

Manuscript  
Collection  
MITCHELL, (JOHN) Papers.

212

Part of the manuscript of John Mitchell's last book, The Settlement of York County, acquired in 1982 from Mrs. Elaine Williams. There is no restriction on the material.

Extent: 1 box

Biographical sketch:

John Mitchell (1880-1951) was born on the 5th line of Mono, in the Caledon Hills on the farm which his grandfather secured from the Crown for £ 37 in 1834. The boy spent his first years on the farm which was to become the setting for his most famous book, The Yellow Briar. His father became restless, however, and after studying veterinary science, set up in practice in Drayton, 40 miles west of Mono. After three years in Drayton, William Mitchell departed for the Canadian West where two of his brothers were already living. Mrs. Mitchell and her son, John, moved with him, but the marriage had become incompatible. From the time John was 8 or 9 until he was 14, he spent his winters with his mother in Mono, and his summers with his father in Prince Albert. In 1894 his mother moved to Toronto where her brilliant son attended Harbord Collegiate Institute, moving on to Victoria College where he was a gold medalist and eventually to Osgood Hall. He practised law in Toronto for 28 years.

In 1930 his first effort at writing, The Kingdom of America, was published. This was an essay which voiced some of the optimistic ideas about Canada which were to underlie The Yellow Briar four years later. The fact that Mitchell took out a mortgage on his property to pay for its publication was an omen of the financial disasters to come.

In 1934 The Yellow Briar, written by Mitchell and published under the pseudonym of Patrick Slater, burst upon the literary scene. Mitchell, whose reticence and odd manners were already mounting, became a celebrity overnight. The book has remained a minor classic ever since and has gone through many editions. Its popularity only tended to make Mitchell more anti-social.

Shortly after the publication of his novel, Mitchell's lack of business acumen caught up with him. His practice was largely among poor immigrants, and all too often he neglected to collect his fees. His office books fell into chaos, he borrowed small sums of money, and eventually he wrote a letter to the Attorney General accusing himself of having allowed his own funds and his clients' money to become confused. Although the crown counsel and the Magistrate in the subsequent trial tried to minimize the crime, Mitchell insisted that the law be enforced. He was given a light sentence and was released after serving six months. However he could no longer practise law, and was doomed to lead a life of poverty and obscurity. Not a gifted poet, he nevertheless tried his hand at verse. The Water-drinker was published by Thomas Allen in 1937, and was not a popular success. Neither was his second novel, Robert Harding, published by Allen in 1938. At the time of his death he had just completed

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212

The Settlement of York County, which had been commissioned by Municipal Corporation of the County of York to mark the centennial of the beginnings of municipal government in the two Canadas. The book, which was published after his death, while fresh and lively in its approach, tended to be anecdotal, and lacked most of the requirements of a proper history book: foot-notes, a bibliography, and even an index.

Mitchell died in poverty in October, 1951. The admirers of The Yellow Briar wrote lengthy accounts of his life in the Toronto newspapers, and when his financial situation was made public, a fund was set up to provide a grave stone. The fund was over-subscribed, and the balance was sent to the Canadian Writers' Foundation to assist other needy authors.

Contents:

Box I. Eleven chapters, with a table of contents headed The Story of York. Partially typed and partially manuscript. Six of the chapters have been pasted into scrapbooks. Many of the chapters have titles which were used in the finished version, some of the text was published unaltered, but much rewriting was done by his editor. The Settlement of York County was published posthumously in 1951.

Accompanying the manuscript is an A.L.S. to Mitchell's typist, Mrs. Elaine Williams.

R. Grover  
Jan. '84