

Case Study

Who Was The Man in The Attic?

George Matheson returns to the family home to research the stories it hides in the attic

AT AGE 93, MY mother died and with her went the past. Those she might have reminisced with were already dead. She had never confided much to me; I don't recall her ever having been generous with stories.

But she did leave me her house — the family home into which my grandparents had moved in 1917 and which, after my grandmother died in 1960, became my parents' home. In all the years she lived there, my mother threw nothing away, so the attic was crammed with "stuff" — shelves of books from the 19th and 20th centuries, bundles of letters, diaries, postcards, rolled up newspapers, along with piles of frustratingly unlabeled photographs.

One day, I came across a large charcoal portrait of a man.

The picture was oval in shape suggesting that it had once been framed in a large convex frame — a portrait in some family home perhaps? A crudely typed label regrettably glued across his chest read:

William A Stephens
1809 to 1892

Pioneer Poet of Ontario
Author of "Hamilton and Other Poems"

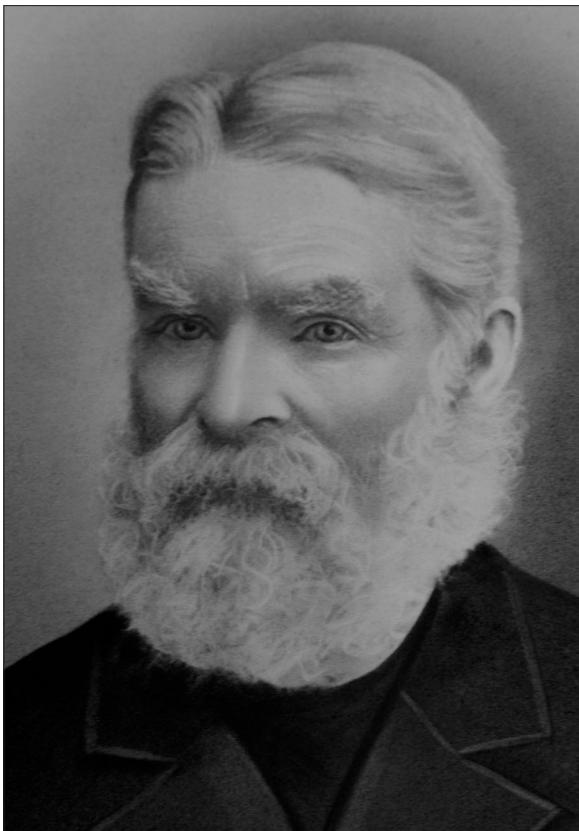
His eyes had an intensity; his beard hid a friendly smile — or so I imagined. Who was he? Why was the man in the attic?

I balanced the portrait atop a bookcase and, as the sorting continued, he watched.

Some months later, I opened a musty shipping trunk with simple brass locks and serviceable leather handles and found two old, worn, leather-bound books. Undisturbed for half a century and untouched by curiosity, the inscriptions declared them to be the 1880 and

1881 diaries of W. A. Stephens, the "man in the attic". The first page of one volume indicated that they had been written in Owen Sound, a small town two hours north of Hamilton, where Stephens was the "Collector" at the Customs House.

drive through the town east and west of the town. She did not enjoy it as well as she would have done as there was a very cold wind and she got quite chilled. It was kind of Mrs B., however, to call for her.



The portrait of W. A. Stephens that captured the imagination of the author.

In legible bold script, he started to come to life in entries describing such mundane things as:

Weather

Thursday March 9, 1880
Keen frost last night... the Bay is frozen out for several miles.

Events

Tuesday October 12, 1880
Mrs. Dr. John Barnhard called with her Buggy and took my wife on a

Activities

Saturday April 3, 1880
Wrote to D. G. Giard, M.P. and sent him an article I wrote for Toronto Evening Telegram referring to the marriage of a widower with his wife's sister.

Politics

Monday May 3, 1880
I went last night with my sister Mrs. Doyle and others ladies to the town council when it was expected that an attempt would be made to repeal the Bylaw against Billiards.

And poems, such as this entry for Friday June 11, 1880:

*What To Teach Your Daughters
Teach them self reliance
Teach them to make bread
Teach them to make shirts
No false hair upon their head
Not to powder or to paint
To wash and iron the clothes
To make a wholesome meal
And a bed for soft repose*

... My curiosity whetted, I found a copy of *Hamilton and Other Poems*, published in 1840 (revised and expanded in 1871) in the Hamilton Public Library Rare Books Department.

