

CREATIVE MOMENTS IN THE CULTURE OF THE MARITIME PROVINCES*

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I

TWICE in the history of the Maritime Provinces literary works have appeared that in retrospect can be seen to have marked the beginning of developments of high significance to Canada's cultural growth. The first of these was *The Clock-maker* by Thomas Chandler Haliburton, which was published in Halifax in 1836. Forty-four years later, in the neighboring province of New Brunswick Charles G. D. Roberts published *Orion and Other Poems*, which he had written while he was a student at the University of New Brunswick and which appeared in the year following his graduation with honours from that institution. Haliburton's tales of Sam Slick enjoyed an immediate and wide popularity on both sides of the Atlantic, running ultimately to over one hundred editions, and being translated, before the century was out, into several European languages. Although Roberts' first volume of poems enjoyed no such vogue, it has long been recognized by students of Canadian literature as the earliest expression of a note that was then new to this country but which came to dominate Canadian poetry for almost half a century afterwards. It inspired Archibald Lampman, then an undergraduate in Toronto, with high hopes for the future of Canadian letters. No one can read Lampman's account of the excitement with which he was seized on reading *Orion* without realizing what it meant to the young men of that time and without becoming aware of the seminal influence that Roberts' work exerted upon the subsequent cultural development of this Dominion.

Although a French critic of the middle of the 19th century expressed astonishment that Haliburton did not indulge in the current mode by composing Romantic descriptions of the Nova Scotian landscape, modern students of Canadian history appear to accept without question the phenomena of a Howe and a Haliburton. In the light of recent researches into the social and intellectual life of Nova Scotia the achievements of these two men in the fields of politics and literature occasion

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no surprise. V. L. O. Chittick has given us the definitive study of Haliburton, and the writings of Roy Palmer Baker have thrown much light on the early literary movements of the Maritime Provinces. Above all we are indebted to Dr. D. C. Harvey, whose articles in the DALHOUSIE REVIEW and elsewhere, have shown the spacious days of Haliburton and Howe to have been the logical culmination of a prior intellectual awakening experienced by Nova Scotia during and immediately following the Wars of the French Revolution and of the era of Napoleon.

No such light has yet been shed upon the social and intellectual milieu out of which Roberts and Bliss Carman emerged. The numerous eulogies and the few serious biographical studies of these authors both fail to sketch more than the haziest of backgrounds, in which the observer can see nothing but the looming figures of Canon Roberts and George R. Parkin moving mysteriously out of the shadows. If one did not guess that the hand of Thomas Carlyle lay heavy upon these belated exemplars of romantic individualism, one might be tempted to suspect the deliberate fabrication of a myth. No historian or sociologist has yet undertaken the task of research into the origins of the Fredericton School of Poets, and it is therefore not surprising that a profound misconception has existed in the minds of eminent scholars, as well as the general reading public, concerning the nature of these origins. In his otherwise admirable study of the poetry of Carman, James Cappon noted in passing that Fredericton was the seat of a small university. He neglected to mention that Carman had been a student at this university during the most formative years of his life, and that he found it congenial and stimulating enough to return to it later for post-graduate study. In 1943 Pelham Edgar, in reviewing a recently published biography of Sir Charles Roberts, was misled into remarking of Roberts' formal education "that at the Collegiate School, and during his three years (1876-1879) at the University of New Brunswick, there is not a great deal to be said. The staffs were not noteworthy in the scholarly sense, and we may assume that the standards were not, on a comparative estimate, high." The Canadian historian who casts about for adequate studies that would render intelligible the creative moment of 1880 in the cultural development of New Brunswick and of Canada finds none and is naturally baffled in his attempt to explain the phenomenon. Professor A. R. M. Lower may therefore be forgiven for writing in his book *Colony to Nation* that "curiously

enough it was the sterile soil of New Brunswick which bred the Roberts family and their relative Bliss Carman."

