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# "Extravagance, Tea, and Trumpery": Irony and Education in Thomas McCulloch's *Stepsure Letters*

Cynthia Sugars and Paul Keen

Few literary characters conjure the anxieties and aspirations of pre-Confederation Canada more vividly than Thomas McCulloch's Mephibosheth Stepsure. An orphan saddled with two lame feet and an impossible name, Stepsure's predicament as an over-educated snob caught in the thrall of a changing time offered McCulloch an ideal vantage point onto the tensions inherent in the challenge of living in a modern commercial world. *The Mephibosheth Stepsure Letters*, which takes the form of a series of letters written by the fictional Mephibosheth Stepsure to the *Acadian Recorder*, offers a sustained laugh at the "folly and extravagance" of Stepsure's social-climbing neighbours (187). Their satirical force made the *Letters* highly popular with readers, but this critique of fashionable modernity also raises some important and difficult questions about McCulloch's underlying response to his age. As a passionate advocate for education, McCulloch was an enthusiastic champion of the idea of social progress, but it is not clear, if we give the critical tone behind the humour that animates the *Letters* any credence, what the idea of progress could possibly mean in a society whose values were so impossibly warped by petty snobbery, delusion, and bad financial planning. Reading McCulloch's *Stepsure Letters* alongside his arguments about the progressive force of education in *The Nature and Uses of a Liberal Education Illustrated*, which he gave as a lecture at the Pictou Academy in 1819, highlights the two sides of this double impulse. On the one hand, McCulloch's *Stepsure Letters* appears to defend the traditional, anti-consumerist ethos of an agrarian economy; on the other, his institute lecture insists on the importance of a liberal education to the promotion of "public justice" (8-9) and "the improvement of the social state" (20).

To put this more plainly, what do we make of the fact that it seems so hard to imagine that the *Stepsure Letters* and the 1819 lecture entitled

*The Nature and Uses of a Liberal Education Illustrated* are by the same person? The one offers a highly conservative message whose critique of the dangers of commercial modernity seems to suggest a resistance to the idea of rural people getting above themselves. The other embraces the transformative power of education as a force that could enable people to pursue new opportunities *and* to foster new forms of more actively engaged citizenship that would be more suitable to a modern society. Which of these is the real McCulloch? Or are there ways of understanding them as different aspects of the same outlook?

At the heart of these questions, especially in the *Stepsure Letters*, is the question of the relations between Nova Scotia's urban and rural worlds. In *The Quest of the Folk*, Ian McKay identifies "the ways in which urban cultural producers, pursuing their own interests and expressing their own view of things, constructed the Folk of the countryside as the romantic antithesis to everything they disliked about modern urban and industrial life" (4). But the *Stepsure Letters* turns this on its head: identifying the countryside as the locus of economic speculation and corruption, and portraying the folk as naïve buffoons rather than noble innocents. What is perhaps most interesting is that McCulloch's work anticipated the very phenomenon identified by Herb Wyile almost two hundred years later. As Wyile puts it, "the Atlantic Canada of today is very much caught up in the profound economic, political, cultural, and social shifts" of the neoliberal era. "Rather than a haven from the consumerism, corporatization, and global competition that characterize our current milieu, Atlantic Canada has been palpably affected by these very trends" (1).

This account might be taken as an apt description of the nineteenth-century social and economic landscape depicted in the *Letters*. As Gwendolyn Davies points out in her introduction to *The Mephibosheth Stepsure Letters*, early nineteenth-century Nova Scotia had been shaped by a particularly disruptive form of these economic dynamics as the financial boom created by the Napoleonic War gave way to economic hardship by the late 1810s. These post-war financial instabilities exacerbated already existing anxieties that historians such as J.G.A. Pocock have identified with deeply ambivalent responses to the triumph of market forces. The ideal of the self-regulating and highly rational individual that underpins neoliberal approaches is in many ways a fantasy that masks the very different impression of earlier thinkers whose concerns

