

## WHAT'S IN A LETTER?

Transcript of William Harper's Letters.

These letters were written to Robert Harper ( 1812-1888) and were found at the Harper family home in Coan West.

(The comments have been added to show the value of old letters as historical documents.)

*Whitby Canada August 23rd 70*

*Dear Brother<sup>1</sup>*

*your letter Came in hand in due time It was welcome news to all the friends to hear of your welfare and also your people the friends hear is all well as usual hoping this Smal letter will find yous all the same as for myself i am just the Same as usual thank god. Charly<sup>1</sup> has Bought another hundred Acres of improved land just beside his other land only the road between he tells me he has 300 and fifty acres now all in one block Charly was hear in may i was at Henerys in July i cant help telling you again about Henerys nice fameley he has a clean nice Wife and pretty Clean Children<sup>2</sup> the crops is verry good this year and we have a fine dry harvest the pottatoes is verry good this good no sine of rot<sup>3</sup> I have built a new house this summer in the County town ten miles from my farm Alexander has done the wood work<sup>4</sup> i had to pay him five Shillings British a day and Board he has been working at it since the first of April he wont have it done until this letter is with you Alexander promised in April to Join me in this letter but he never Could get tim So i wont wait any longer that is the reason that i did not write Sooner he says we will write a letter himself Shortly to*

### Comments

(1) Written to Robert Harper of Coan (1812-1888) the only family member to stay in Ireland after the Famine

*It was the discovery of William's letters that revealed that we Irish Harpers represent only a small part of the whole family tree. The letters also sparked off an interest in research and the discovery of not just a tree but a whole 'forest' of Harpers.*

(2) William mentions his brothers **Alexander** (1820-1905), **Charles** (b.?) & **Henry** (b.1825) and their only sister, **Bessie** (b.?) n his letters but omits Edward and John. John emigrated same time but parted company when they disembarked and they never heard from again.

(2) Henry's had 10 children but we don't have names for some or other details. (According to July 1873 letter he had 9 children)

(3) Interesting reference to weather & potatoes from someone who survived the Irish Famine.

(4) Alexander was a carpenter. His photograph is in the Family Tree plus all his children.

Edward<sup>5</sup> you See the time that i began this letter with the hurry of harwest and the House Building i neglected to finish it Alexander and Henery and Charly Wants you to come over hear and See them and the Contary now as the passage is So Short and i can tell you that if you new the pleasure and the beutyful Contary this is you would come if you Say you will come over hear i will go over there and acompany you back hear again anyway you may expect me over there again if my health will permit me i am going to leave<sup>6</sup> the farm again in a Couple of months for all time you will find a potograff of my Second daughter Fannie<sup>7</sup> inclosed for Saragh<sup>8</sup> Send me them potograff you promised when you write i have given up going into the new Contary at preasent i am verry glad that you have given up the tobacco for it is a useless thing i dont use tobacco myself for a lenth of time as you have promised to write twice a year you will i hope answer this by return of post i am glad that Edward<sup>9</sup> has got his house compleated my best wishes to them both and also Mr and Mrs Watchorn<sup>10</sup> and Saragh that Showed me the most good nature of all and Robert and Mary<sup>11</sup> and the old woman i hope to see you all again your Brothers and Sister join me in wising you would come and See us

William

#### Comments

(5) Edward Harper is my great-grandfather who came to Cramer's Grove in the 1860's and built a house there for himself and Margaret his wife.

(6) William is at retiring age (60)

(7) Little is known about Frances (Fannie), probably his fifth child.

(8) Sarah was Robert's second child: she married a Watchorn. Hence the reference to Watchorns, her in-laws. See (9)

(9) Edward was Robert's eldest son. This is a reference to the completion of his new house at Cramer's Grove. His great-grandson, Samuel Richard Harper still lives there today.

(10) Sarah's in-laws

(11) Mary and Robert (1852-1912) were the two youngest of Robert's family. Robert inherited the family farm at Coan West and was left £233.10s in his father's will.

Mary married an Agar.

*September the 16th 1870*

*let me now if you wrote to George McCullagh  
Alexander wants Edwards adress i will Send  
you a Newspaper the week after this my Son  
William<sup>1</sup> has been in Collage this last fore  
years he graduated this Summer he has the  
title of Master of Arts and best of all a  
methodist<sup>2</sup> Preacher and a Cristian i will Send  
you his potograff in my next i have been to  
see the falls of niagara this Sumer and the  
are the wonder of the world it would be worth  
your while to Come all the way from Ireland  
to See them write as soon as you receive this i  
forgot to Say that Bessy<sup>3</sup> and her man is  
moved to a new Store the are makeing money  
like Everything my best respects to all the  
friends your affectionate Brother until death  
William*

*Comments*

(1) This was the first mention we had of William (1843-1907). Since then we have traced most of his descendants. In 1875 he married Bertha Tauber an aristocratic lady from Munich. He became a professor, author and school superintendent.

