

BURNS AS A WRITER OF PROSE

D. F. FRASER-HARRIS

NINE hundred and ninety-nine persons out of a thousand, if asked who was Burns, would answer—"a Scottish poet" or perhaps, and better, "*the Scottish Poet*". Indubitably he was a poet, for within his 37 years he compressed more true poetry, and wrote more exquisite love-lyrics which will live for ever, than probably any other writer.

His poetry has eclipsed his prose, just as Scott's prose has eclipsed his poetry. For Burns *was* a writer of prose—crisp, idiomatic, forceful prose—almost all of it in his letters.

The reason for general lack of familiarity with this side of his work cannot be that it was written in "an uncouth and little known Scottish dialect", for it was in pure English. "His letters gave Jeffrey a higher opinion of him as a man than did his poetry", says Logie Robertson.¹ Jeffrey may have been somewhat insensitive to poetry, but his opinion that Burns's character shows to greater advantage in his letters than in his lyrics is probably correct. Carlyle, in his notable essay, thus concluded his criticism: "Whenever he writes . . . to trusted friends and on real interests, his style becomes simple, vigorous, expressive, sometimes even beautiful. His letters to Mrs. Dunlop are uniformly excellent".

In Logie Robertson's collection there are 268 letters written to more than 150 persons, the year of the earliest being 1780 and that of the last 1796, the year of his death. The female recipients outnumber the male, for Mrs. Maclehose ("Clarinda") received 48, Mrs. Dunlop of Dunlop 42, Maria Riddell 18, and "Peggy Chalmers" 11. "No four of his male correspondents", says Mr. Robertson, "can be accredited with so many", even although old George Thomson claimed 56. The correspondence with Thomson may be regarded as more or less of the nature of a business one, dealing as it does with the famous collection of Scots songs. Robertson has described the character of Burns's correspondents taken as a whole so well that we can not do better than quote his words:-

His correspondents were of every social grade—peers and peasants; of every intellectual attainment—philosophers like Dugald Stewart and simple swains like Thomas Orr; and of almost every variety of calling, from professional men of recognized

1. *The Letters of Robert Burns*. Selected and arranged with an Introduction by J. Logie Robertson. Walter Scott. London, 1887.

eminence to obscure shop-keepers, cottars and tradesmen. They include servant-girls, gentlewomen and ladies of titled rank; country schoolmasters and college professors, men of law of all degrees from poor John Richmond, a plain law-clerk with a lodging in the Lawnmarket, to the Honourable Henry Erskine, Dean of the Faculty; farmers small and large; lairds large and small; shoemakers and shop-keepers; ministers, bankers and doctors; printers, booksellers and editors; knights and earls, nay a duke; factors and wine-merchants; army officers and officers of Excise.

But Burns gives us prose outside the letters; he left a precious fragment of an autobiography; three journals of observations at Mossgiel, Edinburgh and Ellisland respectively; the itinerary of his Border tour, and the itinerary of his tour in the Highlands; besides certain historical notes to two collections of Scots songs. In addition to these, there is the notable preface to the first or Kilmarnock edition of the poems brought out in 1786, and the other dedication to the "Noblemen and Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt" which was the preface to the second or Edinburgh edition of 1787.

The former begins—

The following trifles are not the productions of the Poet who, with all the advantages of learned Art and perhaps amid the elegancies and idlenesses of upper life, looks down for a rural theme, with an eye to Theocrites (*sic*) or Virgil.

To the author of this, these and other celebrated names (their countrymen) are, in their original languages, "a fountain shut up and a book sealed."¹

Unacquainted with the necessary requisites for commencing Poet by rule, he sings the sentiments and manners he felt and saw in himself and his rustic compeers around him, in his and their native language. Though a Rhymer from his earliest years, at least from the earliest impulses of the softer passions, it was not till very lately that the applause, perhaps the partiality, of friendship awakened his vanity so far as to make him think anything of his was worth showing; and none of the following works were ever composed with a view to the press. To amuse himself with the little creations of his own fancy, amid the toils and fatigues of a laborious life, to transcribe the various feelings, the loves, the griefs, the hopes, the fears in his own breast, to find some kind of counterpoise to the struggles of a world always an alien scene, a task uncouth to the poetical mind; these were his motives for courting the Muses, and in these he found Poetry to be its own reward.

And there is a good deal more in the rather stilted diction of the mid-eighteenth century.

