

Louis Jackson (1843-?)
From *Our Caughnawagas in Egypt* (1885)

In late 1883 the UK decided to abandon the Egyptian occupation of Sudan in light of the rebellion of Mahommed Ahmed and his Mahdist army. Yet by August 1884 the British garrison in Khartoum was surrounded. The government organized to attempt a relief effort via the Nile River. To support the crossing of perilous cataracts, General Garnet Wolseley contacted the Governor General of Canada, who in turn recruited a company of volunteer Canadians, including a contingent of fifty-plus First Nations Caughnawagas. Though the entire party arrived too late to rescue the besieged city, as Khartoum fell to the Mahdist army, the Nile Expedition, and particularly the Caughnawagas, won recognition from both British and Canadian governments. One report of the 'The Voyageurs of the Nile', accordingly, singled out the author of the excerpt below as 'chief of the Canghnawaga Indians' and 'gallant Canghnawaga Captain' for his leadership and skill (143).

In *The Red Atlantic*, Native scholar Jace Weaver affirms the importance Louis Jackson also holds as a strategic chronicler of this journey, writing of the Mohawks/Canghawagas as both 'commander' and 'one of their own' (107). For example, pointing to Jackson's subtitle, Weaver praises its 'clever rhetorical device to establish not just the importance of the Mohawks to the campaign but also their primacy: "A Narrative of what was seen and accomplished by the Contingent of North American Voyageurs who led the British Boat Expedition for the Relief of Khartoum up the Cataracts of the Nile"' (107). Weaver touts Jackson, too, as 'a keen observer of the Egyptian landscape and its inhabitants' (110). Thus, Weaver invites readers to see how, even as the Mohawk team exemplified 'a consistent pattern of empires employing one colonized Other against another', Jackson's account exercises rhetorical sovereignty over the experience, including by carrying out his own ethnographic analysis on the Egyptian scene (108).

See another excerpt from this same text in the print edition of Transatlantic Anglophone Literatures, in the Science and Technology section.

From *Our Caughnawagas in Egypt*

Having been introduced to Lord Melgund,¹ I agreed to go and look after the Caughnawaga boys, although then busily engaged in securing my crops. I, with a number of others reached the "Ocean King" at Quebec, having been left behind in Montreal through incorrect information given me by one of the ship's officers as to the time of sailing. We received the farewell of the Governor General on board the "Ocean King," and His Excellency's very kind words had an especially encouraging effect upon my boys.

On reaching Sidney, C. B.,² and while taking in coal, some funny tricks were played by voyageurs which I must not omit. To get ashore in spite of the officers who kept watch on the wharf, some daring fellows jumped from the vessel's rigging into the empty coal cars returning to the wharf, coming back in the dark and the vessel being a few feet off the wharf, the men had to climb aboard by a rope. Now it happened, that of two friends, one was able to get up, the other was not, neither could his friend help him, they however, contrived a plan, which they carried out

¹ Gilbert John Elliot-Murray-Kynynmound (1845-1914), the Military Secretary to the Governor-General of Canada

² Sydney, Nova Scotia, an important port on Canada's Cape Breton Island.

to perfection. The one on the wharf laid quietly down, while his friend climbed aboard and there informed our officers that a man had hurt himself by falling off the coal shoot, immediately there was great alarm, lamps were hung over the side and the man discovered by his clothes to be one of the voyageurs, a plank was shoved out over the ship's rail, standing nearly upright and a line hove, (some suggested to put the line around his neck.) However, he was hoisted aboard and carried towards the cabin. While being carried, the apparently lifeless one was seen to open his eyes three or four times, but too many hands evidently had hold of him and so he was brought before the doctor, who eagerly examined him, but soon pronounced him dead, "dead drunk" and ordered him to be taken to his bunk, where he soon sat up laughing and feeling good, to escape so easily.

On arriving in Alexandria,³ after a fine passage and good treatment we saw our boats, which at the first sight and from a distance, were condemned by the boys, but later experience changed our first impression [...]

The following day, the 8th, Lord Avonmore⁴ requested of me seven men and a foreman, to go with him up to the Dal cataract⁵ to be stationed there, owing probably, as I thought to myself, that Col. Alleyne considered the Dal the most difficult. I pointed out Peter Canoe as the most experienced boatman I had, and as he does not speak English, James Deer went as their interpreter. I received orders for myself to go down with the rest of my men to Gemai. At Gemai I found twenty-three light boats manned by Dongolese.⁶ Placing a captain in each boat we started, but were disappointed to find that these men had never seen a boat nor used an oar. With the help of the usual north wind we managed to ascend in good time to Sarras.⁷ On the way up we had to teach one man to steer and then go round to each man and teach him to row. Neither understanding one word of the other's language, this was a terrible task. I had however, been long enough in contact with English military discipline by this time, to know that there was no backing out. We loaded at Sarras and proceeded up with Lieut. C. R. Orde as Commander of this convoy, who had an interpreter with him. Without the latter it would have been impossible to get along; as it was, some accidents could not be avoided. Our new commander being an experienced boatman as well as a good carpenter, and a gentleman we managed to keep up with the other fleets. To give an idea of the trouble we had, I need only say that these Dongolese generally understood just the contrary of what they were ordered to do. They would pull hard when asked to stop or stop pulling at some critical place when hard pulling was required. Lieut. Orde as well as myself were continually patching boats on account of these fellows. We made the nine miles from Sarras to Semnah⁸ in just six days, whereas we had travelled before at the rate of seventy miles in five days. At Semnah Lieut. Orde reported to Commander Hammill, R. N., in charge of Semnah cataract, Commander Hammill informed me that my plan of ascending Semnah gate was adopted by all the others, he also asked me if I thought I should be able to make boatmen of the Dongolese, I told him I was discouraged and the only consolation I had was that my Dongolese convoy was still travelling as fast as the other fleets in spite of my strict

