

Town and Country in John Galt: A Literary Perspective

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Volume 14, Number 1, June 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017878ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017878ar>

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Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Waterston, E. (1985). Town and Country in John Galt: A Literary Perspective. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 14(1), 16–22.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1017878ar>

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All Galt's writings about the founding of a town emphasize community rituals and unity. His hope was that his settlement would move through an ascending order from village to town to garrison to city. The actual town of Guelph was of course unable to satisfy his ideal; in *Bogle Corbet* he adopts an ironic tone at the expense of the little town. But *Bogle Corbet* has another importance: in its random form as well as in its tone it emphasizes discontinuity. It foreshadows later treatments of small town life as well as has antecedents in English and Scottish literature. Since Galt's time, the ironic sequence sketch has proved a very appropriate literary genre for reflecting the disharmony of small Canadian towns.

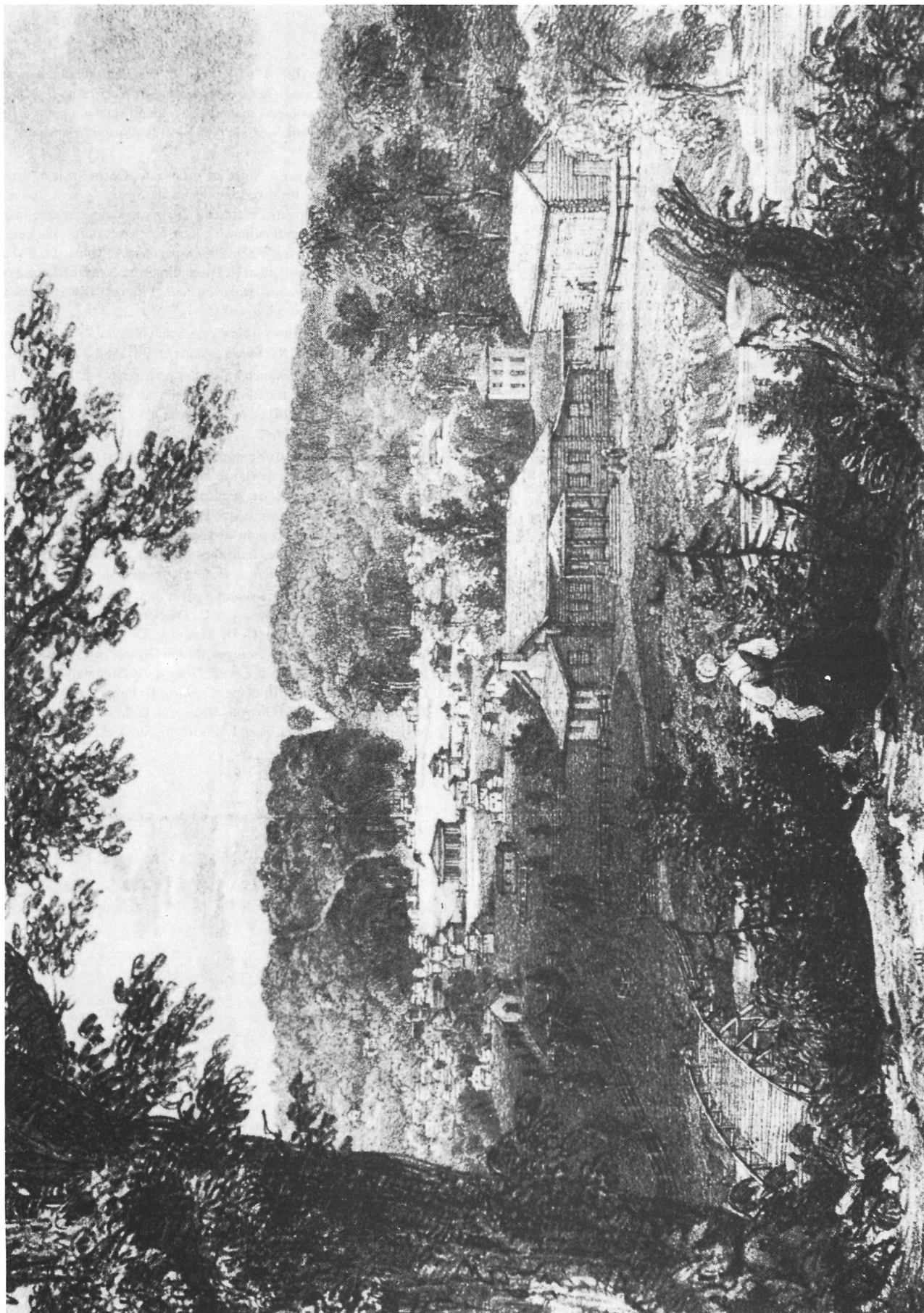


FIGURE 1. The Town of Guelph. Engraving by G. Childs.