1. This is evidently a misquotation of "The Song of Solomon" (IV. 12)—"a spring shut up, a fountain sealed."

But do we realize what we have here? An Ayrshire ploughman aged twenty-seven writes in elegant English about Theocritus¹ and Virgil, and quotes from the Bible about "a fountain shut up and a book sealed". In his own famous phrase, there is no "prentice hand" here. The ease, the assurance, the bold self-approbation and acute self-dissection with which this son of a poor Scottish farmer comes before the world of letters is amazing. This is astonishing to be the composition of a young man whose mother tongue was a harsh, lowland, Scottish dialect. Perhaps it *is* a little self-conscious, and perhaps it *is* slightly stilted, but not nearly so much so as some things of Addison or Johnson. What practice could Burns have had in the writing of elegant English? He wrote his prose as he wrote his poetry, as though to the manner born. But this is not the end of it. The Dedication of the Edinburgh edition to the "Noblemen and Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt" is an equally remarkable composition.

My Lords and Gentlemen

A Scottish Bard, proud of the name, and whose highest ambition is to sing in his Country's service—where shall he so properly look for patronage as to the illustrious Names of his native Land, those who bear the honours and inherit the virtues of his Ancestors? The Poetic Genius of my Country found me as the prophetic bard Elijah did Elisha, at the plough, and threw her inspiring mantle over me. She bade me sing the loves, the joys, the rural scenes and rural pleasures of my native Soil in my native tongue: I tuned my wild, artless notes as she inspired. She whispered me to come to this ancient metropolis of Caledonia, and lay my songs under your honoured protection. I now obey her dictates.

And whence this assurance, this elegance, this dignity—for these are no halting sentences? This young "rustic", as he has so often been called, addresses the Lords and Gentlemen in their own language, not in his. The ploughman talks to the peers, if not as their social equal, then as their equal in the lore of their common country, and in a solicitous regard for the credit of its literature. He comes before the flower of Scottish culture with no apologetic shuffle, but with the easy assurance of a man of similar culture.

We are compelled to ask, where did Burns acquire the use of this perfect English? For in his native medium of expression he gives us this:

1. "Theocritus" is possibly a *lapsus penna*.

There, lonely by the ingle-cheek
 I sat and ey'd the spewing reek
 That fill'd wi' hoast-provoking smeek
 The auld clay biggin'
 An' heard the restless rattons squeak
 About the riggin'.

And much more might be quoted that is much farther removed from our southern speech.

He himself has told us what he read—The *Spectator*; Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding*; Boyle's *Lectures*; Allan Ramsay's *Works*; Taylor's *Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin, Select Collection of English Songs* and Hervey's *Meditations*. Excellent as these works are, they cannot in themselves be held responsible for the formation of Burns's prose style. As no reading made him a poet, so no reading made him a writer of good English prose. He tells us he desired to excel as a letter-writer after the fashion of the English letter-writers of the eighteenth century, but we must suppose that in his mental make-up there was a potential or latent capacity for literary expression in the form both of verse and of prose. His so called self-education no more made him a good prose writer than it made him a poet. He consciously set before himself certain models in prose, but the capacity to copy these models and in some instances to improve upon them came from within.

The letter to Dr. Moore, dated Mauchline, August 2nd, 1787, is full of interest both on account of the otherwise inaccessible biographical details it contains and for its easy, mature style:

The great misfortune of my life was want of aim. I had felt early some stirrings of ambition, but they were the blind gropings of Homer's Cyclops round the walls of his cave. I saw my father's situation entailed on me perpetual labour. The only two openings by which I could enter the temple of fortune were the gate of niggardly economy or the path of little chicaning bargain making. The first is so contracted an aperture I never could squeeze myself into it, the last I always hated—there was contamination in the very entrance. Thus abandoned of aim or view in life, with a strong appetite for sociability as well as from native hilarity and from a pride of observation and remark; a constitutional melancholy or hypochondriasm that made me fly solitude; add to these incentives to social life my reputation for bookish knowledge, a certain wild logical talent and a strength of thought something like the rudiments of good sense; and it will not seem surprising that I was generally a welcome guest where I visited, or any great wonder that always, where two or three met together, there was I among them.

But far beyond all other impulses of my heart was *un penchant à l'adorable invitée du genre humain*. My heart was completely

tender, and was eternally lighted up by some goddess or other, and, as in every warfare in this world, my fortune was various; sometimes I was received with favour, and sometimes I was mortified with a repulse.

I spent my nineteenth summer on a smuggling coast, a good distance from home at a noted school to learn mensuration, surveying, dialling, etc., in which I made a pretty good progress. But I made a greater progress in the knowledge of mankind.

Here though I learned to fill my glass and to mix without fear in a drunken squabble, yet I went on with a high hand with my geometry till the sun entered Virgo, a month which is always a carnival in my bosom, when a charming fillette who lived next door to the school overset my trigonometry and set me off at a tangent from the sphere of my studies.

This is no faltering composition, this vivid self-analysis in idiomatic English which closes with so apt and witty a simile.