resonate in important ways with the foibles depicted in *The Stepsure Letters*. As Pocock has argued, the ideal of "economic man as masculine conquering hero" is fundamentally at odds with these earlier impressions which tended to describe the modern individual, dominated and distracted by market forces, as "a feminised, even an effeminate being, still wrestling . . . with interior and exterior forces let loose by his fantasies and appetites" (*Virtue* 114). As Pocock's delineation of this discursive topography highlights, reactions to the impact of commerce were always gendered, adopting an implicitly and often explicitly misogynist tone as a way of making sense of the instabilities of a transactional world. McCulloch's own response was defined less by his recoil from these problems than by his struggle to find solutions that would channel these instabilities into more progressive possibilities. But naturalizing the instabilities and excesses of commerce was never going to be an easy task. The Scottish Enlightenment philosophers whose ideas shaped the intellectual horizons of McCulloch's childhood world in Scotland sought to contain these anxieties by insisting that "the fortune of a man is entire while he remains possessed of himself," but for many critics, the destabilizing effects of capitalism unsettled this dream of self-possession in ways that were as ominous as they were inescapable (Ferguson 217). Even worse, these concerns about the moral infirmity of the modern individual extended to worries about the fundamental irrationality of society as a whole, predicated as it was on the contingencies of an endless process of exchanges between strangers. If this was true, then a modern commercial society's values were shaped, not by moral ideals and purposeful debate, but by "a blend of fictions, namely fantasy and convention," dooming its citizens "to inhabit a world more unstable in its epistemological foundations than Plato's cave" (*Machiavellian* 451). In its narrative depiction of these problems, the *Stepsure Letters* offered a complex version of both these earlier anxieties about commerce and the narrative responses that McKay charts in relation to these dynamics in our own day, conjuring a rural world that is the most extreme version rather than the Romantic antithesis of these fears about modernity. Instead of using the idea of the Nova Scotian Folk to project an idealized, pre-modern fantasy, McCulloch uses his "folk" as a way of staging anxieties about modernization. This approach enables McCulloch to envision a sanitized version of modernity that has been purged of its excesses.

*The Mephibosheth Stepsure Letters*, which appeared in the *Acadian Recorder* between 1821 and 1823, has been described by various critics of early Maritime literature as a defence of traditional values and agrarian life, what Ronald Sutherland and Hugh MacLennan described as the Maritime "mystique" of community (41),[1] or what Janice Kulyk Keefer termed "the plague sore of community in Maritime writing" (39). As Kulyk Keefer writes, "McCulloch hopes to persuade his common readers to mend their ways and fortunes by reverting to traditional habits of self-sufficient, home-based, communal life" (43). In this way, McCulloch might be seen to have contributed to the "folk" identity of Nova Scotian literature that has been so deleterious to Nova Scotian culture. But it may be that the critical emphasis on Atlantic-Canadian community and tradition has obscured some of the more tortuous literary engagements with these topics in the past. Wyile's identification of the mistaken depiction of the East as "slow-paced and unchanging [and defying] the force of time" (2) is in fact central to Stepsure's critique of his kinsmen: they are not defiant enough!

If Atlantic-Canadian identity was rooted in a fabled sense of traditional life enriched by the "mystique" of a strong sense of community and shared moral purpose, the *Stepsure Letters* offers an ironic but sustained critique of this ideal. The Nova Scotia that Mephibosheth Stepsure depicts amounts to a wholesale denial of these ideas. It conjures a rural world ruined by genteel aspirations, fashionable temptations, and, most fundamentally, the vagaries of a credit economy awash on the unstable tides of a modern transactional world in which the idea of value had come untethered from any reliable foundation in honest labour. Although we may not identify with his moral rectitude and superiority, Stepsure (and by extension McCulloch) is an ardent critic of the deleterious effects of neoliberalism. To Stepsure, who bears witness to the conditions of his age, the situation is dire. As Letter 7 (the first of the "Stranger's Letters"[2]) warns:

> The Province has now arrived at a state with which almost every man is dissatisfied; and, indeed, at a state in which it cannot possibly remain. In the midst of our golden dreams, disappointment has beset us; our imaginary mountains of gold have become mountains of embarrassment; and every honest mind is awakened to feelings of debts and deprivations, which render it a stranger to peace. Merchants, it is true, have large books; and farmers, large proper-

> ties: but, in these days, a transfer of property is usually a loss upon the one side, and ruin upon the other. But description is unnecessary: every man knows our state, and every man feels it. (68)