II

In view of these quotations and of the widespread point of view which they epitomize, it becomes a matter of some moment to search for an explanation of the occurrence of the Fredericton school of poets that does not do violence to the major sociological findings of the last fifty years. It will be useful also, and necessary to our purpose, to compare the movement in New Brunswick in the eighties with that of Nova Scotia in the thirties and forties of the last century, and to attempt to account for the differences in character that mark them off from each other. It is to be hoped that such an exercise as this will yield the answer to the question as to why New Brunswick came only in 1880 to the point analogous to 1836 in Nova Scotia's development. It seems safe to assume at the outset that such a difference in timing is a factor of significance to our enquiry, since we are avowedly eschewing the romantic notion that sociocultural phenomena are the result of spontaneous generation. On the contrary, some acquaintance with the culture of primitive peoples, as well as with the rise and decline of ancient and modern nations, has convinced me that it is necessary for societal elements to coalesce into differentiated and fluid patterns, that communities that emerge by virtue of the formation of these patterns must experience mounting tensions through the polarity of their parts, if there is to be a discharge of creative energy in any field of endeavour. At the creative moment the interacting elements out of which the society is composed are suddenly transcended, and a proliferation of forms ensues that are new and different from any that could have appeared at an earlier period in the community's course. Like metropolitan societies, which tend to be worlds-in-themselves, small communities must become as mature as their narrow limits allow before they can fulfil the purpose that is within them.

No such communities emerged, or (given the conditions of the time) could have emerged in the Maritime Provinces before the opening of the nineteenth century. Forces of discontinuity and dispersion have tended to inhibit the growth of these provinces throughout their entire history. There was no significant and lasting continuity between the aboriginal

society and that of the incoming Europeans. Although visited early, Acadia was long neglected in favour of neighbouring areas, partly for fortuitous reasons and partly because the French and the English, in their drive to possess the continent and to exploit its resources, found promise of more ample rewards elsewhere. Through the establishment of their strong outposts in New England, Virginia, and the West Indies, the English began in the 17th century to lay the foundations for a commercial empire in the North Atlantic, and when they wrested the valley of the Hudson from the Dutch they accelerated the thrust into the western fur-bearing areas that left Acadia outflanked and far behind. The French, too, were not long in discovering that the successful pursuit of the fur trade demanded the establishment of bases on the St. Lawrence, and it was there that their main colonial and commercial efforts were made. Their remote fishing stations on the Acadian coast survived the official colonizing ventures of Monts and Champlain, but they could not become important strongholds of French enterprise in the New World as the fishing technique later developed by the French did not demand the establishment of agricultural settlements in Acadia to serve as sources of supply for their fleets. For the sake of neither fish nor furs did the French form large permanent communities in Acadia. In other circumstances it might have been expected that the River St. John, which ran for hundreds of miles through north-western Acadia and, among the rivers on the Atlantic seaboard, was exceeded in size only by the St. Lawrence and possibly the Susquehanna, would have served the French as a highway of commerce and a focus of settlement. But this extensive river basin was outflanked by the St. Lawrence as a means of access to the northern fur-bearing country, and its headwaters could actually be reached more easily by a short journey south from the St. Lawrence than by the long ascent of the St. John itself. So tenuous was the hold of the French upon it that, a hundred years after Champlain had discovered its mouth, it was virtually abandoned, and remained so for a quarter of a century. Frequently throughout the 17th century the French lost Acadia to the English, and even on occasion to the Scots or Dutch. They failed to integrate it into their Atlantic economy, and it remained neglected, underpopulated, and remote from the main theatres of imperialist enterprise.