A good example of Burns's vigorous style may be had in one of his letters to William Nicol, written from Mauchline in June, 1787, after his return from the success of his first Edinburgh visit:

I never thought mankind very capable of anything generous; but the stateliness of the patricians in Edinburgh and the servility of my plebeian brethren (who perhaps formerly eyed me askance) since I returned home have nearly put me out of conceit altogether with my species.

I have bought a pocket Milton which I carry perpetually about with me in order to study the sentiments, the dauntless magnanimity, the intrepid, unyielding independence, the desperate daring and noble defiance of hardship in that great personage, Satan.

Still more vigorous is his tirade against poverty in the letter dated 17 January, 1791, to Peter Hill, the Edinburgh bookseller:

Take these two guineas and place them over against that damn'd account of yours which has gagged my mouth these five or six months. Oh the supreme misery of making three guineas do the business of five! Not all the labours of Hercules, not all the Hebrews' three centuries of Egyptian bondage, were such an insuperable business, such an infernal task. Poverty, thou half-sister of death, thou cousin-German of hell, where shall I find force of execration equal to the amplitude of thy demerits?

Oppressed by thee, the man of sentiment whose heart glows with independence and melts with sensibility only pines under the neglect or writhes in bitterness of soul under the contumely of arrogant unfeeling wealth. Oppressed by thee, the son of genius, whose ill-starred ambition plants him at the tables of the fashionable and polite, must see in suffering silence his remark neglected and his person despised while shallow greatness,

in his idiot attempts at wit, shall meet with countenance and applause. . . .

Far otherwise is the lot of the man of family and fortune. His early follies and extravagances are spirit and fire; *his* consequent wants are the embarrassments of an honest fellow, and when to remedy the matter he has gained a legal commission to plunder distant provinces or massacre peaceful nations, he returns perhaps laden with the spoils of rapine and murder; lives wicked and respected, and dies a scoundrel and a lord.

As invective, it would be difficult to say whether the English of this outburst or the broad Scotch of "Holy Willie's prayer" is the more terrific.

Burns *could* write prose in broad Scotch, which however he very rarely did. His letter to William Nicol dated at Carlisle, June 1st, 1787, is one of the few examples of his prose in broad Scotch:

I'm sitten doon here. . . . to gie ye some notion o' my land lower-like stravaguin sin the sorrowfu' hour that I sheuk hands and parted wi' Auld Reekie. . . . I hae dander'd ower a' the kintra frae Dunbar tae Selcraig, and hae forgathered wi' mony a guid fallow and mony a weel-far'd hizzie.

I was gaun tae write ye a lang pystle, but God forgie me, I gat mysel' sae notoriously fou the day after kail-time that I can hardly stoiter but and ben. My best respects tae the guid-wife and a' our common friens. . . . I'll be in Dumfries the morn gif the beast be to the fore, and the branks bide hale.

Gude be wi ye, Willie, amen!

R. B.

It might be noted in passing that in this letter Burns uses the expression "common friends" correctly, and not the objectionable term "mutual friend" made familiar by Charles Dickens.

A very slight acquaintance with his poetry shows us that he possessed immense powers of satire and invective. In his prose, in addition to these he could write in strain of mock rhetoric and real banter which is highly entertaining. The letter to William Nicol, dated 20th February, 1792, is a case in point:

O thou wisest among the wise, meridian blaze of prudence, full moon of discretion and chief of many counsellors. . . .

May one feeble ray of that light of wisdom which darts from the sensorium, straight as the arrow of heaven, and bright as the meteor of inspiration, may it be my portion so that I may be less unworthy of the face and favour of that father of proverbs and master of maxims, that antipode of folly and magnet among the sages, the wise and witty Willie Nicol. . . .

For me, I am a beast, a reptile, and know nothing!

From the cave of my ignorance, amid the fogs of my dulness and pestilential fumes of my political heresies, I look up to thee,

as doth a toad through the iron-barred lucarne of a pestiferous dungeon to the cloudless glory of a summer sun. . . . As for him, his works are perfect; never did the pin of calumny blur the fair page of his reputation, nor the bolt of hatred fly at his dwelling.

Thou mirror of purity, when shall the elfin lamp of my glimmerous understanding, purged from sensual appetites and gross desires, shine like the constellation of thy intellectual powers? As for thee, thy thoughts are pure and thy lips are holy. Never did the unhallowed breath of the powers of darkness, and the pleasures of darkness, pollute the sacred flame of thy sky-descended and heaven-bound desires; never did the vapours of impurity stain the unclouded serene of thy cerulean imagination.

This is, undoubtedly, fooling, but it is on the whole clever fooling. It is not exactly what we should expect in the way of banter from the "ignorant rustic" that in the estimation of many people Robert Burns was.

