A JOURNAL BY
THOMAS HUGHES
A Journal by Thos. Hughes, For his Amusement, and Designed Only for his Perusal by the Time he Attains the Age of 50 if he Lives so Long. (1778-1789)

E. A. Benians

Frontmatter

Facsimile of the opening page of the Journal
A Journal by Thos: Hughes

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(1778–1789)

With an Introduction by

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Map of Canada and the Northern Colonies 1777

*The map is available for download from www.cambridge.org/9781316509524
INTRODUCTION

THOMAS HUGHES, the author of the Journal, was one of four brothers, sons of Major William Hughes and Elizabeth Carlyon, all of whom followed their father into the armed forces of the Crown and in an age of world-wide warfare served their country in East or West. His eldest brother, William Carlyon Hughes, who rose to the rank of general, served in the American War and, later, in the West Indies, dying in 1808 while Governor of Surinam. John Hughes, also, served in America and afterwards in India, and was acting A.D.C. to Colonel Wellesley (later Duke of Wellington) at the capture of Seringapatam. The third brother, Philip, became a Captain in the East India Company’s fleet. Thomas left Eton in 1774 at the age of fifteen and enlisted as a volunteer in the 53rd Regiment, in which his father held a commission. Shortly afterwards he was able to purchase an ensigncy and in April 1776 his regiment was despatched to Canada as a reinforcement.

Hostilities in North America had begun in the preceding year and American Independence was proclaimed a few weeks after the reinforcement arrived at Quebec. At the time, Sir Guy Carleton was in command in Canada, with Burgoyne second in command. An American attempt on Canada in the previous autumn had been foiled by Carleton’s courageous defence of Quebec, and the opening pages of the Journal describe the fighting on the Canadian frontier in the summer of 1776 with the American army in retreat down the Champlain route. Carleton advanced as far as Crown Point and
then withdrew into winter quarters. For the next year, 1777, an offensive stroke was projected to isolate the New England colonies by a combined movement of the British forces assembled in Canada and New York. Burgoyne returned to England to urge this and was sent back to Canada in the spring to command the northern force. In this expedition Hughes took part. Burgoyne’s force was inadequate for its task, and no support reached him from the south. Howe’s army was engaged in the capture of Philadelphia and Clinton could do little and did that too late. Burgoyne succeeded in taking Ticonderoga on 6 July, but advanced amidst increasing difficulties, and, after hard fighting in September, finding himself surrounded, he surrendered with the remainder of his force to General Gates at Saratoga on 17 October 1777—one of the turning points in the war.

Ensign Hughes himself was made prisoner on 18 September at Ticonderoga where the 53rd Foot were posted on the line of communications. He was taken to Boston, which he finds ‘by no means inferior either in size or buildings to the largest towns in England’, and thence to Pepperell, where on 7 November the news of the disaster at Saratoga reached him. His active military career was thus a short one, and a great part of his journal records the monotonous routine of a prisoner’s life. Parole was given him in due course and he seems to have enjoyed a good deal of freedom. But occupation was hard to find, and there were days ‘capable to make an Englishman hang himself’. ‘Of all the situations in life’, he writes in 1780, ‘that of having no pursuit is the worst.’ Most of his time was passed in small towns in Massachusetts and Eastern Pennsylvania (of some of which he gives a detailed
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description), waiting for an exchange which would enable him to return home. While appreciating the treatment of the officers, he comments severely on the sufferings endured by the men, who were for months confined on a guardship, ill-fed and clothed, and finally marched off in the winter to Virginia. But the American militia seemed not much better off.

Meanwhile he kept his Journal, beginning it a second time at New York in 1778, for his first Journal he lost when made prisoner. It is a diary of personal experiences and observations, of the matters that affected and interested him—the scenes around him, the places through which he passed, the behaviour of fellow prisoners, the daily food and comfort of his quarters, the manners and customs of the people, the aspect of the land and the means of getting about, and the amusements and occupations that brightened the daily routine. The chief interest of the Journal is in the picture he gives of social conditions in the colonies. Unlike the young French nobles who had come to serve on the opposite side in the war, he finds nothing romantic in American equality. Town life and social rank are more attractive to him than the rough and equal conditions of the American settlements. With the colonists he had no sympathy: they were simply rebels, certain in due course to be reduced to submission, and the danger was lest Great Britain should grant them too lenient a peace. He records occasional incidents that illustrate the treatment of the Loyalists, the difficulties of the Americans with their levies, and the discontent caused by the depreciation of the currency, rising taxes and the scarcity of provisions. The Continental troops impress him: ‘more of the military in their appearance than I ever conceived American troops had attained.’