³ Egypt's major port and second-largest city

⁴ Barry Yelverton (1859-1885), the 5th Viscount of Avonmore, who died of a fever while serving in Sudan

⁵ A waterfall in northern Sudan

⁶ Inhabitants of the capital of Nubia, Dongola

⁷ An Arabian city bordering Egypt

⁸ A Nubian region located on the west bank of the Nile

orders always to give the right of way to boats manned by soldiers and to avoid retarding them in the cataracts [...]

At Tangur⁹ it was found advisable to split the convoy, Major Crofton taking 10 boats and Lieut. Orde the rest. Going up some minor cataract with eight Dongolese on the line, and one young fellow, a little brighter than the rest, in the boat with me and having just passed the worst place, a couple of the men ashore got to fighting and the rest let go the line either to part them or to join and I was left at the mercy of the rapid for a variety. These men were, as I said before, entirely unused to boats. They are all excellent swimmers and able to cross the river at almost any place. When making long distances they make use of the goat skin bottles they have for carrying water, scolding was of no use, they neither understood nor cared. I may here mention another peculiarity of theirs. I had noticed many scars on their bodies, but could not account for it, until one of them fell sick when the other cut his skin to bleed him, and filled the cut with sand.

This convoy carried about sixty tons of freight, all of which was brought safely to the foot of Dal cataract and the convoy was ordered downwards again as far as the head of Ambigol cataract for reloading. As I could not trust the Dongolese in shooting the rapids I manned the boats with my Iroquois¹⁰ and made trips at each cataract, letting the Dongolese walk. It was a grand sight to see so many boats on their way up, some sailing, some rowing, some tracking and some on shore patching up.

We reached the head of Ambigol, loaded up and started up stream. We made the foot of Dal with less trouble on this trip, the Dongolese having learned a great deal as well as I and my men knowing now some words of their language.

On arriving at Dal, I found that this place had become a very busy scene. Many tents were pitched among which were a commissariat¹¹, a post office and a number of officers tents. Lord Avonmore had come down from the middle of the Dal cataract, next to his tent was that of Colonel Burnaby, then Major Mann, near the beach was Sir George Arthur, who had arrived that day from below, commanding a convoy of boats. On the south end of the little colony were Lord Charles Beresford, Col. Alleyne and Major Spaight. Col. Alleyne congratulated me on my success with the Dongolese [...]

The last boat that I assisted in passing was on the 14th of January and on the 15th I received orders to start for Wady Halfa,¹² which brought my active service in the Egyptian Expedition to a close.

We arrived at Wady Halfa on the 18th of January where I found Captains Aumond and McRae and nearly two hundred voyageurs. At Wady Halfa I witnessed the military funeral of a Gordon Highlander,¹³ which was a novel sight to me.

One dark night, long after the retiring bugle had sounded, an alarm gun was fired. I went out of my tent and to my astonishment I found the soldiers already prepared to fight. No lights had been used and it was a mystery to me how the men could get ready in so short a time. I could see that in a real attack, the enemy would not get much advantage over these men.

⁹ City in the Sudan province of Kordofan

¹⁰ Indigenous people from the Onondaga, Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, or Seneca tribes

¹¹ Department of food supplies

¹² Sudanese port city on Lake Nubia

¹³ An infantry regiment of the British army

I must mention here a curious sight I witnessed at the funeral of an Egyptian, before lowering the body into the grave they put a small coin into his mouth, and I found out, that their belief is, that the dead have to cross a river to get into the "happy hunting grounds" and I concluded that the ferryman, not ferrying on "tick" they had provided their comrade with his fare. Before leaving Wady Halfa, I had the satisfaction to see two of my Iroquois carry off the first prizes for running at the United Service Sports,¹⁴ held under the patronage of the Station Commandant Col. Duncan and the officers.

We left Wady Halfa on the 29th January, arriving at Cairo, February 5th, where an opportunity was given us to visit the following places of interest: Kass el-Nil Bridge, Kass-el-Nil Barracks, Abdin Square and Palace, The Mosque Sultan-Hassan, the Citadel, the Mosque Mohamet-Ali, the Native Bazaar, the Esbediah Gardens, and finally Gizeh and the Pyramids.

Source Text:

Jackson, Louis, *Our Caughnawagas in Egypt* (Montreal: W. Drysdale & Co, 1885).

References:

Benn, Carl. *Mohawks on the Nile: Natives Among the Canadian Voyageurs in Egypt, 1884-1885*, (Toronto: Dundurn, 2009).

‘The Voyageurs of the Nile’, *The Saturday Review* 60.1553 (1 August 1885), 142-3.

Weaver, Jace, *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000-1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Athletic competitions held between various branches of the British army