As a contrast to this high-spirited nonsense, let us look at a letter to the Rev. Archibald Alison, written from Ellisland, 14 February, 1791. This letter is nothing less than Burns's critical opinion of Alison's *Essay on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, written after a careful reading of that famous treatise. The book had, in fact, just come out (1790), and the reverend author had evidently sent Burns a copy of his work. Alison would not have done such a thing had he not considered Burns as a person worthy of receiving an essay dealing with aesthetics from the philosophical point of view—truly a curious study for the "rude rustic" of the imagination of certain readers:

Sir:

You must by this time have set me down as one of the most ungrateful of men. You did me the honour to present me with a book which does honour to science and the intellectual powers of man, and I have not even so much as acknowledged the receipt of it. The fact is, you yourself are to blame for it. Flattered as I was by your telling me that you wished to have my opinion of the work, the old spiritual enemy of mankind, who knows well that vanity is one of the sins that most easily beset me, put it into my head to ponder over the performance with the look-out of a critic, and to draw up, forsooth, a deep learned digest of strictures on a composition of which in fact, until I read the book, I did not even know the first principles.

I own, sir, that at first glance several of your propositions startled me as paradoxical. That the martial clangour of a trumpet had something in it vastly more grand, heroic and sublime than the twingle-twangle of a Jew's harp; that the delicate flexure of a rose-twig, when the half-blown flower is heavy with the tears of the dawn, was infinitely more beautiful and elegant than the upright stub of burdock, and that from something innate and

independent of all associations of ideas—these I had set down as irrefragable, orthodox truths, until perusing your book shook my faith. In short, sir, except Euclid's "Elements of Geometry," which I made a shift to unravel by my father's fireside, in the winter evening of the first season I held the plough, I never read a book which gave me such a quantum of information and added so much to my stock of ideas as your "Essays on the Principles of Taste." One thing, sir, you must forgive me mentioning as an uncommon merit in the work. I mean the language. To clothe abstract philosophy in elegance of style sounds something like a contradiction in terms; but you have convinced me that they are quite compatible.

Not quite the criticism of an unreflecting, uneducated or superficial person, at any rate.

Apròpos of the finer emotions in presence of the beauty of external nature, we have a remarkable letter from Burns to Mrs. Dunlop, dated "Ellisland, New Year Day Morning, 1789"

. The first Sunday of May; a breezy blue-skyed noon some time about the beginning, and a hoary morning and calm sunny day about the end of autumn; these, time out of mind, have been with me a kind of holiday

We know nothing or next to nothing of the substance or structure of our souls, so cannot account for those seeming caprices in them, that one should be particularly pleased with this thing or struck with that which, on minds of a different cast, makes no extraordinary impression.

I have some favourite flowers in spring, among which are the mountain-daisy, the hare-bell, the foxglove, the wild briar-rose, the budding birch and the hoary hawthorn that I view and hang over with particular delight.

I never hear the loud, solitary whistle of the curlew in a summer noon, or the wild mixing cadence of a troop of grey plovers in an autumnal morning, without feeling an elevation of soul like the enthusiasm of devotion or poetry

Are we a piece of machinery which, like the Aeolian harp, passive, takes the impression of the passing accident? Or do these workings argue something within us above the trodden clod? I own myself partial to such proofs of those awful and important realities—a God that made all things—man's immaterial and immortal nature—and a world of weal or woe beyond death and the grave.

These words reveal a mind sensitive to the simple beauty of the open country—sky, birds, flowers—and not only sensitive but capable of reflecting seriously on the mystery of man's appreciation of such beauty.

We have seen that Burns was quite at home in the use of metaphor and simile. He was, moreover, able to make a sustained

use of this kind of writing, as the following extract shows. It is in a letter to Robert Ainslie, dated Ellisland, June 14th, 1788.

I have all along hitherto in the warfare of life been bred to arms among the light horse—the picquet-guards of fancy; a kind of hussars and highlanders of the brain; but I am firmly resolved to sell out of these giddy battalions, who have no ideas of a battle but fighting the foe or of a siege but storming the town. Cost what it will, I am determined to buy in among the grave squadrons of many-armed thought or the artillery corps of plodding contrivance.

Burns in his prose writings frequently makes use of the simile with excellent effect. As another example, we might quote from a letter to George Thompson, written on the subject of conjugal and non-conjugal love (Nov., 1794):

I like you for entering so candidly and so kindly into the story of *ma chère amie*¹, I assure you I was never more in earnest in my life than in the account of that affair which I sent you in my last. Conjugal love is a passion which I deeply feel and highly venerate; but somehow it does not make such a figure in poesy as that other species of passion.

