

The Man with the Sword George Matheson

Revised from an article in the January/February 2012 issue of *Family Chronicle*

In the early 1960's, my grandfather gave me a sword. Not a toy sword, it was an engraved Gillette military dress sword etched with a beaver and floral designs and the words "Canada Rifles". As I would later learn to describe it, the blade measured 32 3/8" long X 1 " wide with an 18 7/8" fuller running to within 1 1/4" of the spear point. The grip was fishskin with twisted copper wire and the steel scabbard had 2 ring hangers to attach it to a waist belt.

As a curious teenager eager to know more about it, I had written to the Royal Military Institute in Toronto. Their reply had been brief: "*We would like the sword for our collection.*" My reaction, aside from disappointment, was "No way!" I have carried the sword with me now for almost 50 years; in each house in which I have lived in it has hung, unexplained, on a wall.





Serendipitously, in the 1980's, my mother came across, and passed on to me, a sitting portrait of a soldier with that same sword fixed at his waist. On the back was written "Uncle (J. D) Layton, the Fenian Raids Meaford". Layton was not a name familiar to me and, while I doubted that he was part of my own family history, I hung his photo on the wall near the sword. And I looked at him often, coming to think of him as some distant, long lost relative.

After my mother died in 2007, I moved back into the old family home that my grandfather had purchased in 1917 and, in the process of searching through all that had accumulated in the attic, I came across a portrait and the diaries of a man named W.A. Stephens. Clearly he was not a family member; so, I was curious to know who he was and how he had found his way to the attic. In my research, I discovered many things about him which I describe in an article entitled "The Man in the Attic" in the May/June 2011 issue of *Family Chronicle*. Something that caught my attention was that he had lived in Owen Sound, a town not far from Meaford. I began to wonder whether the man with the sword was somehow connected to W. A. Stephens.



Meaford is a small town on the south shore of Georgian Bay, Ontario. I began my research there by contacting Pam Woolner, the Curator of the Meaford Museum, who replied:

As it turns out, his name was J.W. Layton or John William Layton and he was a brother to David Lynds Layton, a very prominent man in Meaford's early history.

I believe the label 'uncle' came from the fact that he married Rachel Stephens, most likely of the Owen Sound Stephens. He may have met her

through his sister-in-law who was Eleanor Stephens, also of the Owen Sound Stephens.

A search of census information and death records confirmed that JW (not JD) Layton, born in Nova Scotia, was married to Rachel Stephens, a sister of WA Stephens. Born in 1826 and baptized in Esquesing, Ontario, she had moved to Owen Sound before their marriage. After a number of years in Meaford, where Layton was an established business man and 'gentleman', they moved back to Owen Sound as supported by the Owen Sound 1891 Census entry before Layton died on May 21, 1897.

B ² / ₇	219	Layton John	M	62	M	Nova Scotia	-	England	U. S. A.	Disciple	-
		" Rachel	F	66	M	Ont	-	Ireland	Ireland	"	-

In her elder years, Rachel lived with Margaret Stephens, her niece, in Owen Sound (according to the 1901 census) until her death in 1906:

	Surname first
Name of Deceased	1 Layton, Mrs. Rachel
Sex	2 Female.
Date of Death	3 Dec. 23rd 1906
Age	4 82 yrs.
Residence Street No. or Concession and Lot	5 Bay st.
Occupation	6 — 011704 ✓
Single or Married If Single give name of Father If Married give name of Husband	7 married. 8 widow of the late John Layton
Where Born	9 Canada.
Cause of Death	10 cerebral softening. ✕
Length of Illness	11 3 yrs.
Name of Physician in Attendance	12 G. H. Middlebro's.
Religious Denomination	13 Disciple
Name of Person making Return	14 G. H. Middlebro's.
Date of Registration	15 Dec. 25th 1906.

Most likely the sword, along with other items, had been passed down to William Stanley Stephens, W. A. Stephen's son and then to his widow, who died in 1961 at which point it had been passed on to my grandfather who was the co-executor of her will.