This is especially strange, he explains, since "few parts of this continent possess such a combination of advantages" as Nova Scotia, from the "wealth of the sea" and the "inexhaustible" value of its "mineral productions" to its rich farming land: "Taking this province as a whole, it contains more soil adapted to the purposes of farming, than any country around it of the same extent, Prince Edward Island only excepted" (69). And yet, the letter insists, Nova Scotia finds itself on the brink of ruin, in "a state in which it cannot possibly remain" (68). What makes this especially strange, the correspondent notes, is that "[o]ur neighbours in New England, with a similar climate and a worse soil, have arrived at wealth and no mean station in the scale of society" while "we" here in Nova Scotia, "instead of coping with them in improvement, are drowned in debt" (70).

Having rejected two possible explanations, the letter finishes without offering a solution, leaving this question "the subject of farther investigation" (72). Prior letters by Stepsure himself, however, had already provided an explanation that was both self-consciously focused on early nineteenth-century Nova Scotia and a product of much longer trans-Atlantic debates about the dangers of nothing less than modernity itself. Neoliberal celebrations of the power of an unfettered marketplace tend to be premised — explicitly or otherwise — on a vision of the individual as highly rational and self-regulating, ready to thrive in a world where citizenship amounts to being a good consumer. But as Pocock has argued, for earlier critics, "economic man . . . was seen" in far less confident terms, "still wrestling with his own passions and hysterias" (*Virtue* 114).

Stepsure's neighbours fit squarely into this latter category. Eager to become rich and tired of hard labour on the farm, they have been seduced by the allure of the brave new world of shopping. Like Solomon Gosling's wife Polly, after her ill-fated trip to Halifax to sell her turkeys, "by seeing the fashions, [they] had learned to be genteel" (8). Most critiques of commerce embraced rural life as a wholesome alternative to these "passions and hysterias," but the *Letters* suggests that far from being immune to these corrupting forces, the sheltered nature of rural life made it all the more susceptible. Not only that, but the impact of

these distractions was far more disruptive than it tended to be in urban contexts. "I do not know how it is in Halifax," Stepsure insists, "but, in the country, it is really a great hardship to be a respectable gentleman. For the sake of character, such a person must do a great many things which he would otherwise avoid" (36).

Yet these foibles, the *Letters* implies, as humorous as their misguided pretensions may have been, are not the real core of the problem. The more serious issue is a related but far more fundamental error about the true nature of value itself. The town's "general distress" is not, Stepsure explains, the result of "carelessness or inactivity," but, quite the contrary, a product of the wrong kinds of obsessive interest and hyperactivity, "for the most of our townsfolk are eager to be rich, and [they are] as active as eager. I will venture to affirm that there is not another township in the province, where there are so many bargains every day made" (28). Having known better than to heed Parson Drone's advice that "the property of the town at that time, could not make us all wealthy" no matter how many times it changed hands in various types of bargains, the townsfolk are puzzled by the fact that "by some strange fatality, misfortune has fallen heaviest upon those who were most active" in their hunt for bargains (28). This is the real puzzle: a world in which those busiest enriching themselves seem to be the most prone to just the opposite fate. The answer, of course, is that in their faith in the art of the deal, they are going about it the wrong way. To put this in Marxist terms that McCulloch would almost certainly have hated, they had embraced the tantalizing spectre of "exchange value" grounded in an economic ideal of pure circulation over the more stable but definitely less exciting idea of "use value" that was the cornerstone of the genuine forms of productivity that ought to characterize "a farming life" (8).