Where Love is liberty and Nature law. Musically speaking the first is an instrument of which the gamut is scanty and confined, but the tones inexpressibly sweet; while the last has powers equal to all the intellectual modulations of the human soul. Still, I am a very poet, in my enthusiasm of the passion. The welfare and happiness of the beloved object is the first and inviolate sentiment that pervades my soul; and whatever pleasures I might ask for, or whatever may be the raptures they would give me, yet, if they interfere with that first principle, it is having these pleasures at a dishonest price; and justice forbids, and generosity disdains, the purchase.

There is a manliness as well as a subtlety in this analysis.

In his "Border tour" Burns, writing of a Miss Clark, has one particularly apt and graceful simile—"time has blown the blushing bud of bashful modesty into the flower of easy confidence." It would, however, be an immense mistake to suppose that nothing but love, scenery and his own misfortunes interested Robert Burns. There is a letter to the editor of the *Star* (Nov. 8, 1788), in which Burns discusses with excellent criticism and strong common-sense the rival claims of the House of Stuart and the House of Hanover:

I went last Wednesday to my parish church most cordially to join in grateful acknowledgement to the Author of all good for the consequent blessings of the glorious Revolution. To that

1. "Chloris" is here referred to. Her name was Jean Lorimer; she died in Edinburgh in great poverty in 1831.

auspicious event we owe no less than our liberties civil and religious; to it we are likewise indebted for the present Royal Family the ruling features of whose administration have ever been mildness to the subject and tenderness of his rights. (Here Burns, protests against the abusive manner in which the reverend gentleman mentioned the House of Stuart).

We may rejoice sufficiently in our deliverance from past evils without cruelly raking up the ashes of those whose misfortune it was, perhaps as much as their crime, to be the authors of those evils; and we may bless God for all His goodness to us as a nation without at the same time cursing a few ruined, powerless exiles who only harboured ideas and made attempts that most of us would have done had we been in their situation. Might not the epithets of "bloody" and "tyrannical" be with an equal justice applied to the House of Tudor, or York or any other of their predecessors?

The simple state of the case, sir, seems to be this:—at that period, the science of government, the knowledge of the true relation between king and subject was, like other sciences and other knowledge, just in its infancy, emerging from dark ages of ignorance and barbarity. The Stuarts only contended for prerogatives which they knew their predecessors enjoyed and which they saw their contemporaries enjoying, but these prerogatives were inimical to the happiness of a nation and the rights of subjects.

In this contest between prince and people, the consequence of that light of science which had lately dawned over Europe, the monarch of France, for example, was victorious over the struggling liberties of his people; with us, luckily, the monarch failed, and his unwarrantable pretensions fell a sacrifice to our rights and happiness.

Whether it was owing to the wisdom of leading individuals or to the jostling of parties, I cannot pretend to determine; but likewise happily for us the kingly power was shifted into another branch of the family who, as they owed the throne solely to the call of a free people, could claim nothing inconsistent with the covenanted terms which placed them there.

The Stuarts have been condemned and laughed at for the folly and impracticability of their attempts in 1715 and 1745. That they failed, I bless God; but cannot join in the ridicule against them. Who does not know that the abilities or defects of leaders and commanders are often hidden until put to the touchstone of exigency; and that there is a caprice of fortune, an omnipotence in particular accidents and conjunctions of circumstances which exalt us as heroes or brand us as madmen just as they are for or against us....

In such well chosen English did Burns discuss with a London editor the philosophical aspect of the theory of government. The discussion is shot through with common-sense flavoured with good taste. His being a poet had not destroyed his historical per-

spective; his being brought up at the "tail of the plough" had not precluded his powerful intellect from coming to the wisest conclusions on any problem presented to it.

Or read his letter to Mrs. Dunlop dated "Mauchline, 4th May, 1788."

Dryden's Virgil has delighted me. I do not know whether critics will agree with me, but the *Georgics* are to me by far the best of Virgil. . . . When I read the *Georgics* and then survey my own powers, 'tis like the idea of a Shetland pony drawn up by the side of a thorough-bred hunter to start for the plate. I own I am disappointed in the *Aeneid*. Faultless correctness may please, and does highly please, the lettered critic, but to that awful character I have not the most distant pretensions. I do not know whether I do not hazard my pretensions to be a critic of any kind, when I say that I think Virgil in many instances a servile copier of Homer. If I had the *Odyssey* by me, I could parallel many passages where Virgil has evidently copied, but by no means improved, Homer.

Nor can I think there is anything of this owing to the translators; for from everything I have seen of Dryden, I think him, in genius and fluency of language, Pope's master.

I have not perused Tasso enough to form an opinion; in some future letter you shall have my ideas of him; though I am conscious my criticisms must be very inaccurate and imperfect, as there I have ever felt and lamented my want of learning most.