SOURCE: *Fraser's Magazine*, November 1830.

Town and Country in John Galt: A Literary Perspective

Elizabeth Waterston

Résumé/Abstract

*L'urbaniste et romancier John Galt diffère des écrivains de son époque, tel William Wordsworth, dans sa façon d'envisager la nature et la vie urbaine. En 1827, comme agent de la Canada Company, il a la chance de mettre en pratique quelques-unes de ses théories sur la construction d'une ville. Quatre ans plus tard, il publie **Bogle Corbet**, une version romancée de cette expérience en urbanisme. Tous les textes de Galt traitant de la fondation d'une ville insistent particulièrement sur les rituels de la communauté et sur l'unité. Il souhaite que l'établissement évolue selon un ordre ascendant : d'abord village, puis petite ville, puis garnison et enfin cité. La ville de Guelph n'est évidemment pas dans la réalité en mesure de correspondre à son idéal et, dans **Bogle Corbet** il adopte un ton ironique aux dépens de celle-ci. Mais **Bogle Corbet** est important pour une autre raison : aussi bien par sa forme fortuite que par son style l'ouvrage met en relief la discontinuité. Ce traitement spécifique, qui a des antécédents dans la littérature anglaise et écossaise, servira de modèle par la suite pour décrire la vie dans les petites villes. Depuis l'époque de Galt, la succession de sketches humoristiques démontre que ce genre littéraire est très approprié pour refléter la discordance des petites villes canadiennes.*

*John Galt, town-planner and novelist, differed from contemporary writers such as William Wordsworth in his response to nature and to urban life. As agent for the Canada Company, he had the chance in 1827 to put some of his theories about town building into practice. Four years later, his novel **Bogle Corbet** presented a fictional version of that experiment in urbanism.*

*All Galt's writings about the founding of a town emphasize community rituals and unity. His hope was that his settlement would move through an ascending order from village to town to garrison to city. The actual town of Guelph was of course unable to satisfy his ideal; in **Bogle Corbet** he adopts an ironic tone at the expense of the little town. But **Bogle Corbet** has another importance: in its random form as well as in its tone it emphasizes discontinuity. It foreshadows later treatments of small town life as well as has antecedents in English and Scottish literature. Since Galt's time, the ironic sequence sketch has proved a very appropriate literary genre for reflecting the disharmony of small Canadian towns.*

Intense response to wild and remote scenery is one of the marks of the development of Romanticism in literature at the beginning of the nineteenth century. That yearning for ruggedness, isolation, and mystery was inversely related to the actual growth of cities at the time. Of two rival novelists in the Romantic period, Walter Scott catered to the taste for the lonely glen, the solitary fastness, while John Galt pleased those who relished the intricacies of urban life, the politics of town development. Since John Galt played an important

part in establishing settlement patterns in Canada, his attitudes offer interesting light on contemporary responses to town and country. In particular, Galt's *Autobiography*,¹ and *Bogle Corbet*,² in their disparate treatments of the founding and development of an urban centre at Guelph, Ontario, show the choices confronting British emigrants in the 1820s: roughing it alone in the bush, or clustering at the cross-roads of settlement. Galt's own preference of cross-roads over bush, town over country, led not only to a historic Canadian development in settlement patterns, but also, from a literary point of view, to the development of a fictional form which would prove important in the unfolding of Canadian literature.