As the century drew to a close, however, two circumstances combined to enhance the importance of Acadia. One was

the expansion of New England into the northeast, which was prompted by the need for settlements closer to the fishing grounds that lay off the Acadian coast. The other was the strategic value of Acadia as a potential naval base from which to dominate the northwest Atlantic, including the approaches to the gulf of St. Lawrence and to the Atlantic seaboard. Because the French and English empires in America were by 1689 converging upon each other and because of the intensification of Anglo-French rivalry in Europe and on the high seas the sovereignty of the Acadian peninsula became a matter of concern to the English. Its conquest by the British in 1710 made possible by French neglect of sea power and their squandering of blood and treasure in a vain attempt to satisfy Louis XIV's insatiable dynastic ambitions, placed the Acadian settlements under alien rule. These people, who had survived the vicissitudes of colonial life, found themselves during the long period from 1713 to 1740 neglected by the English, as they had been by the French. Although in the course of their history they had become a community marked by distinctive traits, their situation on the flank of two rival empires was in reality one of great insecurity, and with the renewal of warfare in the mid-century, which stemmed in some part from the heightening pressure of New England against Acadia, they suffered the blow from which they have never entirely recovered, at least in a psychological sense. The Expulsion of 1755, and after, not only shattered the pattern of Acadian community life: it removed the majority of the people themselves bodily from the scene. Those who managed to evade expulsion, together with those who returned to fight on a later day in "the battle of the cradle" have, for all their fine qualities, made no contribution to French Canadian culture comparable to those with which we are here concerned. As a peasant people they were quite different from the enterprising Yankee with his enquiring mind, his political acumen, and his cultivation of the intellectual virtues, and it is therefore doubtful whether the Acadians would have developed the kind of social dynamic that was necessary to high accomplishment in the field of literature, had they been allowed to remain in possession of their homes. Nevertheless their removal meant that the social processes had to be commenced anew. The rejection of the aboriginal way of life and the obliteration of the Indian culture had been a foregone conclusion. With the expulsion of the Acadians in the middle of the eighteenth century a hundred

and fifty years of persistent social growth was destroyed, and the province was left less like a palimpsest than like a slate that had been wiped clean.

III

The effective beginning of the modern organized communities of the Maritime Provinces was thus delayed until the founding of Halifax in 1749, the immigration of the Yankees at the end of the Seven Years War, and the sudden inundation of the Loyalist refugees at the close of the American revolution. In these events for the first time lay the possibility of a diversified economy based upon a variety of skills and techniques capable of utilizing such resources as lay at hand and of capitalizing upon the Province's position in the commercial empire of the Atlantic. Here too was the promise of political growth and of an evolution of self-consciousness that would seek and ultimately find a measure of self-expression. All this, however, would take time, and during the War of Independence there was clear evidence of the immaturity of Nova Scotia. It had not yet achieved a singleness of purpose, and the neutrality to which the majority of the Yankees tried to adhere showed the measure of its weakness. Even after the Loyalist migration the fundamental weakness of Maritime life became strikingly evident. Students of the subject are accustomed to contrast the institutions of the geographically scattered Maritime area with the centralized style of those of the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes system. The Maritime world of islands, peninsulas, and river valleys, lacking a single entrance or unifying principle, has always been unusually divided against itself, and from the earliest times to the twentieth century it has bred small-scale competition and cross purposes. The organization of the fishing industry, operated from many different bases in Old and New England, and in Nova Scotia itself, reinforced the particularism of the area and stimulated many rivalries, of which that between Halifax and the outports was only the most conspicuous, and which continued even after the diversionary pull of New England was relaxed at the end of the War of Independence.

Up to this point we have been stressing the forces that retarded the development of an integrated and purposeful community in Nova Scotia, but these very conditions were to contribute to the challenge to which the province would respond

successfully during the first half of the 19th century. When the British government, for reasons that are well known, dismembered Nova Scotia in 1784, the peninsular remnant was sufficiently homogeneous and aggressive to follow the star of its own peculiar destiny. It contained the oldest and most populous part of the province, and while the Scots were filling up Cape Breton and the eastern shore, Yankee and Loyalist elements were gradually conquering their distrust of each other. The central districts comprised a narrow area—too narrow, it might be thought, to father great achievement—but the memory of the Dutch Republic warns us of the danger of accepting without reserve the generalization that “small countries make small people.” It was this area more than any of the others, even the Scottish districts, that furnished the enterprise and intelligence that were to carry the Province forward to the climax of the 'thirties and 'forties.

