

GEORGE HERIOT,  
AUTHOR-ARTIST

by

J.C.A. Heriot

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## GEORGE HERIOT, AUTHOR-ARTIST

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**G**EORGE HERIOT, one of the most prominent of the early American authors and artists, was born at Haddington, Scotland, in 1766. His father was the sheriff clerk for the county of East Lothian and a descendant of the Heriots of Trabroun, an old Scottish family that possessed the lands of Trabroun in East Lothian from 1423 to about 1625. Of this family was the celebrated George Heriot, banker and jeweller to King James I of England, and founder of Heriot's Hospital in Edinburgh, and also Agnes Heriot, mother of George Buchanan, the distinguished Scottish poet, historian and statesman.

Heriot was educated at the Edinburgh High School, and at the University of that city. He began his career as a cadet at Woolwich but subsequently entered the civil service. In October, 1799, he was appointed Deputy Postmaster-General of Canada, a place which he held until 1816. For particulars of his term of office, the student of Canadian History is at present indebted to the late Dr. Kingsford, and according to what he states, Mr. Heriot does not appear in a very favorable light as regards his administration of the office of Deputy Postmaster-General.

"Holding the office as an Imperial appointment, he claimed that he could act only according to the instructions received from the Postmaster-General in London. The Authorities at the Head Office were governed by the principle of having the work performed as cheaply as possible, without regard to the efficiency of the service, or to any Canadian requirement.

"General Sir Gordon Drummond, who was administrator and Commander-in-Chief at this time, intervened to obtain a better

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system, and brought the matter to the notice of the Colonial Secretary. Heriot, in defence of his position, explained that his instructions enforced economy, and that he could not increase the expense. Drummond directed the Civil Secretary, Loring, to point out to Heriot that a more frequent transmission of the mail would lead to greater receipts.

“Heriot replied that in 1812 he had pointed out the insufficiency of the service, and the necessity of improvement, but that his suggestions on the matter had received no attention. Drummond continued his efforts to have the service improved, and matters were brought to a crisis, when a request was made by Loring, asking Heriot for definite information about the service between York, Niagara and Amherstburg. Heriot replied that he was governed by Acts of Parliament and written instructions received from the Head Office in London, and he could only report to the lords of that department and receive orders from their Secretary.

“Drummond was so incensed at this reply from the Postmaster that he requested Bathurst to have him removed from office. The date of his last letter on record in the Archives is the 31st of May, 1816.”

Although Dr. Kingsford is severe in his condemnation of Mr. Heriot for his administration of the Canadian Postal Service, the fact must not be overlooked that the system was largely responsible for a great deal of the trouble. As Mr. Heriot himself states, his efforts at improving the service did not receive much consideration. Any steps that he may have wished to take to improve matters, had to be referred to the Authorities in London, who seem to have been most persistent in adhering to a policy that was unworkable, rather than make such modifications as the requirements of a new country demanded.

Mr. Heriot is more favorably known as an author and artist than by his administration of the Canadian Post-Office. During his tenure of office in Canada, he travelled through a great portion of the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, and made himself familiar with the conditions of the Country at that time. In 1807 he published a book of travels through the Canadas, illustrated with reproductions from his own drawings, in which

he describes the condition of the inhabitants, the scenery and the possibilities of the two provinces for the development of agriculture. The book also contains a great deal of valuable information relating to the conditions and habits of the various Indian tribes of North America, which makes the work one of value as a book of reference to those interested in the history of the original inhabitants of this Continent. He seems to have been profoundly impressed with the grandeur of many of the scenes visited during his travels, as may be inferred from his own quaint description of Niagara Falls, which is here quoted as being characteristic of his literary style:

“The Falls of Niagara surpass in sublimity every description which the powers of language can afford of that celebrated scene, the most wonderful and awful which the inhabitable world presents.”

He also visited parts of the United States and, after his return to England in 1816, he travelled through portions of Spain, the South of France and Italy. His literary productions include “Travels through the Canadas,” published in 1807, of which there are three editions, two published in London, in one of which the plates are colored, and a third published in Philadelphia in 1813 without illustrations; “A History of Canada;” a picturesque tour made in 1817-1820 through the Pyrenees Mountains, Auvergne, the Department of the High and Low Alps, and a part of Spain, and “A descriptive poem” written in the West Indies and published in London in 1781.

All of the above and a large number of his water color sketches are in the British Museum. Of the latter he has left numerous examples, as he seems to have been most prolific in the use of his brush, both in oil and water color. His technique is characteristic of the work of his time, his drawing is good and his work always interesting. His faculty of expressing distance and atmosphere in even the smallest of his sketches, is expressive of a high artistic temperament.

Among the examples of his work reproduced with this article, is one of the Government Buildings at Washington before they were destroyed by the British Army during the war of 1812-1814. The original picture was exhibited at the Centennial Ex-



QUEBEC, FROM THE ST. CHARLES RIVER,  
As it appeared in 1805

*From a Water Color by George Heriot*



THE GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS AT WASHINGTON, D. C.  
Before their destruction in 1814

*From a Water Color by George Heriot*

hibition, held at Philadelphia in 1876 and attracted much attention.

Some of the old families in the Province of Quebec with whom he was on most intimate terms, and various relatives, are in possession of numerous examples of his work, and the two subjects reproduced in connection with this article are from his original sketch books, containing about five hundred sketches made in England and Canada, and are in possession of the present writer.

Heriot died in England in 1844 unmarried. His older brother John, was like himself, a man of literary tastes. Entering the navy as lieutenant of marines in 1778, he saw considerable service on the West coast of Africa, and in the West Indies. He was present and was wounded in Rodney's action with the French fleet under DeGuichen April 16, 1780. At the conclusion of "peace" in 1783 he was placed on half pay. In 1792 he founded the "London Sun" and the "True Briton" in 1793, both of which were started in support of the policy of Wm. Pitt. He edited both of the above papers for several years, besides being the author of several works. In 1809 he was appointed Deputy Pay-Master General of the troops in the Windward and Leeward Islands.

On his return to England in 1816 he was appointed Comptroller of Chelsea Hospital, which post he held until his death in 1833. His younger brother Roger settled in Charleston, South Carolina, and was prominent in the social and professional life of that city for nearly fifty years. His character is fittingly described in Thomas' "Reminiscences of Charleston." His only sister Sophia, married Mr. Melmonth Guy of Kenton Hall, Devonshire, and Grosvenor Square, London.

Her only son, the late Lieut. Gen. Sir Phillip Melmonth Nelson Guy, K. C. B. served with distinction through the Indian Mutiny, and commanded the Third Infantry Brigade at the relief of Lucknow, besides holding several important commands at home and abroad. Robert Heriot, a cousin of George Heriot, who settled in South Carolina in 1759, served under Washington with the rank of Colonel in the War of the Revolution.

Some Canadian writers confound George Heriot with his

cousin Major General, the Hon. Frederick George Heriot, C. B. who served with distinction in Canada through the war of 1812-14 with the rank of Major and later as Lieut. Col. in the Canadian Voltigeurs.

He was for many years a prominent man of affairs in the province of Quebec.