Worse still, this misguided belief that endless bartering might somehow set an entire community on the road to riches is unsettled by the even more dangerous effects of credit, a hazard that is epitomized by the unfortunate fate of Solomon Gosling himself. It is no small irony that Gosling was a victim of his own success. Whereas genuine forms of productivity yield predictable rewards, Gosling is actually destroyed, not by his commercial failures but by the unexpected scale of his success. Having mortgaged his farm to Callibogus, the West India merchant, Gosling is able to set himself up as a retailer of exotic goods. By appealing to the fashionable desires rather than the actual needs of his

neighbours, he does sensational business: "For a number of weeks, little was talked of, but Mr. Gosling's Store . . . and, during the course of the day, long lines of horses, fastened to every accessible post and pinnacle of the fences, rendered an entrance to his house almost impracticable" (9). Not only that, but his neighbours, eager to procure his goods, pay him ready cash for their purchases, leaving their debts with Mr. Ledger to be settled another time. Armed with his new-found wealth, Gosling makes another trip to the city to acquire an even greater inventory. Interest in his goods does not decline, but now, having established themselves as trustworthy customers, his neighbours naturally decide that they prefer to buy on credit from Mr. Gosling as well, a preference that it would be churlish for him to refuse. Having learned too late that his customers are themselves already in danger of losing the mortgage on their farms to Mr. Ledger because of their inability to pay off their prior debts, Mr. Gosling soon finds himself in the same situation. When his customers default, he is shocked to learn that his books of debts "are of no more value than a rotten pumpkin" (11). Like many of his neighbours, he is soon invited to "go to live with the sheriff, as the most of [these others] are likely to do," where "they will get into very genteel company" (16).

The point here is that the real core of McCulloch's satire is not ultimately about good or bad economics but, more fundamentally, about the impact of these dynamics on the sustainability of the community itself. It is not just that wealth based on credit is illusory, but that it generates a set of mutually destructive relations in place of the neighbourly support that would normally sustain a farming community. Having opted for this more illusory form of wealth, Stepsure's neighbours become implicated in unhealthy relations with each other, buying on credit in ways that expose each other to bankruptcy. As more and more mortgages fail, the once healthy farming community finds its parodic counterpoint in the "genteel company" of debtors living with the sheriff.

These narrative complexities were amplified by a set of related instabilities that were grounded in the ambiguous nature of Stepsure's critical relation to his neighbours' failings. In many ways, it was a carefully crafted form of satirical incredulity that allowed McCulloch to expose various forms of duplicity in a less sermonizing tone than might have been the case had Stepsure more clearly recognized these failings. "Our sheriff," he explains at one point, "is a very hospitable gentleman; and, when any of his neighbours are in hardships, he will call upon

them, and even insist upon their making his house their home. Nor did I ever know any shy folks getting off with an excuse" (12). Euphemisms are taken at face value; ways of rationalizing personal indulgences are never questioned. In a subsequent letter, Stepsure notes that the Sheriff's lodgers were accidentally prevented from being released to witness a twenty-guinea bet on "the comparative merits of Mr. Gawpus' grey mare and the sheriff's bay gelding" because, "somehow or other, before he went to the race, [the sheriff] happened to turn the key of their room door; so that they could not get out" (58). The good-natured naïveté implied by this "somehow or other" offers the *Letters*' actual readers a form of interpretive agency by placing them in a position where they know more than these characters, even though we as readers can never know just how incredulous Stepsure really is.

McCulloch's implicit warning about the ubiquity of these problems culminates in the darkly self-ironic shift in Stepsure's identity by the end of Book One. Where Stepsure's narrative voice had remained distanced from the moral and economic contagion of these dynamics by a sense of mild disapproval and (often) polite bafflement, taking his neighbours' pretensions at face value even as he remains unaffected by their influence, his final letter in Book One dramatizes his own complicity, emphasizing Stepsure's growing sense that, like his neighbours in their scramble for distinction, he too has "now . . . become somebody" (188): "I have now got a character to maintain. . . . for every decent man likes to be respected by respectable persons" (186-87). Ironically, Stepsure's growing stature, which is itself a direct result of his ability to expose the emptiness of his neighbours' obsession with social status, has nurtured his own preoccupation with this same longing for fashionable distinction. Nor, the passage suggests, has his own good judgement been any less immune from the corrupting effects of this preoccupation. The letter concludes by informing his readers that the growing public impression that his letters "were a very clever thing" (186) has culminated in no less than an announcement by the Attorney General himself, that "Turn where you will, folly and extravagance stare you in the face. That GENTLEMAN, Mephibosheth Stepsure, had given us a picture of ourselves, which he was sorry to say was too true" (187). Stepsure, whose own vanity has been stirred by the news, misses the fact that the Attorney General's remarks had actually been deeply ambivalent; however strongly he might agree with Stepsure, the

