,"[19] and marshalled himself to finish the job he was hired to do.

With all its quirkiness, the atlas was another achievement for Hamilton, even if he did treat it with rather less gravity than he should have. But he might have had qualms about the whole enterprise. Hamilton had to convince new settlers that the rocky land was suitable for agriculture: "Many farmers have noticed that the best soil is near the rock, without knowing the reason, which is probably due to a weathering of the feldsphathic portion, which yields comminuted plant-food in a very available form." As his audience was made up of largely uneducated settlers, they just might be fooled by his lofty prose. But more poignantly, the maps of each township delineated each free grant lot with each settler's name neatly recorded. But a good number did not thrive; in fact, many of those settlers had long since abandoned their lot. Did Hamilton feel any guilt about his part in promoting Muskoka as a suitable destination for emigrant farmers? He was simply too clever a man not to have realized the grim realities that would beset so many settlers.

To all appearances, he was comfortably settled in Bracebridge. But in October 1880 he abruptly left for the town of Chatham in southwestern Ontario. He didn't divulge the reason for the sudden move in either of his memoirs, although his drinking might have caused him to lose his job, and in a town as small as Bracebridge, there would have been few opportunities for further employment.

Chatham, with a population of about 9,000, offered a wider scope for Hamilton to flourish: smaller than the city of Toronto, but surpassing Bracebridge's limitations. The town was a place where he could choose between notoriety and anonymity—he elected for notoriety, but that was to be manifested in various incarnations. When he arrived, he had solid journalism credentials—his contributions to the *Undeveloped Lands* book and the Muskoka atlas proved that he could be a reliable worker, and coupled with his impressive Irish lineage and obvious intelligence, he would be quite the catch for his employers.

Hamilton became a local editor of the *Chatham Tribune*, an eight-page newspaper. In his *Peeps* memoir, he provided us with scant detail about his eighteen-month spell while there, but we get some insight from Victor Lauriston, the chief editorial writer and columnist after

[19] W.E. Hamilton, *Guide Book & Atlas of Muskoka and Parry Sound* (Toronto: H.R. Page, 1879), 37.

the Second World War for the *Chatham News*. In a 1952 article he wrote: "[Hamilton] was in Bob Cooper's telegraph office the day the flash came through that President Garfield had been shot. From the mere bald message plus his retentive memory of the Garfield-Hancock campaign, Hamilton threw together an extra. Peddling it on the streets of Chatham he sold 1,000 copies at five cents each."[20] From this small detail we can ascertain that Hamilton was at the top of his game at the time, able to use his broad knowledge and well-honed writing skills to turn breaking news into an instant article and reap the benefits.

In addition to his work on the *Tribune,* Hamilton became an emigration agent, greeting emigrants as they arrived and helping them settle in the district. As in Bracebridge, he was an active member of the community. In *Peeps,* he listed some of his accomplishments while he was in Chatham, among them: denouncing the practice of sending "lunatics and the honest poor to jail"; co-founding the Home for the Friendless; having the market shed enclosed "for the benefit of shivering saleswomen"; and co-founding the Literary and Scientific Society.[21]

He rarely mentioned his family in his memoirs, but in *Peeps,* he did make an exception with Archibald. Although his tone was light, one can sense the disappointment he felt when contacted by his long-lost sibling shortly after his arrival in Chatham.

> One evening, when boarding at A.F. Ryall's Prince Edward House, (Chatham), and being very much amazed at the non-coming of some old country money from my brother, Rev. A.H. Hamilton, a messenger told me that a parcel was lying for me at the Express Office. There was a dollar and eighty-three cents to pay on it. Running back with the parcel to the hotel, I eagerly opened it, and found a huge thick ugly piece of Spanish cork—that and nothing more. I threw it at the open fire, but passion marred my aim and Alf cried, "Stop, I see something shining." I picked up the despised enclosure. It was the heaviest cork on record. Cunningly set into the edge, the parson had thickly stuck in half-sovereigns.[22]

Most likely, there was a malicious intent to Archibald's action. Even taking into consideration the bitterness he held toward his brother for his handling of the family's properties, this was a rather childish, mean-minded gesture. It must have hurt Hamilton deeply, for throughout his life he demonstrated a deep affection for his family members. Unfortunately, Hamilton didn't divulge why Archie was sending him money—presumably it was from the sale of a family property.