In his own time, John Galt's view of town and country was counter-cultural. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, the great Romantic writers — Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott — built a cult of nature-worship. The city, with its “chartered streets” and chartered river, was seen by the poets as a mighty destroyer, beautiful only when, dawn-drenched, the temples, banks, and houses blurred into natural shapes. But the colours and forms of mountains, cataracts, and woods were, as Wordsworth said, “an appetite, a feeling and a love.” John Galt, on the other hand, hymned towns and cities. Greenock, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and London rise in his novels, in ascending order. A first view of London (in *Ayrshire Legatees*) “overpowers his faculties”: “The dome of St. Paul’s, . . . throned amidst the smoke of sacrifices and magnificence, . . . presented altogether an object of vast sublimity. I felt touched with reverence, as if I was indeed approaching the city of *The Human Powers*.”³

In part, Galt's celebration of town life was old-fashioned — a conservative continuance of eighteenth century assumptions that rational man will flourish in the city, in society, and that solitary walks in nature are proper only for melancholy regeneration of spent forces. In part, however, Galt's celebration of town life in the early nineteenth century was also innovative, responsive to the new drift of the industrial age. And, in part, the focus on town life stemmed from a deep personal malaise in the face of natural forces. In his *Autobiography*, Galt records infant memories which suggest fear of fire, fear of heights, and a particular terror of water. He remembered seeing, when he was under eight years old, a picture of Niagara Falls — “The wildest sight I had ever seen, and my juvenile imagination was awfully excited” (*Ab.*, I, 8).

Between 1819 and 1826, Galt built a reputation as a novelist set against the retrospective tone and the glorification of wild scenery popularized by Walter Scott. Galt's novels anatomize the social community, and analyze the real urban pressures of the time. *Annals of the Parish* (1821) traces the metamorphosis of a loose rural community into a complex coherent town. *The Provost* (1822) dissects the city as a political organism. *Sir Andrew Wylie* (1822) uses London as setting. Auldbiggin, in *The Last of the Lairds* (1826), is the last of the dwellers in country places; he moves to “Athens” (Edinburgh) in the end, into a house in a New Town terrace.

Galt thus came to Canada, in 1826, with preconceptions about town and country, and with an established literary forte. He came to direct settlement for the Canada Company in their huge tracts in Canada West. In *Bogle Corbet* (1831), the novel published after his ignominious return, and in the *Autobiography* (1883), published in a time of illness and poverty, he records his experience as town planner and builder.

His sense of hostile nature had intensified in Canada. For Galt, and his Canadian persona Bogle Corbet, openness to nature meant exposure to “wet broken weather,” “deadly wet days” (105), “dismal influences of the wilderness” (122). Man, says Bogle, is “not incapable of responding to nature; but over-apt to respond negatively to the wet day” (108). Even the wind “is as it were cowering from the rain” (106). Then there is that peculiarly Canadian menace in nature — the ice. In *The Autobiography* and in a letter to Moir, Galt records his sense of wild danger in crossing the St. Lawrence through ice floes (*Ab.*, II, 92). In *Bogle Corbet*, a companion ship is wrecked near Anticosti, as Bogle and his group helplessly watch. *The Autobiography* records that even on a bright and beautiful day the old terror of water can recur. Galt's description of a trip down the Grand River moves to sudden danger, “violent” rapids, “turbulence in the stream,” a “spiteful” rock: “a rock in the most spiteful manner . . . damaged the scow.” The tone is playful, but the old sense of hostile relations between man and the elements remains. *Bogle Corbet* presents some pleasant scenes in Nature — a Canadian dawn, when sympathy with primeval antiquity and silence awakens (193), or a moonlight walk — but here the movement is from moon and stars to the welcome man-made lights from a cottage window (135).

The welcome opposite to nature is the man-made structure, the cottage, the town. Natural beauty at best looks as if it had been organized by man: the Thousand Islands in their “pleasing nooks and sylvan bowers” are “beautiful as if they had been the artificial ornaments of some Blenheim or Stowe, adorned by a Capability Brown, and not the unpremeditated graces of Nature in her playfulness.” Playful nature — feminine nature — can be brought under man's rational control. Annette Kolodny, in *The Lay of the Land*, illuminates the widespread use of feminine imagery relating to the land, the soil, and the landscape as illustrating “the destructive masculine orientation of history, before which anything suggestively feminine must fall victim.”⁴ In Galt's case the general tendency toward such imagery and such implied aggressiveness is augmented by his notable personal uneasiness in relation to women. Finally, from the practical point of view, nature *ought* to be exploited. Land is a commodity, Bogle Corbet insists (64). The picturesque can be made profitable (52). The awful sense of Niagara's power will subside, and thoughts of “useful purposes” can emerge (*Ab.*, II, 116).

