

THE NECESSARY ACID TOUCH

Charles Rice (1822-1901)

On his death in 1901, the newspaper he had owned and edited three decades earlier, described Charles Rice as “... a deep thinker and an incisive and logical writer ... always read with interest, though his principles were opposed perhaps to the larger stream of public opinion”.¹ More than a half century after he left journalism it was further recalled that “in his hands the [Perth] Courier became more and more a power in the community ... and a household visitor all over the Counties of Lanark and Renfrew”.²

Born on November 7, 1822 in Drummond Township, Charles Rice was the son of Sergeant John Rice (d.1842) and Hannah van Boeler (1790-1873). His father was a native of County Down, Ireland, and had served 13 years in the ranks of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment of Fencible Infantry before receiving a land grant at Drummond Township C-2/L-5(W) in 1816. His mother had been born at Annapolis, Nova Scotia.

As a youth Rice was as poor and disadvantaged as a backwoods township boy could be. Just as his father was beginning to make progress on creating the family farm, their barn burned late one summer, destroying most of their livestock and the entire year's harvest. John Rice was forced into debt to merchant Roderick Matheson (1793-1873)³ for the supplies necessary to support his family for an entire year. That liability accumulated interest and was never fully repaid in the lifetime of John Rice. It was left to his sons⁴ to clear the debt.

When his labor was not required on the farm in the winter, for brief intervals Charles Rice attended a school at Perth kept by Edward Hudson (1795-1879)⁵ and another kept by Dawson Kerr (1819-1898)⁶. When not in class he worked at burning charcoal to earn tuition money. From a young age it was apparent that Rice had been blessed with a remarkable intelligence combined with boundless energy and drive. Among those who recognized his potential was local lawyer James Boulton (1793-1878).

*When Mr. Charles Rice was eleven years old Mr. Boulton wanted to take him as an apprentice under articles which would expire when Mr. Rice was twenty-one. Mr. Boulton was to educate him and put him through law, to use Mr. Rice's own words, "Father was willing, but mother wouldn't part with her boy, so little Charlie lost the chance of his life."*⁷

¹ *Perth Courier*, September 6, 1901.

² *Perth Courier*, August 3, 1934.

³ Roderick Matheson, former Lieutenant of the Glengarry Light Infantry, settled on half-pay at the Perth Military Settlement 1816; merchant, magistrate and money-lender.

⁴ John and Hannah Rice were the parents of at least eight children: Anne (1816-1884), John (b.1817), Charles (1822-1901), Edward (1825-1894), Frederick John (1827-1904), Susan (1829-1881), William (1832-1873), Harriet (1938-1911).

⁵ Hudson's school seems to have been a joint venture with a man named Tully.

⁶ Dawson Kerr was also a dry goods merchant, owner of a printing and book binding business and one-time publisher of the *Ottawa Advocate*, and of the *Volunteer Review*, at Bytown.

⁷ Undated, unsigned typescript written for the Perth Historical and Antiquarian Society, c1900, possibly by Archibald McDiarmid Campbell (1868-1948).

By the age of 13 he had been at school for a little more than two years, but had reached a competency in reading, writing, and arithmetic sufficient to be hired as a book-keeper at the Beckwith Township timber shanty of Aaron Chambers (b.1816)⁸. However, when he reported for work, after a 30 kilometer winter walk from Perth to the bush camp near Franktown, he was informed that in addition to keeping the books, he was expected to cook for the men and chop the necessary fire-wood. Rice refused and walked 30 kilometers home again.



In place of formal schooling, Rice applied himself to self education and in 1839, at age-16, was apprenticed to the printing trade under James V. Thompson (1812-1912) publisher of the *Bathurst Courier and Ottawa General Advertiser* in Perth. He later worked as a printer's devil at the *Kingston News* and then at the *Kingston British Whig*. While living at Kingston he found that a fellow boarder in his rooming house was a Frenchman visiting from Paris, making his living by giving private French lessons. Taking advantage of the opportunity Rice undertook to study French every day following the evening meal and, in six months, was functionally bilingual.

The death of his father in 1842 brought Rice back to Perth where he found that *Courier* publisher James V. Thompson (1812-1912) had undertaken the study of law in the office of local attorney W. O. Buell (1819-1878). Finding his plate too full, Thompson took 20-year-old Rice into partnership and put him in charge of managing the newspaper. For the next decade, Rice and Thompson jointly owned the newspaper and printing business, with Rice serving as editor and business manager.