He might have thrived at the *Tribune* for some time, but in 1882, the newspaper was sold, and Hamilton became local editor of the *Chatham Daily Planet*. Also at that time, he compiled the first Chatham business directory. Mustering

[20] Undated clipping from W.E. Hamilton file, Chatham Public Library.

[21] Hamilton, *Peeps at My Life,* 13.

[22] *Ibid.*

the skills he had utilized for *Undeveloped Lands* and as editor of the Muskoka atlas, he accomplished a straightforward, useful publication. Prior to a list of Chatham business people was a five-page "introductory," one that outlined the town's many advantages for business and settlement. The directory differs from his other publications as it was much more disciplined and well organized, and it did not contain any little anecdotes about lonely bachelors or fishing expeditions. In the directory, his own listing indicated that he was at that time residing at the Rankin Hotel. This suggests that during his first few years in the town, he was able to afford room and board and was enjoying some creature comforts.

Hamilton's time at the *Planet* was short-lived. Victor Lauriston wrote in his column quoted above, that he "lost" the *Planet* in the fall of 1884*,* implying that Hamilton's drinking contributed to the loss of the job. Shortly after, he moved on to the smaller town of Dresden to become editor of the *Dresden Times.* Situated about thirty kilometres north of Chatham, Dresden was one of the destinations for Black Americans who escaped slavery via the Underground Railroad. The details about Hamilton's nine months in Dresden are again a bit fuzzy, although he claimed he once gave a speech there to 3,000 people. (Hamilton may have been exaggerating the size of his small-town audience.) Again, Lauriston hinted that he didn't thrive at the *Dresden Times,* although he managed to write his *Muskoka Sketch* while there. Hamilton described the Muskoka memoir as "a big success," which seems unlikely; despite his ability to describe the quirky characters in the district, his stream-of-consciousness prose was rather awkward. But he was a dreamer: if he wrote a book about Muskoka, it was by nature a best-seller.

After a life of drifting, Hamilton, at the age of around fifty, finally settled down in Chatham for the rest of his days. Unable to hold down a job for very long, his only recourse was to become self-employed. And so, on 5 September 1885, he launched the weekly *Market Guide,* a small pink pamphlet that he peddled throughout the streets of Chatham every Saturday, whatever the weather. It was a modest publication, but one that he took pride in, despite its quirky, anecdotal style and the occasional typo. Miraculously, a copy of the 30 May 1891 issue of the *Market Guide* has survived in the Trinity College files. Hamilton must have sent it to Archibald, hoping to impress him with his accomplishment: to have become the editor and proprietor of his own newspaper, however modest the publication might have been. As well as covering local news, Hamilton included his characteristic witticisms, as well as reports on market prices for commodities such as flour, wheat, oats, and potatoes. The paper also contained a number of advertisements, which would help finance the venture.

While Hamilton was struggling to earn an income with the *Market Guide,* news of his aunt Sydney's death just might have reached him in Chatham. In 1875, Sydney had left Ireland for Auckland, where she had become the matron of

An older William Edwin Hamilton (from his book Peeps at My Life*).*

the city's Pauper Lunatic Asylum. On 3 March 1889, she died there at the age of 75. Sydney's was a peripatetic life, much like her nephew's, but unlike him, she had persevered both in Nicaragua and Auckland, carving out a living against the odds.

A vivid description of Hamilton in his later years was provided by a journalist named Augustus Bridle, in his book titled *Hansen: A Novel of Canadianization*. Bridle was an art critic for the *Toronto Star* for thirty years and co-founder of Toronto's Arts and Letters Club. Having come to Canada as a British home child, he fictionalized his experiences as a new Canadian in *Hansen,* which was published in 1924. Bridle had attended high school in Chatham, where Hamilton was a familiar sight in town. In the novel, the young "Hansen" is reading John Stuart Mill's *Liberty* in the Mechanics' Institute library, when he encounters a fictionalized Hamilton, who is given the name "Burnham."

> A shuffly old man with a reiterant cough, whose back had been turned at the book-shelves ever since Hansen entered, came and stood over him. The pockets of his threadbare overcoat bulged with copies of a paper headed *Market Gleaner.* His old Christie hat was battered, his head was bald, a pipe upside down in his mouth, and he bore the aroma of recently acquired whisky...
>
> He had heard of this old man... who spent... many of his evenings in barrooms, his midnight prowling about the town, the rest of the night on a straw pallet in a room behind the law office, and his spare time editing the *Market Gleaner*... That evening... [Hansen] saw a haystack beginning to blaze and pulled out of it old Burnham...[23]

[23] Augustus Bridle, *Hansen: A Novel of Canadianization* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1924), 107, 108, 143.