One day, searching through an old trunk in the attic, I came across a crossbelt that I recognized as the one worn by the soldier in the picture. Pictured below, it consists of an officer's pouch and whistle mounted on an original section of the black leather belt. Along with it was a crossbelt plate badge (or brooch) of heavy die cast silver plate simply saying "Canada Rifles" with a QVC (Queen Victoria Crown) and a wreath of maple leaves surrounding a beaver.



Eric Fernberg, Collections Manager, Dress & Insignia at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa said that the officer in the picture "is suited in the uniform of a rifle company officer." However, he noted that "a check of the Canada General Service Medal roll entitlement does not list his name for either the Fenian Raid of 1866 or 1870."

With this find, I began to investigate further into the "Canada Rifles" discovering that it did not exist in the 1850s-1870s as a separate regiment. Rather, there were a number of Companies of Provisional Rifles in southern Ontario, none of which were named "Canada Rifles" but which had incorporated some of the generic insignia.

Infantry Company 2, based in Meaford, and made up of volunteer townsmen and district landowners and farmers, was one of these.

It had been organized in reaction to the Trent Affair, an international diplomatic incident that occurred during the American Civil War in November 1861. A United States cruiser had boarded the British mail packet Trent and carried off two Confederate diplomats, James Mason and John Slidell who were

bound for Great Britain and France to press the Confederacy's case for diplomatic recognition by Europe. The initial reaction in the United States was to threaten war between the Americans and the British, hence the creation of the infantry companies. But, President Lincoln feared a permanent rupture in Anglo-American relations and even diplomatic recognition by Britain of the Confederacy.

The Trent Affair eventually blew over and there was no further call for a militia until the spring of 1866 when the Fenian troubles broke out. Military records for the early 1860s describe Layton with the rank of "ensign" at the time.

The Fenian Raids are something of an anomaly - an obscure part of Canadian history. Named after Fianna, the legendary band of Irish warriors led by Fionn mac Cumhaill in the year 250 A.D., the Fenians were dedicated to the establishment of an independent Irish Republic. When the American Civil War ended in 1865, more than a million armed Union forces were still in the field and many of them were newly arrived Irish immigrants. Fighting, it seems, was still in their blood.

Their plan was simple, foolish and fanatical. They planned two attacks against the British: one to be an uprising in Ireland and the other an attack across the border on Great Britain's Canadian colonies. The madness of the scheme was the befuddled and whisky-soaked dream of capturing Canada (with 1,500 men) and trading it back to the British in exchange for Ireland.

The threat of raids by the Fenians from the United States put British Canada on alert. On April 1, 1866, orders were received to bring No.1 (Owen Sound) and No. 2 (Meaford) companies to Sarnia to assist in guarding the border against the Fenians who were reportedly amassing along the Great Lakes. For the next three months, the men guarded the border along Lake Huron and the St. Clair River.

Despite allusions of large scale invasions, only a few small border raids occurred, the largest being at Fort Erie in June of 1866 when a thousand men crossed the Niagara River and moved inland until they ran into a body of Canadian militia. After a brief skirmish at Ridgeway, the Canadians retreated but news of a further approaching force made up of militia and British regulars convinced the Fenian invaders to retreat over the border.

The Meaford Militia never saw action. But it is part of Meaford history. An old (1866) photo in The Meaford Museum shows the volunteers from Meaford, listing among them J. W. Layton (probably the officer standing on the far right):



A well-worn copy of *A History of the County of Grey* found in the stacks of the Brantford Public Library identifies one Lieutenant John W. Layton, who served as the Quartermaster, in September 1866, when the 5 small rifle companies in the county were reorganized into the 31st Grey Battalion of Infantry. Layton's battalion was not to see active duty until three years after his death when, in 1900, it contributed men to the Canadian contingents sent to assist the British Army during the second Boer War.

Now I know who the sword on my wall belonged to: J. W. Layton, a loyal subject and native born Canadian, who volunteered to actively defend his country in its early years.

Thanks to Pam Woolner, Curator at The Meaford Museum for her assistance in this research.