Galt's early nervousness about the elements, then, becomes in Canada a bias in favour of manipulation or adaptation or exclusion of nature. The founding of a town becomes a deeply significant human event.

Bogle Corbet offers ideas which are not only central to Galt's views, but also to the development of an identifiable Canadian strain in literature. “The first effectual step in colonization is to plant a village. . . . For we see it is from towns in all countries that cultivation proceeds; and history,

in describing the colonies of antiquity, distinctly shows that the first object was over the choice of a proper site for a fortress or a city" (65). Village, town, fortress, city: this is an ascending order of value for Galt. He therefore describes the founding of Guelph, over and over again, with an increasingly ritualistic sense of significant enactment.⁵

In a report to the Canada Company, April 30, 1827, Galt wrote of setting out from Galt, examining the terrain, and laying an axe to the root of a tree to mark the town site. In *Fraser's Magazine*, November, 1830, he elaborates. He writes of a nameless stream and untrodden banks, and describes the incident of being lost "like Babes in the Woods" on the way from Galt to Guelph with Dunlop, who had lost his compass. A Dutch settler's shanty produces a guide, and at sunset Dr. Dunlop, in blankets draped to suggest both kilt and toga, joins Galt and the woodsmen and surveyors to cut the "superb maple tree." "The genius of the wood departed" and whiskey is quaffed in a toast to "the unbuilt metropolis of the new World." McTaggart quotes this version in *Three Years in Canada*, and adds references to the rain and the powers of the air; Dr. Dunlop dances "like a red genius of the place,"⁶ drinks a bottle of whiskey, and christens the town "as a good joke." Other early witnesses emphasize that joking quality; it was "a grand jollification," says Robert Thompson; he adds the idea that Dunlop laid a lady's fan on the stump of the "sugar maple" to suggest the layout of the streets.⁷ *Annals of the Town of Guelph* also adds the presence of an Indian's hut — a runaway murderer's refuge. In a letter to Moir, Galt writes of the silence, the absence of life: no vultures but thousands of pigeons, and a doe with her fawn watched the ceremonies, he says. The final nonfictional version, in *The Autobiography*, focuses also on the silence of the woods, that echoed to the sound [of the axe] "... as the sigh of the solemn genius of the wilderness departing forever." The rain, he now says, "suspended during the performance, began again to pour." This version ends with an inversion of Galt's usual evaluation of nature and society. The crash of the falling tree, he says, thunders, "as if ancient nature were alarmed at the entrance of social man into her innocent solitudes with his sorrows, his follies, and his crimes" (II, 59). But in *Bogle Corbet*, Galt would not permit himself to identify with nature in this way. At the founding of Stockwell, a distant noise, heard in the forest, is "hoarse, dreadful and mighty"; the wilderness in stormy mood so terrifies the settlers that they accept Bogle Corbet's preaching of the value of "keeping in community." Nature silences their "crave for independence"; they see the need for cooperation, and go to work on the public buildings, the road, the tavern, the school and eventually the mill. "The advantages of reciprocal civility" are thus established, with a hostile nudge from nature.

For his "American" novel, *Lawrie Todd* (1830), Galt provided two accounts of town-founding; it is interesting to note some recurring elements there: a seven-mile walk to the new site at sunrise; Mr. Hoskins heading a procession of axemen,

with green boughs in his hat; a wooden cannon hauled by parties of boys to the site; men with lighted match ropes; Bailie Waft and Lawrie Todd, marching hand-in-hand, "lovingly as two babes in the woods"; and a series of ceremonial blows to a large tree, "banishing the loneliness and silence of the woods for ever."⁸ A feast follows, and the Bailie snaps his fingers and sings, as Lawrie Todd dances a reel with him.

In all the versions, Galt emphasizes the ritual moment of dismissing the wilderness. As a fabulist he is more concerned with ceremonial details — song, libation, procession — than with the details of urban layout. There is nothing random or insignificant in the establishment of a town for Galt, in fact or in fiction. He did not envision a town growing, unstructured, at a haphazard crossroads. Galt's plan for Guelph included a central gathering area and a fan of roads leading to places of worship. Similarly "Stockwell" in *Bogle Corbet* is imagined as carefully centralized, with a common shelter, roads, and crossroads all jointly constructed before individual settlers are allowed to build their own cottages in the town (73).