A pretty fair standard as regards the knowledge of classical poetry to have been attained by a self-taught "peasant"—for such indeed Burns called himself.

The expression "You shall have" in the letter just quoted is not in accordance with the Scottish usage, "you will have" being the more usual form, for the Scots are said to be incorrigible in regard to the use of "shall" and "will." Burns, however, seems to have used these words correctly, if by "correctly" we mean in the southern usage. It will be remembered that in "Scots wha hae" he said—

We will drain our dearest veins,
But they *shall* be free!

Persons belonging to Burns's social stratum to-day invariably confuse "shall" and "will"; they probably did so in his day, so that it is certainly remarkable that he himself should have been free from this particular error, if error it be.

ART AND CANADIAN LIFE

HILDA RIDLEY

In the general disorder, in the universal breakdown of equilibrium, the need for order and equilibrium is more imperious than ever. It is natural that the artist should appear...because he is the sole man of order that exists. His unique function is to combine with other artists so as to be able to create with them the style that defines their civilization...the artist is the most civilized of all men. Except for the lyrical expression of emotion, the poetic, plastic or musical stylization of its sensibility, a people leave behind nothing.—ELIE FAURE.

WE must concede, if we study history in a sufficiently comprehensive way, that the developments of art and of life have, on the whole, run in parallel courses, and that the sincere artist, in any age and climate, has fulfilled the function that is his peculiar province—that of interpreting his day and making of his art a mirror of life. His achievements in painting, literature, architecture, sculpture, and the related arts, constitute our most valuable records of the various evolutionary stages and phases through which mankind has passed, because in them, through his unitive faculty, he has presented us with a vital representation of the living spirit of his age,—the offspring of his ability to recognize order in the midst of disorder—the underlying harmony which throws a fresh ray of light on the enigma of existence, and is his contribution to the solution of it, in the particular aspect that it wears for his generation.

To-day, as in the past, we may expect that the artist, in seeking to express himself, will reflect his age and the peculiar conditions of the country in which he is found. Certainly, at this time in Canada we find ourselves in need of such an interpretation, and we should strive, through the cultivation of the open mind, to be alive to its intimations.

The "open mind" in Canada is not easy to cultivate. Our background is too complicated, and we are still divided in our allegiances. Some of us cannot forget our racial origins, and continue to be English, Scottish, French and Irish, clinging to shibboleths that have outworn their virtue. Others confuse "Canadianism" with the adoption of an outlook characteristic of our neighbours to the South, and still others recognize only insuperable barriers in our differences of language and religion. But, in spite

of these divergencies, there is, I believe, in Canada a strong and prepotent spirit that is now making itself felt in our art, as well as in every other department of our national life, modifying the attitude of even those who fancy themselves firmly entrenched in their prejudices. This prepotent spirit is germane to our growing national self-consciousness, and is a form of *nativism*—not in the narrow political sense attributed to that word by the United States in 1856, but in the sense that the keenest appreciation of the quality of Canada that differentiates and individualizes it tends naturally to be felt by those who, from their earliest years, have been subtly conditioned by it. It is not mere national consciousness, which is often expressed in its more ostentatious forms by those who are Canadians by adoption, but it is an inner spirit that serves to intensify that consciousness and to transmute it, so that those within its purview become tinged with its colour.

This prepotent spirit, still felt by only a proportion of the native-born, and by those born in other lands whom they have affected, is relatively recent in its manifestation. It was not until well on in the nineteenth century that a native-born population in Canada assumed significant numbers, and not until still later that it found those political conditions under which it could develop national self-consciousness. As Edward Blake succinctly remarked in his Aurora speech of 1874, "It is impossible to foster a national spirit unless you have national interests to attend to." In Confederation we have the factor that first began to quicken the spirit of nativism,—the proud consciousness of those born in this land of their country as a *whole*, composed of many diverse strains, but presenting in its totality a unique phenomenon, to be studied and interpreted. Then it was that they began to associate with this conception the scenes with which they had been familiar from their earliest years, invested with "the glory and the dream" that childhood and youth bestow upon the objects of daily intercourse,—the soil, the stones, the climate, the woods and waters of the beloved native land. It is this inner spirit of nativism, permeating the larger, more remote one of national consciousness, that makes the combination so potent. And those who feel it most strongly are our artists, to whom we may look for intimations of an interpretation of life as it is in Canada in this age.