The volume had received some attention. Nicholas Flood Davin, in 1877, wrote in *The Irishman In Canada* that: "A Scotchman, (sic) himself a poet of considerable merit, the Rev. William Wye Smith, pointed out in a lecture upon the poets of Canada, that "Hamilton," a poem by W. A. Stephens was the first

volume of poems published in Upper Canada... Mr. Stephens' poem deserved better treatment than it received at the time of publication. It is very unequal. But it has considerable merit in places. The conception is exceedingly good, and had the execution throughout been what it occasionally rises to, "Hamilton" might have won an enduring place in literature."

So, I set out to find out more about the life of W. A. Stephens.

The 1851 Census for Canada West listed him as "a farmer" and the Federal Census (Ontario) of 1871 recorded him as the Customs Collector in Owen Sound, Ontario. At that time, the town, known as the "Chicago of the North" since its location on Georgian Bay gave it access to the upper Great Lakes, and major rail lines that moved cargo south, was a busy Great Lakes port.

Records show he had been born on 9 April 1809 in Belfast, County Antrim, Ireland. How did he get from there to Owen Sound where he died "a Gentleman", on 21 March 1891 (not 1892 as the tablet indicated)?

The novelist, Frank Delaney once wrote: "Like all the Irish, he has a story to tell and he knows it." Much of William's story was to be found in an autobiography written by his brother, James, in 1891.

It seems that William was of solid protestant stock. His father, Thomas, born in 1771 in Ireland was, in his youth, a member of the first Lodge of the Orange Order which was founded in the family's native town of Moy in County Monaghan. He fled to Scotland after a march down a mostly Catholic street led to a Catholic fellow being stabbed with a bayonet. Warrants were issued for the apprehension of a number of the members of the Lodge and a servant girl in the employment of William's grandmother informed

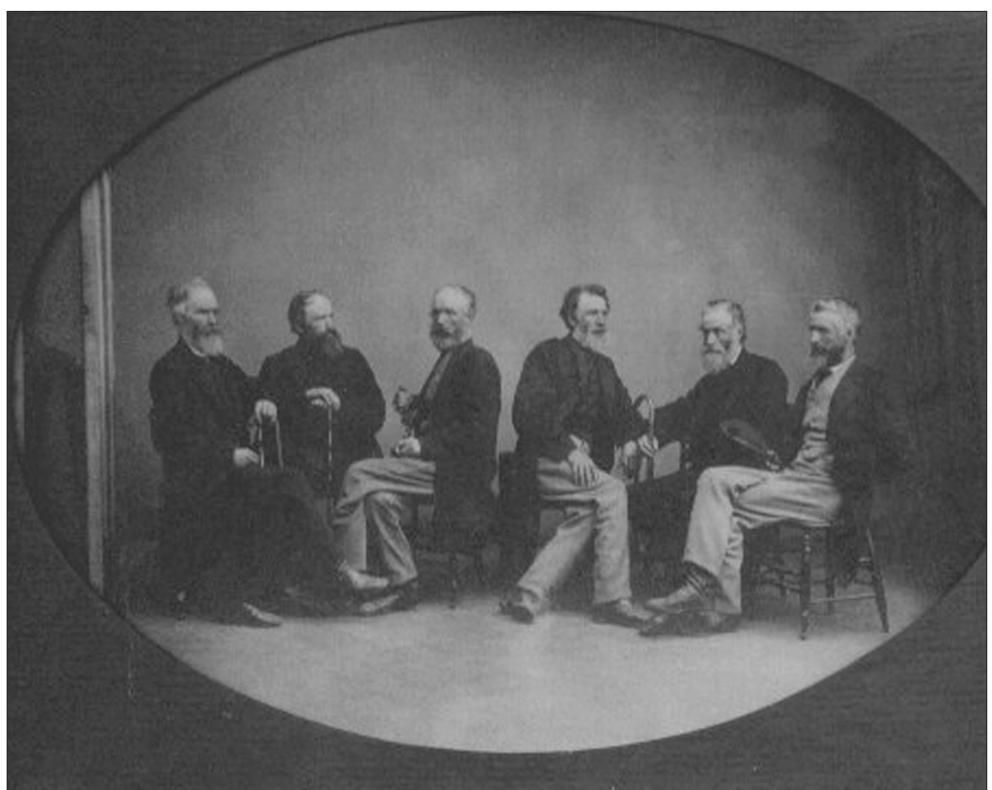
against the Stephens boys. The local magistrate, in pity, told her that it would be better for them to go abroad until they could safely return.