This is not merely a town, but a "fortress," to quote from Bogle Corbet's ascending list. Captain Campbell of Dungan is directed by Bogle Corbet to set up a military police force. Campbell makes a "judicious suggestion": "You must not only have a captain, but subalterns, sergeants, and corporals . . . degrees are beneficial . . ." By this military order, "a stricter morality was established among the settlers than they were disposed of themselves to practise" (86-87). The formal order of the garrison reinforces Galt's belief in military decorum, as a defence against depressing and menacing nature — in the environment, and in the human heart.

In a metaphoric sense every early Canadian town like Stockwell was a garrison, buttressed against the surrounding country. Writing of Canada's cultural history, Northrop Frye and other critics have used the term "garrison" pejoratively. Professor Frye writes of "a closely knit and beleaguered society," "tense and tight groups."⁹ John Moss, in *Patterns of Isolation*, expands the notion of a "garrison mentality" as "reclusive self-containment,"¹⁰ producing a life of "ironic mindlessness . . . and grace."¹¹

But a garrison — a hierarchic walled-in city — is not so bad a thing, given the Calvinistic theory of the nature of man, and the realistic Canadian sense of the nature of nature. Garrison towns valiantly preserve such imperial cultural values as propriety, literacy, and social responsibility. Among travellers' accounts of Canada, the most interesting include the jaunty records of military visitors.¹² At the garrisons these military travellers found people with their own qualities: humour, precision, sportsmanship, chivalry, adaptability. Galt's *Autobiography* summarizes garrison pleasures: "constant private parties, an amateur theatre, . . . a nocturnal sederunt with whisky punch in the castle of St. Louis" (*Ab*, II, 36). In Galt's fictional garrison, Bogle Corbet and Cap-



FIGURE 2. The Town of Irvine in Galt's time. Engraving by H. Lizars.

SOURCE: Archives of the Town of Irvine.

tain Campbell develop scientific pursuits — botany and archaeology — after the fashion of the Quebec “Lit. and Hist.” Association of officers and friends. Galt, in the years between 1825 and 1835, had caught a period when the garrison world was at its best and strongest.

Yet, even when we have given the garrison credit for some civic values, the fortress is not quite the city. An old city like Quebec may subsume its fortress into a sophisticated complex, but a smaller, newer garrison — a Fort York, or a Stockwell — will lack the values Galt most admired, values of the city proper. For this entrepreneur, the true city was an economic power: “London is always the last part of the kingdom that suffers. It has so many resources peculiar to itself” (BC,18). In describing Stockwell Bogle Corbet includes analysis of a burgeoning financial life: the raising of “bons” to establish a mill, for example. (Indeed, the story of Bogle Corbet’s managerial techniques gives Galt some claim to have written a “business novel” of the kind Roger Hall called for in a recent article.¹⁴) But Guelph, or “the half-dozen houses called Stockwell” as Galt terms his fictional town,

was too small for real economic complexity. It was not a city — just a town, and a colonial town at that.

Any colonial system, because it relates always to an imperial centre, is always beset by ironic recognition of its limitations. Colonial depreciation is voiced often in *Bogle Corbet*: the radical’s son is “aye threepin’ that Glasgow was a brawer town than Rochester”; Angus McQuestein specifies, “There’s a wide difference, Sir, between the Gorbals and this wild country”; the difference between cities in the new world and the old is even greater than the difference between “the green hills of Dungowan . . . and these wild and interminable woods” (97).

In writing about the small town, then, Galt is working in two directions. He is celebrating “reciprocal civility,” even on so small a scale, as preferable to the world of nature. At the same time he is recognizing that the scale *is* small, that the town is far from central in power, and that its force lies in the future rather than in the present. A tone is established, ironic, and self-mocking. Yet it also contains the

ironist's note of self-congratulation, the sophisticate's pride in his own ability to look down on the small town from a more cosmopolitan point of view. This is a tone established also in Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) and in many other Canadian small town books, up to our own day and to Alice Munro's stories of "Jubilee," in *Lives of Girls and Women*, and in other annals of her parish. We have returned to the question of literary perspective, and can now see Galt's small-town novel as an important point in the line drawn by Canadian literature.