Art, it is true, began to find expression in Canada with the coming of the French to Quebec, and the establishment of the English in Ontario, but it was the art, primarily, attendant on the civilization that, in ready-made form, the two races set up in

the new land. The "mirror of life" which the early artists held up did not reflect, for the most part, life in Canada, but mainly Old World scenes and traditions. Thus, in painting, most of our early artists of any note, like Fowler, Jacobi, and Kreighoff, were born abroad, and inspired by Old-World models, and those who immediately succeeded them, even if native-born, like Blair Bruce, Peter Paul, and Wyatt Eaton, received their training and did much of their best work in foreign countries. Only here and there, to correspond with the slow growth of national feeling, which received its first impetus as a result of the war of 1812, do we discover a distinctive Canadian note, as in the novels of Thomas Chandler Haliburton and the poetry of Charles Sangster.

The first significant expression of the spirit of national consciousness, permeated by the deeper and more intimate one that relates to the cherished associations and memories of childhood and early youth, was contained in the poetry of the native-born Charles Mair, a pioneer member of the ill-fated (politically), but all-potent (dynamically) "Canada First" party, inaugurated in 1868 by five young men, who shared an equal devotion to the land of their birth. And following Mair, and vitally affected by the movement of which he was the mouthpiece, came the galaxy of brilliant native-born young poets,—Charles G. D. Roberts, Duncan Campbell Scott, Archibald Lampman, Bliss Carman, Wilfred Campbell, and Pauline Johnson,—in all of whose work we recognize the authentic lineaments of our natural environment, even while at times the form suggests the influences of Old-World poets. They were the precursors of a line of native-born poets, or of poets infected with nativism, who in their turn were engaged with the cherished and characteristic qualities of our natural environment, and spoke now in the French tones of Emile Nelligan, Albert Lozeau, and Paul Morin, now in the *habitant* verse of W. H. Drummond, again in the lyric voices of Marjorie Pickthall and Isabel Valancy Crawford, and to-day in the virile notes of Wilson MacDonald, Tom MacInnes and Robert Norwood.

In the other branches of literature, and in painting, the plastic arts, the drama, and music, we do not discover a corresponding appreciation of the indigenous character of our land. They continued, with a few exceptions, to be in form and spirit practically a part of our cultural inheritance from Great Britain and France. Not until just before the Great War did a movement start that was to place painting beside poetry, and in some aspects in advance of it, as an expression of distinctive Canadian feeling. I refer, of course, to the one initiated by the Group of Seven, the members

of which had come under the spell of a young, native-born artist, whose training had been received primarily at the hands of nature herself, in the woods and beside the waters of Northern Ontario. In Tom Thomson we discover, personified, the essence of that inner consciousness of the indigenous quality of Canadian life that I have attempted to define, so potent in its pervasive influence that it draws to itself and tends to fashion the attitudes of those with whom it comes in contact, even those whose early years have been spent in other countries. Thus, while three members of the Group of Seven came originally from England, these were not excelled in their sensitive response to the authentic qualities of our natural environment, as expressed in the terms of the primordial North, by the native-born members.

"One man of you shall chase a thousand," says the Scripture, and out of the movement quickened by Thomson we discover ramifications apparent in many aspects of our Canadian life and art, affecting the impulses of our writers, our musicians, architects and sculptors, and which continue to increase and multiply.

The Great War, like the South-African War and the War of 1812, gave another strong impetus to the growth of national Canadian feeling, which found compensation in the political realm by an increased autonomy that stopped just short of absolute independence. In art, as the accompanying manifestation, we find that extension of the consciousness that inspired the work of the Group of Seven, to which I have referred. An unprejudiced study of the Year Book of Canadian Art of 1929, which contains the contributions of thirteen writers, each a recognized authority in his own field, and creatively engaged in it, must convince the reader that in music, sculpture, and architecture, as well as in painting and poetry, a new spirit is at work, akin to the one that animated Tom Thomson. In this it is related to the fresh and vital creative impulses that have marked the early stages of the various schools of world art, and thus, in the truest sense, it may lay some claim to a part in the "great tradition."

The instinct to interpret our natural environment has led some of our artists to turn to the native sources of inspiration resident in the folk-songs of Indians and French-Canadians, who have always drawn deeply from the soil. In music this is shown by the use our composers are making of French-Canadian and Indian motifs, as instanced in the work of Ernest MacMillan, Alfred Laliberté, Healey Willan, Leo Smith, and others. This tendency has been stimulated by the exhaustive collections of native songs made by Marius Barbeau and J. Murray Gibbon, and also by

the institution of folk-song and handicraft festivals by the Canadian Pacific Railways. In sculpture the distinctive Canadian note is found most frequently in the work of French-Canadians, such as Henri Hébert, Laliberté, and Suzor-Coté, while a large hospitality to the free play of creative imagination in relation to our environment is evidenced in the work and attitude of Emanuel Hahn, Walter Allward, and Elizabeth Wood. The indication of an authentic Canadian feeling is less apparent in architecture and the drama, although, in the growth of the Little Theatre movement, and in the outstanding achievements of Canadian architects,—as witness, to name only a few, some of our great hotels, like the Chateau Frontenac, the Chateau Laurier, and the Canadian Pacific Railway Hotel at Banff—we can trace the beginnings of an eclectic process, based on national preferences, that holds great possibilities for the future.