In Glasgow, Thomas married Ann Neily, the daughter of his landlady, and had two children. On New Year's Eve 1794, the family was together, but within the year, all but Thomas had died of unknown causes.

Struck with grief, Thomas turned to the church. He trained to be a preacher and was sent back to Ireland as an evangelist where he met his second wife, Eleanor Newborn and opened a store "selling linens, gambricks, embroidered muslins, keeping in hoops of girls at fancy work". In the following years, two sons, James Dawson



Thomas S. Stephens
(1771-1833).



THE STEPHENS BROTHERS

William Alexander - Alexander M. - Thomas Cory
Marshal Neily - James Dawson - Robert E.

Case Study

(1807) and William Alexander (1809) were born.

Thomas grew restless and sought the 'new world'. In July 1811, the family landed in New York City where he again established a clothing stall. Tensions in the city resulting from the War of 1812-1814 led the family on a long journey sailing first to Albany, then by hired wagons to Schenectady, onto the Mohawk River before arriving in Oswego on Lake Ontario. From there, they sailed by schooner to Lewiston, crossed to Queenston and eventually to little York, present-day Toronto. James recalls that: "the vessel anchored near the shore, there being no wharf, but one under progress. Indian Wigwams lined the shore. Our long, long journey was at an end."

The family settled briefly in Markham, before moving to 150 acres of uncleared land in the township of Esquesing, to establish a Baptist settlement which ended as "a failure in every respect".

Working to clear the land and build a house, James writes that "William and I were able to do men's work or at least we tried to... The only light we had during the long winter night was hickory bark or pine knots, which made a bright and cheerful fire. Then we had lots of books: among the best, the Edinburgh encyclopedia in 20 volumes — a library in itself. When William or I came to the hard words, our dictionary was ever near. Our father at once gave the meaning."

The early years in Esquesing were tough for the Stephens family which now included four daughters and six sons, but "all was harmony and love."

In 1837, William's sister Ann took a severe cold which lodged in her lungs. When local remedies failed, she was sent to Niagara where she lingered awhile before peacefully passing away. William eulogized her death:

*Her form is now laid in its funeral rest
But we may not seek for her spirit there*

*The grave is never the home of the Blest
It is far beyond the earth and air
She has gone to mingle with kindred minds
Where flowers of Eden so brightly bloom
To gather the fruit from its clustering vines
Then why should we mourn for those in the tomb
She was borne by angels on pinions bright
Her father has welcomed his child to the sky
She gazed on Jehovah's throne of light
And basked in the beam of Emanuel's eye
She quenched her Christ at the living tide
That flows from His throne o'er a diamond strand
And gathered the fruit that grows by its side
From the tree of life in the Spirit land
Her father has asked her what new from earth
How her mother, her brothers, her sisters fare
She has told him and oh, it well were worth
A world but to witness their courage there!*

William and James continued to clear their land, all the while trying their hand at running a store and in blacksmithing — both were failures.

After their father's death, "William and I were now partners and pulled steadily together," writes James. "Our crops were good; our sister now took charge of household affairs. My brother William during my escapades remained at home on the farm pursuing the even tenor of his way. Nothing disturbed his serenity, ever happy and contented — he was a poet." It was about this time that William turned author and published *Hamilton: and other poems and lectures*. He had a thousand volumes printed and canvassed a number of counties for subscribers.

William, by then a local merchant, remained in Norval, chairing the Esquesing meeting of the Canadian Alliance, continuing his writing and, on 14 October

1844, marrying English-born Milliecent (Mary Ann) Crispin of Owen Sound.

Eventually, William and his family moved north to Owen Sound where other members of the Stephens family had already established themselves. His brother-in-law, George Miller, manager of the grain elevator, later became Harbour Master. Another brother-in-law, Richard Doyle, an inventor and entrepreneur, was the owner of the Owen Sound Portland Cement Company. *Scientific American* credits Doyle as the first to manufacture Portland cement from native marl.

Settled in Owen Sound, William, as well as the Customs Collector, became Magistrate, Councillor and, in 1869, mayor of the city.

James writes, in 1891, that: "William was ever happy cultivating the muses, fairly reveled in their society and any of his new creations would read to me to criticize or to praise. Tis over sixty years since he made the good confession. Thirty years he was the Pastor of the church at Owen Sound. At the time I am writing his memory has gone, (he) scarcely recognizes his own children, supremely happy, in sacred subjects, perfectly sane. I have only given a partial sketch of my dear brother. One trait I will give, I said to him one day, how is it William that I have so many disputes with others and none with you. His answer, because I always give you your own way. I led, he followed. (Wisdom led by Folly)."