(2) He joined the Methodist Church in 1862. He received his B.A. at Albion College, Michigan. I wonder if his father's remarks are coloured by the revivals in Ireland (1747-1859) which sprung from the Wesleys and reached every part of the country despite political upheavals.

(3) We still have not located any further details of Elizabeth, William's only sister and the youngest in the family.

July 16th 1873  
Greenwood. Canada

Comments

*My Dear Brother Robert according to promise i Send you those few lines hoping the Will find you and fameley and friends all Well as usual The friends hear is all Well as usual my own health is not So good as it Was Stil there is nothing much in particular the matter Consequently Some of my friends is oposed to me going to Ireland this Summer So that i have given it up for this year anyway tell me in your next if you got the letter i sent you last Winter i Think it Was in february Alexander is getting on verry Well With his fameley i am on a visit at preasant at Henerys I go about fishing and Shooting for pastime Henerys has a delightful fameley of five boys and fore girls the oldest daughter<sup>1</sup> is maryed last Winter to a young Man a neer neighbor that has an estate of too or three hundred acres there is no fortunes hear With girls unless there is no one elce to Eare it the weather hear has been verry Dry up to the midle of June the Crops promices to be good last Winter<sup>2</sup> Was one of the Severeest Winters that has been in america for many years Since i rote to you or in the month of April i went to the Southern States and i found it best Contary that i ever put my foot on The Climate is Just like Ireland it borders on the atlantick ocean i can by beautiful improved land for Ever for 4 or 5 pound an acre i am going there with my fameley in November if all is Well So i Want you to rite by return of post So that i will get your letter before i leave this and When i get*

(1) Harriet Harper survived till 1943. She married Richard Rathwell and had 6 children. According to records she was a fine Christian woman faithful to her Church, the United Church of Canada. She lived in Dundalk, Ontario.

(2) Once again the contrast with Irish weather is significant.

*Settled there i Will rite and let you no how i get  
on give my best Wishes to Mr Watchorn and  
Edward and there fameleys and also Saragh  
and Mary and there fameleys and young  
Robert and the old Woman<sup>3</sup> that beheaved So  
kind to me while i Was With you the Brothers  
all Join me in Sending there best Wishes direct  
your letter to William Harper Greenwood  
Ontario Co Canada*

*William Harper*

*Greenwood Canada Dec 16th  
1873*

*Dear Brother I receive yours dated Sept 7th  
and i am glad to hear that you and all the  
friends are all well The friends (here? are)  
well as usual as for myself i am verry well i  
might say i never was a day sick or obliged to  
stay in bed since you seen me but i had what the  
docktors call torbidity of the Liver but that is  
not a dangerous complaint That is the reason i  
said in my letter my health was not so good i is  
well now the people say that i look younger  
than either Henery or Charly you say when  
either of us is removed all communication<sup>1</sup> will  
Cease and i think so likewise for none of them  
can rite and the dont seem inclined either i have  
asked them to rite but the wont. I am sorry to  
hear of your troubles with Robert<sup>2</sup> i would  
never thought that Robert would turn out so  
foolish i thought he was the wisest and  
Steadyest Boy i ever seen but my advice Would  
be to you to Bring him back home and forgive*

### *Comments*

(3) It is not known who this refers to

(1) It nearly did but since this research began there has been contact both sides of the Atlantic.

Some of Alexander's descendants have been to Harper Reunions at Ovoca Manor, Avoca (1990) and at Cramer's Grove, (1992) William's great-grandson, David Harper visited Ireland in 1994 and again in 2006 to the Harper Family Reunion at Kilkenny.

(2) Robert ran away and joined the Army. (1872) His father bought him out after 2 weeks for the sum of £20, quite an amount in 1872. Robert's Army papers and the receipt for the money paid were discovered at the house in Coan and are now in safe keeping.

him When we look back we our Selves were foolish doing things that we are Sorry for now a forgiveing spirit is good more especialy our own it was a good thing that you that you bought him out of the Army for it is the most retched place that ever man was in as for him and if the girl<sup>2</sup> is his Choice i think love is more to be desiered than riches While you had the last too years wet we in this Contary had the weather rather dry but for all that the crops has been verry good the hay crop is rather lite this year but there will be enough with Care hay sells for 4 and 5 pound a tunn the best I am glad to hear from Saragh I wish her much joy with her young son<sup>3</sup> i have her preasent safe yet and also Mary and Mr and Mrs Watchorn There is nothing i no of that would give me more pleasure than to see them all once more i think i will try hard to come over next summer but i wont promice whether i will come or not as i dont no how my mind or boddy may be when summer comes but i would like to a cross the atlantick it is so healthy but still there is some trouble I am glad to hear that Edward and fameley is well and that he is doing so well after his trouble<sup>4</sup> When you rite again let me no if you have heard from George McCullagh he did not rite to me for some time about a year I am going to the Southern States if nothing happens in the month of february next to by a farm i can get a farm there the most beautiful of any place in the wourd that i ever seen and it is the best Climate in the world so you need not answer this for i wont be in this Contary but i will rite to you sometime next Summer likely in July

## Comments

(2) Robert married Sarah Smith (1843-1921); they had 9 children. Like Edward, Robert ran away to get married.