Another very effective factor in the quickening of our national consciousness was the rude awakening that was thrust upon us, in common with other countries, in 1929. The termination of the war released an ironic force that, clothed in the gray mantle of disillusion, was destined to complete a process that had been at work for many years, but which most of us had stubbornly ignored. For the first time, some of us began to take into account the metamorphosis that had overtaken the civilized world. We recognized frankly that the mechanization of industry and the results of scientific investigation had placed a new face on the clock of time, and that the *tempo* of that clock had been speeded up considerably, with effects that were patent in every department of life, economically, socially, and artistically. In Canada we began to realize that tradition, in certain aspects, had governed us more rigidly than in the motherland, and one of the interesting results, incidentally, of our enforced acceptance of our changed situation is the discovery, to our surprise and enlightenment, that it has placed us more truly *en rapport* with the land that has always been in the van of political and social progress.

In the artistic expression of the mechanization of civilization and the scientific interpretation of life, some of our Canadian artists, writers, and sculptors have found more than one congenial element. The modernistic repudiation of the past appeals to those who desire a more untrammelled freedom in which to discover the things that belong to our unfolding national consciousness; and its technique, in its less extreme forms, seems the appropriate medium through which to convey our awareness of the new world,

so shorn in many of its aspects of the content of the past. There is a simplicity, an economy, a directness in some of the modern art that evokes a response in those who are weary of the superfluous. It arises from a form of beauty that the artist of to-day has discerned in the scientific or mechanical product, a beauty that owes nothing to ornament or decoration, but simply to the perfect adaptation of all its parts to the function for which it was constructed. The discovery that utility may give birth to beauty is the modern contribution to art, and this has encouraged the artist, in all forms of creative endeavour, to invade fields that were formerly not supposed to be within his province. Modernism, in these senses, has found a place in Canadian art, because it accords with certain elements in the Canadian national character, as it is beginning to make itself felt. It was apparent from the first in the work of the members of the Group of Seven, who, out of the rich prodigality of nature in our Canadian North, selected the elements that contributed to a unified expression, subordinating detail to design. It is also apparent in the painting of the various groups with which they have affinity, such as the Montreal Group, and in the attitude of the recently formed Canadian Group of Painters of Toronto (an outgrowth of the Group of Seven) who, in their avowed intention "to extend the creative faculty beyond the professional meaning of art and make of it a more common language of expression," express the spirit of modernism that tends to restore to art a greater measure of its pristine function as an interpreter of life.

In literature we find exponents of this form of modernism in a group of writers in whom national consciousness has reached a high-water mark,—the members of the Writers' Club of Toronto, many of whose views are set forth in a recently published book *Canadian to the core*, "Open House"; and it is evident, also, in the unadorned language and economy of words of some of our other writers, notably of Morley Callaghan.

The prepotent spirit which I have attempted to define, as a form of nativism that invests the larger one of national consciousness, has now left a sufficient impress on Canadian art, as I have indicated, to enable us to recognize some of its lineaments and direction. While it is still in the stage of assimilation, it has already shown preferences that mark its growing individuation. In common with kindred manifestations in other countries since the catastrophes of the war and the ensuing economic upheaval, it has discarded many of the outworn formulae inherited from older civilizations, and is at home in a clarified environment that gives it an opor-

tunity to find and express its essential self. That essential self it seeks mainly in its own natural environment, in which primordial nature still plays a preponderant part. In turning to it, it finds the touchstone by which it tends to adjudge the contributions that, in the slow but steady stream of immigration, come to this country. For this reason, it is interested in origins rather than derivations.

This liking for origins is reflected in its interest in the native songs and crafts of the various nationalities within our borders, as well as in the sources of our own art, music, and crafts, of which frequent exhibitions, and the festivals and pageants, arranged by the Canadian Pacific Railway are manifestations. In its assimilative stage it has developed an open-minded attitude that is providing it with a wealth of material from which to make a selection in a future eclectic stage, when it shall have come more fully into its own. But to make this exercise of choice of value, it becomes all the more necessary that it should realize its essential self. It is this appreciation that makes the progress of nativism a vital one, and one that is concerned with "elaborating and expressing its idea", in order that it may, in the words of Mazzini, "contribute its stone also to the great pyramid of history"; or, in the greater words of one of our own poets, slightly paraphrased, in order—

That the great light be clearer for its light,
And the great soul the stronger for its soul.