In 1847 the name of the newspaper was slightly modified to *The Bathurst Courier*, with the words "*and Ottawa General Advertiser*" dropped from its masthead.



In 1848, at Perth, Charles Rice married Grace Murray (1818-1893). Born at Paisley, Renfrewshire, Scotland, she was the daughter of James Charles Murray (1778-1858) and Mary Davidson (1777-1852), and had grown up on a farm in Lanark Township near Middleville where the Murray family had settled in the 1820s. Charles and Grace Rice became the parents of five children; John Albert (1849-1873), Caroline Elizabeth (1851-1880), James M. (b.1856), Ida (1861-1881) and Jeanetta (1854-1868).

⁸ A Westport, Leeds County, based merchant and lumberman.

Obsessed with education and self improvement, the story is told of Rice purchasing a Latin dictionary from young lawyer Henry W. Sache (1819-c1860)⁹, and proceeding to commit it to memory. When Sache discovered what Rice was attempting, he explained that what was also needed was a Latin grammar, and that using both, he might learn Latin by translating. There was no Latin grammar to be found at Perth, but the stage driver agreed to purchase one for him in Brockville. With some additional assistance from Ephraim Patterson (1826-1892)¹⁰, who was then studying for the church ministry, rapid progress was soon achieved. In time Rice could read both Latin and Greek.

In the course of his tutoring by Patterson, Rice was inspired to study for the Church of England ministry as well. He discussed this new direction in his life with the local Anglican priest, Reverend Michael Harris (1790-1855), and even had the opportunity to do the same with Reverend John Strachan (1778-1867), Anglican Bishop of Toronto, when he paid a visit to Perth. The clergymen were encouraging but also pointed out the extent of study he would have to undertake before he could even begin studies for a college degree and thus qualify for holy orders. Undaunted, Rice began studying for the ministry.

He reduced his course of studies to a system. He had to work 10 hours a day in the printing office to support himself; so, he rose at four o'clock in the morning, winter and summer, and studied Greek till six, when work commenced at type-setting. Of the breakfast hour and dinner hour he devoted forty minutes of each to the study of Euclid. From seven till 10 p.m. was devoted to the study of Latin. Of course, his health occasionally broke down under this severe strain and compelled a short cessation, but only to be resumed again.¹¹

However, as Rice worked his way through Reverend Harris' theological library of works on church history, Christian evidence and doctrine, he found his studies led him not toward the Ministry, but away from it and away from religious belief altogether.

The knowledge he had acquired of the Latin, Greek, and French languages was of great service to him in his reading and studies. The evidence and arguments contained in these works did not satisfy him—he felt that there was a weakness and a want running through them—something ignored that ought to have appeared; and he determined to see and know the other side and sift the matter to the bottom. With this view, he purchased and read the latest modern works on Christian evidences and Biblical criticism, and the scientific works of Darwin, Spencer, Huxley, and many others, and finally, after many years of study and research, settled down into a confirmed Agnostic.¹²

When James Thompson was appointed Sheriff of the Counties of Lanark and Renfrew in January 1852, he sold his interest in the *Courier* newspaper and printing office to Charles Rice, who continued to publish and edit the paper for another 10 years, changing its name to the *Perth Courier* in 1857.

⁹ Henry W. Sache articulated with Perth lawyer James Boulton in the 1820s-1830s and practiced at Perth into the late 1840s; not to be confused with Charles Henry Sache who was Deputy Clerk of the County Court at Perth 1822-1862 (although the two men may have been related).

¹⁰ Reverend Canon Ephraim Patterson was the son of soldier-settler George Patterson of Bathurst Township. He studied at Perth Grammar School, the Diocesan Theological college at Cobourg and Trinity College Toronto and was ordained in 1849 by Bishop John Strachan.

¹¹ *A Cyclopedia of Canadian Biography, Being Chiefly Men of the Time*, edited by George Mclean Rose (1888).

¹² *Ibid.*

At the same time he became outright owner of the *Courier* business, Rice had a new building constructed to house it. That building, which stands today at 63-67 Gore Street East, accommodated the newspaper and print shop on the second floor and provided space for two retail stores on the ground floor, one of which housed a bookstore Rice purchased in 1856 from William Allan.