(3) The Watchorns have still to be researched so we have no name for this person.

(4) Not certain what this alludes to but this was at a time of rent wars and difficulties for tenant farmers.

*give my best wishes to all the friends hoping  
this will find al well*

*Granfather William<sup>4</sup>  
will either come or rite the first of May*

Undated letter with no address, possibly enclosed with a letter from an M.Coogan referred to in the next letter dated May 1885.

It would seem to date mid - end Dec.1884.

*Dear Brother Since i rote the other I thought i  
would say a little more Alexander is not  
maryed<sup>1</sup> yet he is doing verry well and the  
fameley is getting on nicely Bessy and her  
Husband is going Well the keep a fine Shop  
The are Worth a great dale of money the are  
makeing it for Someboddy else Charly is the  
Richest in property of any of us he has a fine  
fameley most girls<sup>2</sup>*

*I like Henerys fameley the best of them all  
Henery has the best woman for a wife of them  
all She is English Henery has fifty acres of  
wheat this year he is going to sell his farm to  
by a farm in a nother place farms is boutt and  
sold hear like cattle and now i wish you all a  
happy new Year as you will have this before  
that i hope i will try hard to come over and see  
you once more this next year*

*Fare well*

*William*

#### *Comments*

(4) William's eldest daughter may have had a family at the time of writing or perhaps William is referring to his little nephew. His eldest son, William was away in Germany and didn't marry till 1875.

(1) Alexander's first wife died in 1871, I think soon after the birth of their 9th child, Harriet.

(2) According to our records he had two boys and two girls.

London Ontario May 13th 1885

Comments

Dear Brother yours of the 26 of February has come to hand and also your letter of the 18 of December i would have answered the first only i had put them few lines in M Coogans letter

I am glad to hear that yourself and all the fameley are alive and well I was verry sorry to Hear of your awful trouble<sup>1</sup> it must have been dredful suffering well try and forgive them and leave all in the hands of God There time of suffering is coming Indeed i often thought of you on hearing of the disturbance in Ireland about the rents I thought I wrote twice but no matter

your Brothers Alx and Charley and Henerly are alive and well This is a Blessed and Happy Contary to Live in we have Great Peace and Health and Plenty we are the most favoured People on the Earth a little Cold in winter But the people likes it I thought maybee you have my age in the old fameley Bible The next thing is how long between your age and mine i Have thought it is a year and a half perhaps you can tell I thought likely i am 75<sup>2</sup> this year Sometime perhaps at the end I do intend to prepare a Potograff and send you to or three

My health is a wunder i am just as you seen me i havent Been one day Sick since i was with you my Cheeks is red and healthy looking

I have been asked if i painted People guess me to be 55 or 60 and some people say i may live 20 years yet But that is with The Lord That has been with me for which i am verry

(1) This was a time of trouble in Ireland over rents often payable to absetee Landlords. There were probably evictions locally in Coan at this time. Letters to and from the Landlord's Agent dating from this time have been found at the old family home and are now in safe keeping.

(2) William was born 1810 and Robert 1812.



*thankful you Blamed me when with you for not partakeing of Liquor But i Can tell you that i have been temperate for fortysix years one of my sons called William<sup>3</sup> is principal of a hy school I will send you one of his books in this letter i forgot to tell you That i have got the Second Site I can Read and See without Specks as well as i could 40 years ago i have not used Specks for three or 4 years and i dont remember even haveing the head ake you will say this is wonderful it is true nevertheless my health is a wunder to myself i am a traveling Agent i am not liveing in London now i am in a Town called Brussels at preasent So i will rite again when i find the potograffs some time in the fall before Cristmas*

*There is a sort of a rebellion<sup>4</sup> in the northwest of this Contary But there is about 2,700 miles from hear or old Canada so it dont trouble us hear much my kind Regards to Robert and wife Give my kind regards to Edward and fameley and also the other friends as i have forgot all the names wishing you peace and hapiness the rest of your Days*

*William*

### Comments

(3) We now have quite a full account of his son William's life from his obituary and other articles collected by his descendants. He died in 1907.

(4) This is a reference to a rebellion led by Louis Riel amongst the Metis (=mixed blood, French-Indian) in 1885. It was the largest armed rising in Canadian history but William is quite dismissive of it because it was so far away. Louis Riel was executed in 1886.

—Marion Harper.

First transcribed form the original letters found at Coan in 1994 by  
Gordon Harper.

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