

## WHO WAS JUNIUS?

All who are familiar with the 19th-century history of St. Catharines know of Junius. He was the anonymous author of *A Walk Around Town*, a series of essays that appeared in the *St. Catharines Journal* between May 15, 1856 and February 26, 1857. These essays, labelled A, B, C and so on through the alphabet, are an indispensable source of information about the people, places, institutions and events of mid-century St. Catharines.

In 1967 the essays were reprinted in book form by the St. Catharines and Lincoln Historical Society under the title *St. Catharines A to Z*. This contains 28 essays in all, for Junius split the longest Walks, P and W, into two parts. There was also another essay that was not included in the Society's publication. This Junius called Walk &, presumably because the ampersand used to follow Z in children's alphabet rhymes of old. Here he dedicates the entire series to boyhood friend Jedediah Prendergast Merritt, son and biographer of William Hamilton Merritt.

The *Journal* was published every Thursday, and Walks A to X appeared on a weekly basis. (Walk Y was delayed four weeks, and Walks Z and & eight more.) It is clear from references to current events that Junius did not prepare his essays in advance, but wrote to a weekly deadline. Given their length — most exceed 4000 words and the longest approach 8000 — this must have been a huge undertaking.

The essays are crammed with detail; the fact that roughly 800 people are named in Junius' march through the alphabet is a measure of how much. His coverage of St. Catharines leaves out nothing. He discusses churches, graveyards, schools, industries, trades, merchants, doctors, lawyers and more, pays special attention to topics like the Welland Canal, newspapers and Temperance, provides a wealth of information about the early years of the town, and includes mini-biographies of a number of individuals, prominent and otherwise.

Junius is always generous in what he says about others, typically ending his biographies with a declaration such as "Success ever attend him and his." Never does he succumb to the temptation of making malicious comments under the cloak of anonymity, as did many other writers of that era. As he says in Walk T, this was quite deliberate:

...we designed to write or publish nothing that would give offence to any one ... Our chief intention has been to please and amuse, as well as to enlighten and instruct as far as we were able. We know full well we

have written a great deal of nonsense, and we hope some sense too; but to wound the feelings of any, we would not if we could.

If Junius did write any nonsense it was not the factual material about St. Catharines, which is generally considered to be quite reliable. However his Walks contain a lot more — musings about religion and life, discourses on ancient and modern history, rantings about the evils of drink and circuses (with their "baneful influences and wanton immorality"), poetic rhapsodies on the delights of midsummer, and even advice to the unmarried — which no doubt caused more than a few readers to roll their eyes.

The same reaction may have been elicited by Junius' often florid writing style, with its long sentences, complex constructions, outrageous wordplay, and his habit of stringing together lengthy sequences of fanciful phrases for effect. After a while this borders on the tiresome. The opening lines of Walk A are typical:

In our various peregrinations *in and around Town*, we design giving an Alphabetical number of, a *hop*, *skip* and *jump* sketch, a promiscuous and random version, and an off-hand Sam-Slick, Punch and Junius-like relation, of *Facts and Folks*, *Men and Things*, *Incidents and Affairs*, *Business and Professions*, *Sense and Nonsense* of St. Catharines, as it *was*, *is*, and ought *to be* hereafter; and we will endeavor to *pen* what pops into our mind, what we can think of, what we can pick up, and what may be worthy of remembrance in this Polyglott Town, and among this fast people.

The Junius that emerges from his essays in the *Journal* is intelligent, knowledgeable and quick-witted. He has considerable writing skill (though often gets carried away by his own cleverness). He is opinionated (thus "fashionable" church music is "unholy goosey trash") and altogether full of himself, but also cares deeply about the underdog, whether the hard-working poor, American slaves or underpaid seamstresses. He is also a futurist, who glories in progress and anticipates things that we now take for granted, like air travel and instant communication. He even predicts the expansion of his "infant lovely St. Catharines" to include all the neighbouring municipalities as far south as Welland!

But who was this Junius, and why did he choose that nom de plume? The first question is easily answered; the answer to the second is less obvious.

Junius was Oliver Seymour Phelps, son of Oliver Phelps, the principal contractor in the building of the First Welland Canal. Born on January 12, 1816 in Ludlowville, New York, Seymour, as he was known, accompanied his family to Canada in 1826, settling first in Centreville (later Merritton) and moving to St. Catharines in 1829. Though he never admitted to being Junius until later in life (at least not in print), his identity was no secret — it was obvious from his writing style (which had been honed in previous letters to the press) and from personal references in his Walks. His identity could never have remained secret anyway in a town of just 6000 people.



