

A Lovers' Shorthand: The Letters of Sir John and Annie Thompson

by P.B. WAITE

John Sparrow Thompson (1795?-1867) stepped off the boat in Halifax in May, 1827, fresh from Ireland, determined to make his way in the New World. He was about thirty-two years old, with a lean, pensive, aquiline face, a Methodist from Waterford, strongly pro-temperance and soon, in politics, leaning towards Joseph Howe and the Reformers. Working under Howe, Thompson learned the trade of the newspaperman; but he was not a good one. His literary mind, his stubborn devotion to truth and integrity, these by themselves were not a sufficient recipe for success. J.S. Thompson lacked a grubby, practical commercial sense and sometimes he tried to urge causes, such as temperance, that Haligonians were not yet prepared to tolerate. In days when even choir practices had to be lubricated with periodic draughts of punch, there was no point, as Howe once warned him, in taking on the whole of society just for the sake of temperance.

J.S. Thompson was in and out of several careers most of the time during his forty years in Halifax: printer and/or publisher, and school teacher of a range of subjects. He needed all his careers: he married, in 1829, a Scottish girl from Pictou, Charlotte Pottinger, and they proceeded to have seven children. Thompson taught at the Royal Acadian school, a building that still stands in Halifax, though now a restaurant; but sometimes his "school" would be the front parlour of whatever house he was renting, as his advertisements in the Halifax papers show. And he taught shorthand.

It is not known where he learned shorthand, but it seems to have been in Halifax, for it was a version of shorthand published by J. Dodge in Providence, Rhode Island in 1823. He mastered it well enough to use it in reporting Howe's libel trial in 1835.¹ Indeed, J.S. Thompson's shorthand was good enough that in 1860, through Howe's instrumentality, he was made reporter to the Assembly for the 1860 session, Nova Scotia being one of the British North American colonies that reported debates. Thompson then became Superintendent of the money order department of the Nova Scotia Post Office, a job he continued to hold until he died in 1867 at the age of seventy-two.

¹ The trial is reported in J.A. Chisholm, ed., *The Speeches and Public Letters of Joseph Howe* 2 vols. (Halifax, 1909), I, pp. 24-30. J.M. Beck reports it also in his *Joseph Howe: Conservative Reformer, 1804-1848* Vol. I, chapter nine. In 1837, on the first anniversary of the trial, Howe offered J.S. Thompson a gift of money for his services; Thompson said he could not take it, since he was already too much in Howe's debt. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

John Sparrow David Thompson (1845-94) was Thompson's youngest son. When he first learned shorthand is not known either, but he certainly learned it from his father and, like his father, used it as another string to his bow. In 1867, a young lawyer just two years into work at the Bar, he was appointed to assist John G. Bourinot in reporting the Assembly debates that year, and in 1868, when Bourinot went to the staff of the House of Commons in Ottawa, Thompson took on the Assembly debates himself. From 1869 until 1873, he was assisted by Benjamin Russell, later a judge of the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia. After 1873 Thompson's law practice demanded all of his attention, and his legislative reporting was given up.

Young Thompson first met Annie Affleck (1845-1913) late in 1866 or in 1867. It was a coup de foudre and with Annie pretty much the same. By the time her only diary (June-December, 1867) opens, Thompson was visiting her several days a week, taking her for walks, teaching her French, *and* teaching her shorthand. Within a few weeks, Annie's diary develops shorthand entries, nearly all of them about their courting. It was done with some deliberation; Annie's parents were Roman Catholic, and they were not pleased at the prospect of their eldest daughter being carried off by a Protestant. So mutual tenderesses developed underground, despite watchful eyes. The family could not be on hand all the time, as Annie makes clear; soon she discovered that she could not give Thompson up. "I shudder," she wrote (in shorthand of course) on 4 November 1867, "to think of having to get over liking him if ever I should have to."²

Thompson wrote her often when he was too busy to call or when he was out of town on legal business; frequently his notes had to be smuggled in. Once Annie had a whole box of them. In the only letter extant from this period (1869), Thompson sends a longhand one-page letter; but inside the fold of the paper are two pages of shorthand. As the reader will perceive, there was no holding that romance. Annie and Thompson were married 5 July 1870, by special dispensation, in the bishop's palace at Portland, Maine. (The Halifax Archbishop, Thomas Connolly, was at the Vatican Council in Rome.) A few months later, when Annie was pregnant with their first child, Thompson became a Roman Catholic.

From the time of their marriage, shorthand shifts its function. Annie never seems to have used it much again in her letters, nor did Thompson to her. Only rarely, when he wanted to ask an especially indelicate question, would he use shorthand. Of course Thompson continued to use shorthand himself; his case notes as a judge of the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia (1882-85) were often in shorthand.