There is no doubt Bridle intended this to be a humorous caricature of Hamilton, yet there is a hint of believability to his description. Despite Bridle's lighthearted approach, it is difficult to reconcile Hamilton's eccentric lovability with the tragic figure of an aging man sleeping rough and squeaking out a living whatever the season. And yet, Hamilton was unable or, more likely, unwilling, in *Peeps,* at least, to address the hardship he was enduring. Turning every misadventure into a joke was perhaps the only way he could face the tribulations in his life.

Indeed, Hamilton described "one of my hair-breadth escapes" while in Chatham. He arrived at the tavern of his friend Tom Collop to collect some copies of his newspaper that Collop had set aside for him behind the bar. But he stumbled in the dark and tumbled down the cellar steps, just missing a "sharp iron point which would have spitted my brain."[24] Tom gave him a cordial, and "he added a tongue-thrashing, and guyed me at intervals, till the novelty wore off, after six months."[25] Presumably, the tongue-lashing was an admonition that his tumble was caused by his drinking habits.

Hamilton's last years demonstrated a much darker side to his existence. In the Chatham directory of 1892, this time not edited by him, he was listed as living in the Scane Block. Hamilton's home during his last years was indeed in the back room of his friend E.W. Scane's law office, where he slept on a straw mattress. It couldn't have been much of a "home," but Scane must have pitied his old friend whom he had hired in the early 1880s as an emigration agent.

Hamilton's early time in Chatham was likely quite sociable, when he was respected for his intelligence and made for an entertaining guest. However, in those last years, one doubts he was welcomed into the homes of the better-off citizens of Chatham. Unwashed, frequently drunk guests seldom are. Taverns were the only places where he could enjoy a fortifying drink and the companionship of other patrons.

On the morning of 17 March 1902, Hamilton left his room at Scane's office at around nine-thirty in the morning and ambled over to the Rankin Hotel. By all reports, he seemed to be in good health when he arrived, although he ordered a cup of beef tea, a drink favoured by invalids. At around noon, he was chatting to his companions when he suddenly rose, claimed he needed a breath of fresh air, and walked toward the door of the hotel lobby. Just as Hamilton stepped out onto King Street, he collapsed. Efforts were made to resuscitate him, but he was dead within minutes of his fall. He was sixty-seven years old. His death certificate revealed that the cause of death was heart disease.

Oddly enough, considering that Hamilton dwelt on the edge of convention, the community came together at the time of his death, with tributes pour-

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[24] Hamilton, *Peeps at My Life,* 13.
[25] *Ibid.*

ing in and a subscription set up to pay for the cost of the funeral. The *Chatham Daily Planet* reported:

> Possessed of a magnificent education, endowed with a brilliant intellect and characterized by a vigourous [*sic*] and strong personality, Mr. Hamilton was destined to become a man among men, to attain distinction, honor, prestige... He was a loyal citizen and an active one. At times, possibly theoretical and ethereal, but always elevating, his counsel and advocacy were along lines calculated to outside weal and betterment.[26]

Helping us to understand Hamilton's last years, a letter to the editor of the *Planet* by his friend, the Reverend W.H.G. Colles, revealed Hamilton's struggles.

> [F]ew realized the terrible battle of life that he was waging single-handed against the heavy odds of strong publishing companies and modern organization and machinery... Though he fought an unequal battle, frequently weakened from wont of proper care, he bore bravely up as best he could... without a murmur of complaint, nor ever asking a favour of any man.... I never knew him to use an oath or an irreverent word. I never heard him attempt an unseemly joke, or repeat a scandal, or tell a vulgar tale."[27]

And yet not everyone was as kind toward Hamilton after his death. Chatham resident Alexander Macfarlane, a Scottish mathematics scholar and eventual president of the international Quaternion Society, wrote a cruel personal assessment of Hamilton in the 13 June 1902, edition of *Science* magazine. He trivialized Hamilton's role in the posthumous publication of *Elements,* then observed: "[T]hrough drinking habits [Hamilton] fell into very wretched circumstances. When I first saw him, underclothes were conspicuous by their absence, and his sleeping place was said to be the livery of an old stable."[28] Macfarlane was disgusted that the son of his idol had fallen on such hard times.