Attorney General explained, he nonetheless "did not approve of its being hung up in the newspapers for all the world to look at" (187). But for Mephibosheth Stepsure, the news "that lame Boshy would ever be called a GENTLEMAN, at a public meeting of the grandees of the province," overshadows the more critical tone of the Attorney General's remarks (187). His misreading of the Attorney General's comments suggests that for Stepsure, as for his rural neighbours, the scramble for distinction can only come at the expense of genuine self-knowledge, all of which is highlighted in the closing flourish of his decision to sign the letter "Mephibosheth Stepsure Gent." The satirical message is clear: having begun "to think that I possess more dignity than I was formerly aware of," Stepsure's certainty that with a bit of help from the right accessories, "I shall make a very respectable looking gentleman," has nurtured a capacity for delusion that is as great as his neighbours' (188).

Stepsure's susceptibility to these temptations may have highlighted their dangerous ubiquity, but his own vulnerability to these problems did not necessarily translate into an equally hopeless stance in terms of the book as a whole. However uncompromising the *Letters*' jovial but unrelenting critique of the distractions of fashion and the hazards of commerce may have been, it offered its readers a promise of redemption that was implicit in its recurring references to the wiser urban condition of its *imagined* readers. "To be genteel in the country," Stepsure explained to these imagined readers, "is attended with difficulties and losses of which you townsfolk can have no conception. Morning visits in the afternoon, dressing, and other things, interfere so often with rural industry, that great show and sad accidents are usually combined" (13). Ironically, given eighteenth-century critics' tendency to equate these problems with modern urban life, Stepsure suggested that his readers were relatively immune from these dangerous temptations precisely because they *were* so used to city life. "Our country gentlemen," he repeated, "suffer serious afflictions and losses, from which, you townsfolk, who have nothing to do but to eat butter and be genteel, are altogether exempted" (14). Stepsure's use of the second person plural ("you townsfolk") may have positioned him firmly on the rural side of this divide, but his tone of moral sympathy with these townsfolk — appealing to their shared understanding of these problems — also emphasized his alliance *with* them in stark opposition to the "afflictions and losses" suffered by his neighbours.

In these two different ways he belonged to both groups, and in doing so, his example helped to bridge the gap between these worlds. Stepsure repeatedly exempts this imagined urban readership from the dangers of all of this rural "extravagance, tea, and trumpery" even as he emphasizes his own geographic immersion within this farming community (23). But however distinct these two worlds may be, they do not appear to be isolated from each other. Not only is Stepsure clear that, like himself, these urban readers were free of the problems that formed the content of the *Letters*, he also assumes that they are just as aware as himself of the scale of these difficulties in the countryside. "To your readers in general," Stepsure concluded his first letter, "it will not, I know, be very interesting; for they have all seen the like, and heard the like, a hundred times before" (15). Not only did these townsfolk understand the nature and magnitude of the problem, the narrative tone often seemed to imply that they were personally familiar with the individuals themselves.

Stepsure's references to the greater wisdom of his *imagined* readers in town offered McCulloch's *actual* readers a glimpse of relations between these two groups (the townsfolk and their genteel rural counterparts) in ways that enabled the real readers to think more clearly about their own relation to these issues. They are simultaneously interpolated by these references (the text is speaking directly to them as readers) and distanced from them (since they are not identical with these readers being alluded to, any more than we are) in ways that reinforce their ability to work through their own position within these debates. If Stepsure offers his "townsfolk" readers a glimpse of a rural world gone badly wrong, McCulloch challenges his actual readers to engage more critically with these questions about both the limitations and the advantages of commerce by registering the multiple perspectives at play within these letters.