A question remained — how did his portrait and diaries come to be in the attic?

Well, the answer traced back to my grandfather, Rev. Clifford J. Loney. For 46 years, he was the minister at nearby Stanley Avenue Baptist Church. The attic was the storage place for his records, sermons, correspondence and documents. While searching amongst these papers, I found that he had officiated at the funeral of a Cordelia M. Stephens who died on 29 September 1962 and whose body was interred in the Woodland Cemetery in Hamilton. And

bundled elsewhere was a copy of her will and probate showing that he had been named co-executor of her estate.

Aha! The same last name, "Stephens". But "Cordelia" did not appear in any Canadian census and, according to the Cemeteries Office record, there was no Cordelia buried in Hamilton.

However, mixed in with another packet of papers in the attic was an invitation to the marriage of an Edith Mae Butler. The daughter of Mrs. H. C. Butler, she was to marry a William Stanley Stephens on 20 August 1901 in Smith Falls. Other genealogical and census records showed William Stanley Stephens to be a son of W. A. Stephens and, according to the 1901 census, he was working as a bank clerk in Alvinston, Ontario near Smith Falls.

As for Edith, the 1901 Census of Canada Record for Smith Falls confirms an Edith Butler as the daughter of Hannah C Butler, born 8 April 1873 in Ontario, a Methodist by religion and a school teacher by occupation.

Ten years later, the 1911 Census for Owen Sound shows Edith Stephens, then age 37, as the wife of William Stephens.

Was Cordelia her legal name, but Edith the name by which she was known? The final link came when the 1869-1909 Canada Births Records for Ontario went online. A search for Cordelia May came up with the 1873 birth record for a Cordelia May Butler (see image on this page).

The archives of the *Hamilton*

*Mrs. H. C. Butler
requests your presence
at the marriage of her daughter
Miss Edith Mae
to
Mr. W. Stanley Stephens
Tuesday morning, August the twentieth
nineteen hundred and one, at eleven o'clock
at "Willowhurst,"
Smith's Falls, Ontario*

Above: Invitation to the marriage of an Edith Mae Butler and William Stanley Stephens.

Right: 1873 birth record for Cordelia May Butler.

Spectator provided a microfilm containing the death notice of an Edith Stephens, for September 29th 1962 showing her as a resident at the same address as in the will. Curiously, she was described as a widow, with no mention of her husband. (Death records show that William Stanley died in 1933 in Hamilton, but was buried with the family in Owen Sound.)

A re-examination of the Cemeteries Office records uncovered a plot for Edith Stephens and led to a visit to the grave where I found a flat overgrown marker for C. M. Edith Stephens (mother) and Anita Mae, her daughter born in 1902, and deceased just before her mother on May 8th, 1961.

I had long been fascinated by a magnificent photo found, of course, in the attic. I had long been fascinated by a magnificent 1901 photo of a baby in a fancy pram, found, of course, in the attic. Now I knew this to be W. A. Stephen's grand-daughter."

Edith Mae/Cordelia May was William Stephen's daughter-in-

law. Most likely, she had become custodian of his portrait, diaries and miscellany, and before her death, had given them to her pastor and friend - my grandfather.

The portrait of the "man in the

When Born.	8097144 8th. April 1873
Name.	Cordelia May Butler
Sex, (M. or F.)	F.
Name and surname of Father.	See Richmond Butler
Name and maiden sur- name of Mother.	Hannah Fair
Rank or profession of Father.	Watch Maker
Signature, description and residence of Informant.	Ira R. Butler Mathes Mather Smiths Falls
When Regis- tered.	23d. April 1873
Name of Accoucheur.	Alfred Harvey M. D.
Signature of Registrant.	R. Mather

attic" now hangs beside the photo of his granddaughter, in our guest bedroom; his eyes winking occasionally at me saying: "Now you know."

FC

George Matheson grew up in Hamilton, Ontario, moving, with his parents, into his grandfather's house in 1963. He left to complete a Ph.D (Psychology) at York University, Toronto and, for two decades, he specialized in hypnosis research, teaching and clinical work. Then, following perhaps in the footsteps of a favorite TV character, Bob Newhart, he transformed himself into an innkeeper. During his 15 years operating a B&B in Victoria, British Columbia, he developed an interest in heritage houses — one that would lead him back to the family home and into unravelling the mysteries of long buried contents and past inhabitants.