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All the time he followed with the keenest interest the course and prospects of the war, and reports the rumours that reached him and the reactions of the Americans to the changing fortunes of the struggle. News was uncertain and slow, and he formed no real appreciation of the significance of events and never contemplated the possibility of British failure. As late as October 1779, he writes ‘That the Colonies will again be under the jurisdiction of Great Britain is (in my opinion) a thing of course’. But the American victory at Saratoga and the hard-fought battle of Germantown had put an end to the hesitations of France. In February 1778 a Franco-American Treaty was concluded and war between Britain and France promptly broke out. For a time Admiral Howe frustrated the efforts of the Comte d’Estaing, commanding the French army and fleet, but in the north the British were now thrown upon the defensive. The French Alliance, followed by the entry of Spain and Holland into the war, and the formation of a league of Neutral Nations in Europe, widened the area of the conflict and repeatedly threatened British command of the sea, without which there was no prospect of waging successful war in America. Moreover, victories produced no lasting result; for gains could not be held in the face of the general hostility of the people. New England and the Middle Colonies had been secure from invasion since 1778, and in 1779 the British Government transferred the war to the South, where for a time some successes buoyed up their hopes. To the incidents of the naval war, and to the ups and downs of the fighting in the Carolinas between Cornwallis on the one hand and Gates and Nathaniel Greene on the other, the Journal makes a good many references.
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While the issue in the South still hung in doubt, Hughes received the welcome news that an exchange had been agreed to (7 November 1780), but it was not till 14 June 1781 that he got his passage home, only some four months before the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown virtually brought the war to an end. In command of a convoy of British invalids he sailed from Sandy Hook with the Cork fleet of victuallers. He describes his return home and his introduction to the gaiety of English society, for which after years of exile he felt no taste:

For my part I was out of my element. Being naturally of a reserved disposition strongly affected by the mauvaise honte, owing to a natural bashfulness and want of good company, I could find little pleasure in a concourse of people whose only amusement was the exhibition of their sweet persons and a laborious attendance on the toilette.

To live in London or Brighton was equally unattractive. So to fulfil a longstanding desire to learn French, and to restore his health, he visited Boulogne:

Here I led the life best suited to my inclination, and which I can look back on with pleasure; there was tranquillity without insipidity, cheerful but not riotous. The morning was dedicated to study and the evening to amusement.

A list of ‘a few good books’, standard French authors, Molière, Raynal, Voltaire, but not Rousseau, written on the first page of the Journal, suggests the direction of his study. At Boulogne, in January 1784, he received the news of the Peace ‘by which America was declared Independent by Great Britain, who lost by the war her blood, her treasure and an empire, owing to a cursed faction and weak ministers’.
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His leave expiring, he returned to England, thinking of an exchange to an East India Regiment, when there came ‘a thundering order from the War Office against all absent officers’. His regiment was still in Canada, and, glad to exchange an idle existence for military duties again, in September 1784 he rejoined it at Quebec. The latter part of the Journal describes his experiences in Canada—on garrison duty in Quebec and on more active service on the frontier posts. This part of the Journal is written with greater animation and there is a vivid description of the journey up the St Lawrence from Montreal to Detroit, made in twenty-two days, ‘the most expeditious’, he was told, ‘for a number of men that ever was known’. Detroit was the distributing centre of the fur trade and the strategic military position of the West. Of the serious international question involved in the British retention of these fortified trading posts so long after the Peace, Hughes shows no consciousness and perhaps had no knowledge. They controlled the navigation of the St Lawrence and the points of entry to the Great Lakes. All lay in American territory, as defined in the Peace, but had been retained by the British who were concerned to prevent an Indian war and to preserve their monopoly of the fur trade. A ground for this breach of the Treaty was found in the failure of Congress on its side to fulfil its engagements, particularly in regard to the Loyalists. The posts were finally handed over under the terms of Jay’s Treaty of 1794. Hughes gives some illustrations of the fierce frontier warfare which raged between the Indians and the Americans, but he never enters upon larger political questions. His description of winter life, both at Quebec and Detroit, and of the progress of the Loyalist
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settlements through which he passed, is particularly interesting. Hughes had pined in captivity: but he shows his mettle on service, and at Detroit he was both Engineer and Acting Chaplain. The combination of duties seems not inappropriate to the disposition he reveals. The Journal ends with a description of the Indians as he had seen them in the neighbourhood of Detroit, and with the failure of his health. His last entry is dated 23 July 1789. Another hand records his death of consumption on 10 January 1790.

Hughes had begun the Journal as a boy of eighteen and completed it in his thirtieth year. He wrote it, he says, for his own amusement and perusal, and hence the simple directness which is its chief charm. A young officer, with opinions typical of his class and station, of warm family affections and retiring disposition, proud of his profession and of the good name of England, he was one of the multitude of unknown soldiers who in that age gave to king and country good service, ungrudging and unquestioning. He had no part in important affairs, but this unadorned record of his daily life and experience—in time of war, as a prisoner, and, later, serving on the Canadian frontier—with its occasional glimpses of more important figures, though adding little to historical knowledge, has an interest of its own and fills out the picture of the time, giving realism to military life on the outposts of empire in the eighteenth century.

The manuscript, which has been in the possession of his family, has not previously been printed, and is written in a small folio volume on stout unruled paper in a clear hand that grows more mature with the passing of the years. Writing for his own pleasure, the author has made such free use of
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abbreviations and followed a system of punctuation and spelling that considerable editorial correction has been necessary for the Journal to be read with ease. This work has been done by Mr R. W. David of the University Press, who has modernised the punctuation and the use of capital letters and corrected the spelling in accordance with Johnson’s Dictionary. Some footnotes are given, where necessary for the identification of persons and places and of allusions to the war. In these we have collaborated, and Mr David has supplied the map.

E.A.B.