Not only the tone, but also the form of Galt's response to small town life is important. Galt's form, a series of sketches or annals, linked in a desultory way, was in part a continuance of the character sketches of English eighteenth century periodicals; but the statistical, documentary quality of his work reflected the development of the sketch in the great Scottish journals at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Galt was one of a strong group of contributors to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. In Nova Scotia, a near-contemporary of Galt's, Thomas McCulloch, based his early work, *Aunt Eppie's Tales*, on Scottish models; his *Letters of Mephisbosheth Stepsure* were in fact submitted to *Blackwood's*, but rejected. McCulloch's production is like Galt's in its focus on a small community of Scots immigrants, in its ironic realism, and in its discontinuous form. Thomas Haliburton's *Clockmaker Sketches* — the *Sayings and Doing of Sam Slick* — again offer a sequence of small community stories, and trace ironically the changes in social strata, developments in business enterprise, and shifting social and family interests of a small community. The statistical sketch form had transplanted well from the old to the new world.

In some ways, all these early sketches of town life appear to be a response to ideas expressed in Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village." This immensely popular poem, with its sad picture of an Old Country town drained of its life, stirred innumerable answers from American writers.¹⁵ Freneau, de Crevecoeur, and others hymned the American alternative to Auburn: life as an American farmer, living independently on the fertile soil of the States. In Canada, response to Goldsmith took a different tack. The younger Oliver Goldsmith, Nova Scotian nephew of the Irish poet, was only one of many Canadian writers who urged the Loyalist alternative: a community of Tories, banded together in village rather than agrarian life. In Canada, says Goldsmith, "The village rises gently into day," the pedlar evolves into the merchant, and "the half-bred doctor settles down / And hopes the village soon will prove a town." Written in 1825, published in 1834, "The Rising Village" makes a good companion-piece to Galt's *Bogle Corbet*. In both, north-of-the-border touches of irony shade the picture. In both, as in Mrs. Moodie's later work, the Canadian village is ruefully accepted, the alternative to town life being the devastatingly rough Canadian "bush." In all these early works, the form is not a fiction unified by a strong plot, but rather a loose sequence of sketches.

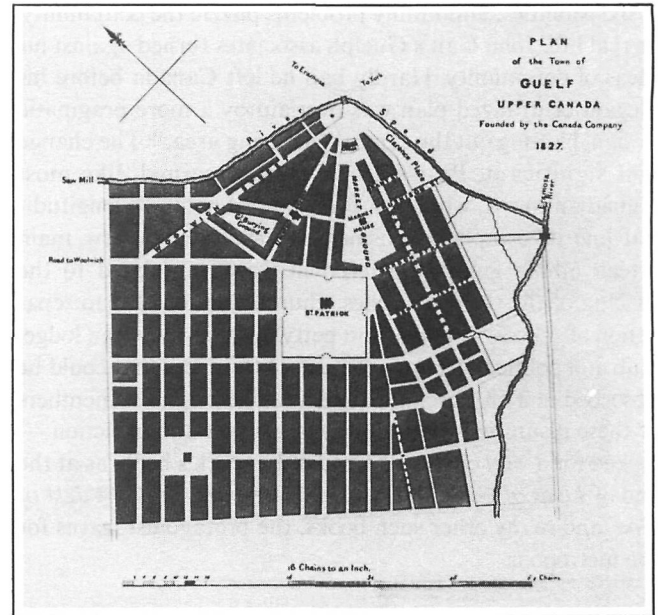


FIGURE 3. Plan of the Town of Guelph, 1827.

SOURCE: Joseph Bouchette, *The British Dominions in North America*. (London: 1861), Vol. I, p. 118.

As Canadian literature emerged, sequence sketches proved to be a privileged genre. Duncan Campbell Scott's *In the Village of Viger*, Gilbert Parker's best-selling *The Lane that Had No Turning*, and L.M. Montgomery's stories of Avonlea are among many very popular village sketch books. Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches* is the central example of these ironic annals. Mariposa, with its mix of bank-clerks, judges, ministers, small businessmen, and rising capitalists, and with its festivals and gossip and silting social and business and theological changes, is Galt's Stockwell updated. In our own day, Alice Munro has updated Mariposa.