The Perth Courier.

Mr. Rice was a master of editorial work. Editors in those days had to be fighters, and his pen had the necessary acid touch, though in other respects he was a peaceable and genial man. In his hands the Courier became more and more a power in the community, and as the field was a wide one and the circulation equally so, it became a household visitor all over the Counties of Lanark and Renfrew.

The files of the Courier show that under Mr. Rice's control the literary tone of the paper became much advanced, and great care was evidently taken in this department.¹³

As its publisher and editor Charles Rice energetically aligned the *Perth Courier* with the cause of the Reform Party and, in particular, advanced the Reform policy of the 'double majority'.

The legislative union of 1841 that amalgamated the colonies of Upper and Lower Canada into the United Province of Canada, governed by a single legislature, was beset by sectional interests, ethnic hostility and religious division, often leading to government paralysis. Rice supported a system of 'double majority' as advocated by Reformer John Sandfield Macdonald (1812-1872), whereby measures purely local to Lower Canada would be dealt with by Lower Canadian members exclusively, and those purely local to Upper Canada, by Upper Canada members exclusively, while general measures affecting the whole province would be dealt with by the United Parliament as a whole. Confederation in 1867 did much to resolve the problem, but in the years Charles Rice was at the helm of the *Perth Courier* the malfunctioning of the United Province Assembly was a major subject of political debate. His political editorials and thoughtful articles on this and other subjects were widely reprinted in other journals across the province.

Always a deep thinker and an incisive and logical writer, he dealt with various public questions, apart from politics, as they came up; and his articles were always read with interest, though his principles were opposed perhaps to the larger stream of public opinion, principally on the question of prohibition and religion.¹⁴

¹³ *Perth Courier*, August 3, 1934.

¹⁴ *Perth Courier*, September 6, 1901.

While still on his journey to agnosticism Charles Rice had continued to attend Reverend Harris's Church of England until his liberal thinking and writing on politics, religion and like subjects prompted a Tory backlash from that most conservative of congregations. One Sunday morning he was confronted with a placard tacked to the church door denouncing him for his political and social opinions. He switched his church attendance to the Presbyterian Free Church until abandoning organized religion altogether.

Charles Rice's journalism career of more than two decades was terminated by the coincidence of two events in 1862. The first was the death in April of Charles H. Sache (1793-1862), who had been County Court Clerk, Deputy Clerk of the Crown, and the Clerk of the Division Court for the United Counties of Lanark and Renfrew for the previous 40 years. The second was the defeat of the John A. Macdonald's (1815-1891) Conservative government in May and its replacement by a Reform Party regime led by John Sandfield Macdonald. Rewarded for his years of support to the Reform cause, Charles Rice was appointed to replace Sache as County Court Clerk, Deputy-Clerk of the Crown and Registrar of the Surrogate Court. He would hold those posts for the next four decades. Two years later he was also appointed a Justice of the Peace.

*He was one of the most efficient officials of the Province, and the court and office records can show few, if any, errors on his part during this term as County Clerk for 40 years.*¹⁵

Having accepted a political appointment, on January 1, 1863, Rice divested himself of the *Perth Courier* and its associated print shop, selling the business to George Lockhart Walker (1838-1874)¹⁶. Ownership of the *Courier* would remain in the hands of Walker family descendants until 1995.

Although retired from the trenches of everyday journalism Rice continued to contribute thoughtful articles on politically non-partisan subjects to publications such as the *Liberal*, the *National*, the *Week*, the *Globe*, *Canadian Monthly*, and local papers. He was widely read and particularly well known for his articles opposing prohibitory liquor laws. In addition to his business and professional life, Rice was also Secretary of the Perth Board of School Trustees for some 40 years.

Grace Murray-Rice, whom he married at Perth in 1848, died in 1893 and in 1899, at the age of 77 years, Rice was married a second time to 40-year-old Charlotte Reid (b.1859)¹⁷. Although Reid was also a native of Perth, the marriage took place at Detroit, Michigan, USA.

Charles Rice died at Perth on August 29, 1901 and was buried in Elmwood Cemetery, Perth.

- Ron W. Shaw (2020)

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ A nephew of Rice's wife, Grace Murray.

¹⁷ Daughter of Thomas Reid (b.1828) and Elizabeth Hogg (1836-1916).