Oddly, information on Hamilton's later life didn't emerge until decades after his death. We know that the family was aware that he lived in Chatham, for Archibald had sent him the coin-embedded piece of cork. During that time, Archibald stayed in touch with his late sister's husband, John O'Regan, who partially supported Archibald till O'Regan's death in 1898, so his brother-in-law must also have known where he was living. Neither of them seemed to have confided in Helen's son the details of Hamilton's latter years, as apparently at some point the young man placed notices in North American newspapers in search of his long-lost uncle. It seemed that both Archibald and John O'Regan preferred that Hamilton "disappear" from the historical record.

In fact, for many years, biographers of his father assumed Hamilton was never heard of again after his last trip to Canada. And yet, he was a familiar figure in Chatham and very well connected.

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[26] Undated clipping from W.E. Hamilton file, Chatham Public Library.

[27] W.H.G. Colles, "Letter Box," undated clipping, Chathm Public Library.

[28] Alexander Macfarlane, "W.E. Hamilton," *Science,* N. S. 15:389, 13 June 1902.

Surely someone would have notified Archibald, or the Dunsink Observatory, or Trinity College Dublin, or the *Irish Times* that he had died. And yet, even in 1966, in an article in the *Irish Astronomical Journal,* concerning the descendants of Sir William Rowan, the Irish physicist Patrick A. Wayman wrote only that Hamilton left for "America."

Thomas L. Hankins published his biography of Sir William Rowan in 1980, and he only mentioned that Hamilton had worked for newspapers in Chatham. But in the mid-1980s, Wayman had finally made a breakthrough when he managed to get hold of Victor Lauriston's 1952 article, which placed not only the date of Hamilton's death, but also revealed the abject circumstances of his life prior to it. And then in 1991, Wayman finally got a hold of a copy of *Peeps at My Life.* Finally, Hamilton's "disappearance" was solved. Lauriston had dismissed him as a failure: "Dropping dead on King Street was not Hamilton's supreme tragedy. His tragedy was the greatest brain Chatham ever knew gone to utter waste; a genius that might have solved world problems frittered away on editorial squibs and Chatham market quotations."[29]

Wayman's interest in Hamilton continued, when in 1999, he published an article in the *Irish Astronomical Journal* titled "Peeps at William Edwin Hamilton." Wayman had his own theories about Hamilton's inability to live up to his father's reputation:

> My own opinion is that William Edwin had many of his father's talents including literacy and breadth of interest, some of his impracticality, a modicum of real talent, but no spark of genius... It is certainly the case that William Edwin's talents were largely lost to the world and it is a matter of conjecture to consider how they might have been better used.[30]

Although Lauriston had written about Hamilton in a small-town newspaper fifty years after his death, it took almost another fifty years for scholars to unravel the mystery of his life.

Hamilton began his sojourn in Canada as a typical remittance man, reliant upon his family overseas, shunning hard work, critical of his new surroundings, wasteful, and, from his family's perspective, morally suspect. Over time, however, he outgrew the stereotype and gained the acceptance and respect of the people of Chatham. Where Hamilton was different from other remittance men was that he had gained a solid education and was, although not a genius, an extremely intelligent man who could live by his wits when the occasion called for it.

In the end, being the son of a genius was Hamilton's biggest hurdle in life. Comparisons with his father were rife in judgements made about him. And although he accomplished a good deal during his time, his impetuousness and lack of self-discipline hampered his pro-

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[29]Victor Lauriston, "Maybe I'm Wrong," undated clipping, Chatham Public Library.

[30] P.A. Wayman, "Peeps at William Edwin Hamilton," *Irish Astronomical Journal,* 26:1 (June 1999), 69-72.

gress and alienated him from his family. But, deep down, those negative attributes were what made Hamilton the remarkable man he was. Unlike many of the "great" men of past history who have recently been toppled from their virtual or actual pedestals, Hamilton felt no compunction to assume greatness, he simply applied his skills and wisdom wherever he found himself in the relatively small arena of nineteenth-century Ontario.

After all these assessments of Hamilton's life, perhaps it is proper that he have the last word. His final paragraph in *Peeps* spoke volumes: "And now, gentle reader good-bye. Come on Mr. Critic and cut me up like a pig, as Tennyson used to say: 'Sharpen your knife. My hide is thickened by thirty years of journalism.'"[31]

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[31] Hamilton, *Peeps at My Life,* 49.