John Galt's *Bogle Corbet*, then, is important as part of a series of anti-romantic urban studies, a first specimen of an important Canadian literary genre. In its desultory movement it foreshadowed the loose form of village annals, sketches (sunshiney or otherwise) of those fictional small towns, Viger, Mariposa, Avonlea, Jubilee, Elgin, and the Manawaka of Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House*. Perhaps Canadian writers have developed this genre as an aesthetic response to the discontinuities of Canada's natural forms — those turbulent, broken, disorganized aspects of landscape that so troubled John Galt. Or perhaps the discontinuous sketches, without central unifying force of novelistic plot, reflect the realities of the Canadian small towns that matured from "Stockwell" roots.

Social unity emerged very slowly in these towns. In Galt's novel, the Presbyterians in Stockwell throw a Methodist preacher over the mill-dam; settlers defect from their

responsibilities; and family problems puzzle the community. In real life, John Galt's Guelph associates turned against his ideas of community. Hardly had he left Canada before his elegant centralized plan was overlaid by a more pragmatic design, blotting out the central gathering area.¹⁶ The change was significant. Post-Galt Guelph remained, like most Canadian towns, without a civic central point. A longitudinal line of competing businesses constituted a new main street; ethnic groups clustered in wards unrelated to the placing of the three churches; church divisions led to separation of schools systems; and petty divisions between lodge, club and political groups widened. Differences that could be absorbed in a city became abrasive. The brightest members of these disunified communities — in fact and in fiction — looked for a way out. At the end of Leacock's book, as at the end of *Lives of Girls and Women*, *The Imperialist*, *A Jest of God*, and many other such books, the protagonist leaves for the metropolis.

Probably Leacock, Scott, Montgomery, and the others did not know Galt's work, let alone imitating it. There was no "school of Galt" in Canada, no direct response to his tone, form, or topics. Yet John Galt's views of the nature of local society and of the place of the individual therein remains worthy of attention. In an unromantic manner, he stressed the significance of western man's break into the wilderness, the value of formal order in protecting the fragile forms of civility there, the complex of economic connections needed to generate growth from town to city, and the desirability of that growth. He satirized the petty forces of social disunity, and voiced a deeper dismay at the horrid forces of nature impinging on man. From a literary perspective, his was a most appropriate response to the realities, the potential, the limitations, and the irritations of town and country in Canada.

NOTES

1. *The Autobiography of John Galt* (London: Cochrane and McCrone, 1833). Further references will be to this edition, and will be inserted in parenthesis in text with abbreviation "Ab."
2. *Bogle Corbet or The Emigrants* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1831). Further citations to "BC" will be to the New Canadian Library Edition, ed. Elizabeth Waterston (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977). This is an unabridged reprint of Part III of the original three-volume edition.
3. *The Ayrshire Legatees* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1821).
4. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1975), 38.
5. Nick Whistler, who is preparing an annotated edition of the Canadian section of the *Autobiography*, drew my attention to some of the differences in detail in variant accounts of the founding of Guelph.
6. John McTaggart, *Three Years in Canada* (London: Colburn, 1829), 204.
7. Robert Thompson, *Annals of the Town of Guelph* (Guelph: Mercury, 1877), 10-13.
8. *Lawrie Todd, or The Settlers in the Woods* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1830), 167. See also John Galt, "Guelph in Upper Canada," *Fraser's Magazine* 1, (1830): 456-7.
9. Northrop Frye, "Conclusion," in *Literary History of Canada*, ed. C.F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1965), 830.
10. *Patterns of Isolation* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 13.
11. *Patterns of Isolation*, 33.
12. See, for instance, Capt. J.E. Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches* (London: Colburn, 1833); Lt. E.T. Coke, *A Subaltern's Furlough* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1833); Lt.-Col. R.H. Bonnycastle, *The Canadas in 1841* (London: Colburn, 1841).
13. British garrisoning of Canada lasted until 1871, but was winding down from 1846 (Militia Act — related to the need of troops in Europe in a year of revolutions), 1855 (further withdrawal of troops during Crimean War), 1862 (British Commission of Defense of Canada).
14. Roger Hall, "A Canadian Context for Business Studies," in *What Did Symons Say? Canadian Issues*, 1, 2 (1979): 53.
15. See James Hart, *The Popular Book in America* (Berkeley: University of California, 1950), 28.
16. See Gilbert Stelter, "John Galt: The Writer as Town Booster and Builder," in *John Galt: Reappraisals* (Guelph: University of Guelph, 1985).