This construction of a judicious urban milieu provides what might be the best way of understanding the links between the conservatism of the *Letters*' critique of fashion-driven commercial excess and the progressive ethos of *The Nature and Uses of a Liberal Education Illustrated*. Addressing the members of the Pictou Academy, McCulloch offered a confident assessment of the value of a liberal arts education as preparation for the learned professions (law, medicine, and the church), but rather than subscribing to a narrowly vocational mindset, he insisted

on its equal value to "public utility" or "the prosperity of the whole," ideas that could never, he maintained, be reduced to economic criteria (23, 4). Having rejected a narrow utilitarian understanding of the value of "useful knowledge," he offered his listeners an important extrapolation, from the value of education as a preparation for the professions to a broader emphasis on the centrality of this professional mindset to a whole range of career paths.[3]

Read against each other, his two texts offered a powerful re-articulation of a long-standing argument for a version of middle-class identity that embraced this professional ethos as a morally sound alternative to the speculative sensibility of a more commercially focused mindset. Rather than treating these as polar opposites, many eighteenth-century critics had argued that individuals engaged in business did so most constructively when their efforts were infused with the kind of moral integrity that was most commonly attributed to the emerging discourse of professionalism. According to this discourse, people ought to be paid for their work — indeed they ought to expect to be paid for it as a sign of their self-respect — but, unlike the more dubious ends of commercial speculators, they were ultimately inspired by a love of the work itself, and by a concern that it be done well.[4] In its insistence on the intrinsic links between a liberal arts education as the basis for the professions and its centrality to "public utility" or "the prosperity of the whole," *The Nature and Uses of a Liberal Education Illustrated* articulated a positive vision for a redemptive modernity that stood in contrast to the delusions and moral failures delineated in the *Letters*.

Whereas the *Letters* tended to emphasize the distracting nature of the heterogeneity of modern life, in which people could all too easily be tempted into making bad choices, McCulloch's *Lecture* celebrated the fact that the individual "is surrounded by a multiplicity of objects that attract attention and excite curiosity" as a key reason for the need to develop an appropriate "system of education" (3-4). What was crucial in order to be able to make the most of this "multiplicity" was that education foster the sort of critical ability that equipped students to handle the complexities of modern life. This "scientific" mindset, as he called it, would train them to discover "general principles" within the endless "individual objects and circumstances" that confronted them by reducing this sea of complexity to "genus and species" through an analysis of their deeper relations (16). Learning to make these connec-

tions would train students to become adept citizens in a world of boom and bust where this capacity had become more urgent than ever.

But this sort of education had a crucial second advantage in its ability to foster a recognition of fundamental connections between each person's self-interested pursuits and "an interest in the general prosperity" (7). By expanding the intellectual powers, McCulloch explained, a liberal arts education both enhances people's "power of communication" and, at the same time, "communicates the knowledge of moral principles" by clarifying man's unique position "as a link in the chain of existence, equally connected with the past and succeeding ages" (18, 19). In assessing the "utility" of education, it was not enough "to consider the human race as solitary individuals" but rather, as social beings whose ultimate success depended on a proper appreciation of their "relations in life" (7). "An extensive view of the vast utility of a liberal education" demonstrated the paramount importance of this larger question of "the improvement and happiness of the social state" (23). A good education, in other words, by fostering the kinds of critical or "scientific" skills that prepared people to be responsible citizens in ways that also nurtured a due appreciation for these larger social relations, infused people with both an ethical core and an interpretive ability that would enable them to avoid the kinds of mutually destructive relations that bedevilled the misguided characters in the *Letters*.

However important these ideas about the progressive force of knowledge may have been in the abstract, their real significance was only fully revealed in the context of McCulloch's commitment to creating and running the Pictou Academy, which had opened its doors to students in 1816, a decade after McCulloch had begun running the school in his own house. On one level, McCulloch's efforts were part of the great trans-Atlantic tide of educational reform that swept through Britain and North America in the early nineteenth century. For these reformers, initiatives such as McCulloch's at the Pictou Academy were signs of an unstoppable historical momentum they hailed as "the march of intellect" (a phrase first used in an 1814 poem by Mary Russell Mitford for the educational pioneer Joseph Lancaster). As Henry Brougham (another leading educational reformer who played a key role in the establishment of University College, London, in 1826) jubilantly put it, "the schoolmaster is abroad, and I trust to the schoolmaster with his primer more than I do to the soldier in full military array for upholding