Thompson became Minister of Justice in September 1885 in Sir John A. Macdonald's government. There is an enormous correspondence with Annie in these first years in Ottawa, for Annie and the family did not finally move to Ottawa until 1888. There are some political secrets in this correspondence; but really vital questions, such as the government's decision about Louis Riel, in October 1885, Thompson would not trust even in shorthand. As Minister of Justice, and Prime Minister (1892-94), Thompson often drafted letters in shorthand for transcription by his private secretary. Some drafts are extant in the Thompson Papers. There are numerous minor notations in Thompson's shorthand on files in the Department of Justice records at the Public Archives of Canada.

2 Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), John S.D. Thompson Papers, MG 26 D, vol. 293, Annie Affleck's Diary. This diary is discussed at more length in P.B. Waite, *The Man from Halifax: Sir John Thompson, Prime Minister* (Toronto, 1985), pp. 23-25.

In the summer of 1891, Annie and the Thompsons' five children rented a cottage on Bedford Basin — the handsome northern extension of Halifax harbour. The two boys, John and Joe, ages nineteen and seventeen, home from school in England, thought it would be amusing to learn shorthand. Annie started to teach them, but soon needed help from Thompson who was, unhappily for him, all by himself in steaming Ottawa, trying to clean up the Langevin Scandal. Annie wanted to know about the four classes of characters; Thompson warned that the boys would not be able to make anything of them without a good deal of instruction. And some words were awkward. (In the Dodge shorthand no vowel sounds were, as a rule, represented.) Words such as “deed,” “roar,” and “favoured” had tricks to them:³

deed = //
 roar = /
 favoured = W

This points to the main difficulty for an amateur (such as the author) in getting at Thompson's shorthand: you have to know just a little of the context. Since in order to know the context, you have to be able to read the shorthand, you can end up chasing your tail. (If you haven't a tail when you start, you may have when you finish!) For example, the letter “r,” transcribed as /, can mean any of six words: air, are, err, or, ire, and our. It depends on the context.

The shorthand in the Thompson family seems to have died out with Thompson himself after his sudden death in Windsor Castle on 12 December 1894. There is no evidence the children ever used it, nor, for that matter, Annie either after she and Thompson were married, though obviously she understood it. Thompson continued to use it readily to the end of his life, and it can be assumed that it was thoroughly functional. But within the Thompson family it was, really, a lovers' shorthand, as this letter of 3 December 1869 suggests. The transcription is line for line:

My own baby dear [...] Yesterday morning the first thing after breakfast I went up to the Way Office to see if the mail had come for I had been thinking the time so long until Annies letters would come. The mail had not come in but presently a wagon stopped at the house, and a box and valise were left but no letters and I felt just as if I had not a friend in the world [...] But soon afterwards Daniel [Sargent, brother-in-law] came in with my darlings letters in his hand. My heart jumped up to the ceiling but I put them into my pocket until I could kiss kiss them all four before reading them. My own pet there never were such darling notes written before. They made me so happy and I laughed over them and kissed them and prayed for Annie when I went to bed for I read them all over again by the fireside before I went to my room.

Later in this same letter Thompson goes on with this revealing phrase, “your ugly coward boy that nobody likes but Annie and that nobody ever did like but Annie....” Written just

3 PAC, J.S.D. Thompson Papers, vol. 291, John Thompson to Annie Thompson, 2 and 7 September 1891.

100001

Barnaby
Dec 3 1869

My dear Annie

I suppose it is very
tired of me to write again
and your own boy will be
but I will be there soon I hope
to apologise in person. Having to
take a fortnight's holiday - the
people are very nice and all
very good. It seems strange that
I should be high for the
we going about and even have
the best shop in town & the
there for about an hour a
day. So on this second time even
where is the joy of my arrival & the
our great personal convenience and
the entertainment of the town. I
think it is to make a return to
that have to be able to do it.

100002

My dear Annie
I suppose it is very
tired of me to write again
and your own boy will be
but I will be there soon I hope
to apologise in person. Having to
take a fortnight's holiday - the
people are very nice and all
very good. It seems strange that
I should be high for the
we going about and even have
the best shop in town & the
there for about an hour a
day. So on this second time even
where is the joy of my arrival & the
our great personal convenience and
the entertainment of the town. I
think it is to make a return to
that have to be able to do it.

John Thompson to Annie 3 December 1869. Courtesy: Manuscript Division, Public Archives of Canada, C 7945D; 79451.

seven months before their marriage, it tells much about this shy, plain, young man of twenty-four years of age, and about the relationship between he and Annie then and later.⁴

None of this information would have been available but for the gift of the work of Dr. Eric Sams. (See Dr. Sams's discussion of the Thompson shorthand elsewhere in this issue of *Archivaria*.) As explained in the preface to *The Man from Halifax*, no one else had been able to decode the Thompson shorthand. There was not a lot of shorthand, but what was there seemed and, indeed, turned out to be vital to understanding Thompson and Annie, their courtship, and the passion for each other that always lay at the heart of their marriage.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 288, John Thompson to Annie Thompson, 3 December 1869; see also Waite, *The Man from Halifax*, p. 27.