*Oliver Seymour Phelps — our Junius*

Junius was not the only pseudonym used by Phelps. Many of his letters to the press are signed Cid, and he claims other “cognomens” such as A Teetotaller, Anti-Rumsucker, Anti-Railway Mania, Anti-Sectarian Cemetery and Agricola. One that he does not admit to is Z, who was the anonymous author of *Our Town Wheelbarrow*, a local news and gossip column that accompanied Junius’ Walks from Walk O onward. The author is obviously Phelps, however, because the writing style is very similar, and it is Z, not Junius, who responds to comments made about the Walks in the *Journal* and other newspapers.

As for the origin of the *nom de plume* Junius, this was a Roman clan name, the second of the *tria nomina* by which most Romans were known. There were two prominent Juniuses in ancient Rome — Lucius Junius Brutus, who founded the Roman Republic in 509 BC, and Marcus Junius Brutus, who killed Julius Caesar in an attempt to save the

Republic in 44 BC. However, it is unlikely that Phelps named himself for either of these Juniuses, at least not directly.

Instead, the name almost certainly derives from 18th-century England, from another Junius who wrote an anonymous series of letters to the London *Public Advertiser* between January 21, 1769 and January 21, 1772. This Junius may have named himself after Lucius Junius Brutus, for like the latter he saw himself as a champion of personal freedom, and he had already called himself Lucius (and possibly Brutus) in previous letters.



*Lucius Junius Brutus — the original Junius?*

The English Junius had extraordinary writing skills, but in contrast to our Junius used them in a wholly negative fashion to attack the government of the day, and in particular George III’s prime minister, the Duke of Grafton. He has been called “the most perfect wielder of slanderous polemic that [has] ever arisen in English political controversy,” and his withering assaults on Grafton and others soon made him the talk of the town. Indeed, Junius was in no small part responsible for Grafton’s resignation after barely a year in office, though corruption, incompetence and a messy private life played a role also.



*Philip Francis — the English Junius?*

Throughout all this Junius' true identity remained unknown, and despite the best efforts of many investigators the uncertainty remains. (For those who like whodunits, Alvar Ellegård's book *Who Was Junius?* is a must-read.) The number of persons supposed to have been Junius exceeds 40, but a combination of evidence — content, handwriting, phraseology, word usage and opportunity — suggests one person in particular. This is Philip (later Sir Philip) Francis, who held the important position of Chief Clerk in the War Office, where he was privy to all manner of information about politics and the goings-on at Court.

Whatever the identity of the English Junius, can we be sure that our Junius took his name from him? Did he even know about the earlier Junius? The answer is almost certainly yes. When George Brown founded *The Globe* newspaper in 1844 he chose as its motto this Junian quote — “The subject who is truly loyal to the Chief Magistrate will neither advise nor submit to arbitrary measures.” Seymour Phelps, who knew Brown, must have seen this (and it is still to be seen on the editorial page to this day).

But there is stronger evidence, for the 1855 holdings of the St. Catharines Mechanics' Institute Library included a copy of *Woodfall's Junius*, a collection of the original letters in the *Public Advertiser* reprinted by the son of its proprietor H.S. Woodfall. (This was but one of numerous versions of Junius that were published in the late 18th and

early 19th centuries.) Seymour Phelps was extremely well read, and as a patron of the library would have been quite familiar with his notorious predecessor. And though he in no way shared the “venemous hate and scorn” that the English Junius displayed towards his subjects, it is not surprising that Phelps adopted the same name for his own anonymous persona. Indeed, knowing him he probably got a real kick out of it.

There remains one curious fact to consider: just north of Seneca Lake in New York State there are two adjacent townships called Phelps and Junius. Could their juxtaposition have prompted Seymour to choose the name Junius? His birthplace, Ludlowville, lay just 50 miles to the south, and Phelps Township was even named for a relative, albeit a very distant one (land speculator Oliver Phelps, who is chiefly known for the Phelps and Gorham Purchase of 1788, involving some 6 million acres of land in western New York State). Since Seymour Phelps was only 16 when he left the area, it seems rather unlikely that he would have been influenced by this geographical coincidence. But we have no way of knowing for sure, so the possibility remains an intriguing one.

**Principal Sources** (apart from those cited in the text): Cushing, *Initials and Pseudonyms: a Dictionary of Literary Disguises*; Phelps & Servin, *The Phelps Family of America*; Ward & Waller (eds), *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*; *St. Catharines Journal*, 1856-57 issues; *Wikipedia*, entries for Junius and Francis.

Reproduced from the *Newsletter* of the Historical Society of St. Catharines, September 2006  
Copyright © 2006 by Alun Hughes