and extending the liberties of the country" (qtd. in Stewart 183). Closer to home, this growing momentum manifested itself in major initiatives such as the creation of McGill University (1821), the future University of Toronto (1827), and the future University of New Brunswick (1827). But like many of the major educational initiatives of this period, McCulloch's efforts in Pictou had a polemical edge. Inspired in large part by his role as a Presbyterian minister, the Academy was created as a non-sectarian alternative to Nova Scotia's only other college at the time, King's College, which, like Oxford and Cambridge, was restricted to Anglicans. McCulloch's efforts were driven by his strong belief that higher education should be available to the vast majority of the province who were currently excluded by this religious provision, in part so that non-Anglican ministers could be educated locally rather than in Britain. But as his speech on *The Nature and Uses of a Liberal Education Illustrated* suggests, it was also inspired by his belief that the college should offer a broad liberal scientific curriculum, much like the education that he himself had received at the University of Glasgow, at a time when England's only universities, Oxford and Cambridge, still remained steadfastly opposed to these initiatives in favour of their more traditional emphasis on Greek and Latin.

Not surprisingly, this democratic ethos was limited by the broader cultural dynamics of the age. Like these other institutional initiatives, both in Canada and Britain, and despite growing debates over the previous half century about the importance of female education, the Pictou Academy's efforts to make education available to non-Anglicans remained restricted to boys. McCulloch's reminder to the "gentlemen" who formed his audience, that they "owe much to those ladies of this place who have formed themselves into a society for the beneficent purpose of enlarging the library of this institution," offered an ironic affirmation that, like his memorable character, Mephibosheth, the march of intellect remained a scene of uneven development, stepping forward with a sure sense of inexorable progress but hobbled by its own lopsided gait (24). As feminist historians such as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have emphasized, however, these asymmetries rarely played out in straightforwardly either/or terms. Embracing the opportunity to enlarge the school library as a sign of their "patriotic and enlightened views" enabled "the ladies of this place" to display their public spirit in ways that would position them to take their own belated

place in nineteenth-century educational reforms (24). This strategic alignment with the broader public sphere was all the more important because of the highly misogynist nature of discourses about the dangers of fashionable excess and the scramble for genteel trappings in a commercial society, which often equated the instabilities and emptiness of modernity with wayward femininity. Faced with these pressures, any chance to display "patriotic and enlightened views" was an especially important springboard to a greater public presence, including, eventually, access to all levels of formal education.

To his credit, McCulloch's satirical focus in the *Stepsure Letters* was largely free of this gendered bias. Stepsure's male neighbours are, if anything, the more vehement in their determination to bargain their way to riches and shop their way to gentility than their female counterparts. Reading the two texts together, or against each other, it is clear that for McCulloch, education remained a powerful antidote to the dangers of fashionable life. Motivated on the one hand by his belief that a modern education should be broadly available to those who were not part of the province's Anglican establishment, and on the other hand by his equally strong sense of the need to prepare people to deal with the moral and economic contingencies of the modern commercial world, McCulloch embraced both literary satire and education as forces capable of neutralizing these dangers. McCulloch's stern Presbyterian faith would have made him skeptical about Whiggish myths of progress driven by the promise of commercial prosperity, but the power of both satirical humour and education to foster this kind of critical awareness offered the hope of harnessing commerce's benefits while countering its greatest dangers. It might not have been enough to neutralize the worst aspects of modern life, but it could certainly help to prevent readers from joining the growing numbers of genteel company who were living with the sheriff.

## Notes

[1] In his interview with Hugh MacLennan, Sutherland asks him whether there is a "particular mystique shared by people from . . . the Maritimes" (41). MacLennan agrees, and aligns this mystique with a sense of community and localized responsible government.

[2] In Letter 5, a stranger dies while in the custody of the sheriff. A collection of letters to the *Acadian Recorder* which are discovered in his possession becomes the basis of Letter 7.

[3] Although McCulloch doesn't use the phrase "useful knowledge" himself, it appeared frequently in early nineteenth-century debates about the value of different kinds of knowledge, often in ways that resonate powerfully with our own debates today. For a study of the prominence of the phrase in the early nineteenth century, see Alan Rauch, *Useful Knowledge: The Victorians, Morality, and the March of Intellect* (Duke UP, 2001).

[4] For an account of the rise of the professional classes, see Penelope Corfield, *Power and the Professions in Britain, 1700-1850* (Routledge, 1995).

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