The fivefold increase in population from 1784 to 1837 was accompanied by an accumulation of capital derived from a widening range of sources that included the increasingly effective utilization of natural products, skilled craftsmanship in the minor arts and in shipbuilding, and privateering and commerce on the high seas. The navigators returned enriched in experience from abroad, and the merchants, as Dr. Harvey has written, “were forced by the nature of their vocations to examine provincial and international conditions,” and were thus “the first to break through traditional modes of thought, to arrive at intelligent conclusions” as to policy, and to raise demands for economic and political reform. Correlated with this was the impulse to enlarge the means of intelligence through the establishment of schools, colleges, libraries, museums, newspapers, and magazines, and through public debate in the assembly. While King's College at Windsor was cultivating an interest in letters and refining literary tastes, the illiteracy of many of the Gaelic-speaking Scots in eastern Nova Scotia was awakening in Thomas McCulloch a zeal for the spread of education that was to result in the founding of Pictou Academy and the inception of a distinguished tradition of scholarship. By 1828, when Howe acquired the *Novascotian* and began his career as a journalist the province was responding in full stature to the importunities and possibilities of the age.

By 1828, also, settlement had been rounded out and the period of social adjustment in a new environment was over. Nova Scotia was at a turning point, but there was only one

direction in which the province could turn if it was to avoid the stultifying consequences of irresponsible government and of subordination to a distant metropolis. The great challenge that came to it at this moment was political in nature. The destruction of the entrenched position of the Halifax oligarchy in the provincial executive would mean not only the achievement of a larger measure of political democracy, but also a position of imperial partnership within the limits of which Nova Scotia would emerge as a new British nation in the western hemisphere. It was to the accomplishment of this twofold task that Joseph Howe and his associates addressed themselves with all the confidence that they could imbibe from the vibrant life around them. Howe's poems tend to derive in form, and to some extent in feeling, from an application to provincial subjects of an 18th century style, but his political statements, in editorials, letters, and addresses, strike a new, terse, and trenchant note that was born of his courageous temper, his forthright intelligence, and pungent wit. In the heat of political battle his spirit soared. In a six-hour speech in his own defence against a charge of libel, he vindicated the principle of the freedom of the press in 1835. In the following year Haliburton published *The Clockmaker*. Three years later still, Howe addressed his famous letters to Lord John Russell. Truly it may be said that in these years the creative forces at work for some time past in the provincial body politic were caught up and transfigured by Howe and his brothers in arms. He, and Haliburton in his own manner, had become masters of the political and literary media with which they worked. That they were contemporaries was no accident, and they were not eminent exceptions to a prevailing mediocrity. They were merely the brightest stars in a numerous constellation.

Their works were essentially political in nature because they were forms of response to a political challenge. Haliburton was no less a Nova Scotian for being a Tory than was Howe, but his Windsor and Kings College background, and his temperament, which was so fully conditioned by it, bred in him a degree of urbanity and detachment that were quite foreign to Howe. He was able to stand aside and castigate his fellow countrymen in the satires and caricatures through which he hoped to spur them on to greater achievement. In doing this he was turning upon himself, for the satirist must experience an identity with what he satirizes. In this way, paradoxically, and in more than a figurative sense, the satir-

ized society is the author of the satire. He was schooled to a sharp perception of the weaknesses and foibles of character and the detachment of the provincial Tory made possible the kind of literary creation for which he is memorable. His style was wrought from the characteristic political journalism that the issues of the time and place called forth, together with certain obscure American influences that modern scholarship has been able to identify. The result was quite unlike anything else and was strikingly at variance with prevailing metropolitan styles. It was the highest literary creation that Nova Scotia was to produce.

In his later writings, Haliburton maintained his distinctive qualities, and perhaps perfected some of them, but he contributed nothing fundamentally new or different. To some extent he imitated himself, and other such satirists, if they had appeared, could have done likewise. But it may be supposed that the style would have become repetitive and therefore progressively sterile. It began with the selection of one of several possible styles, and once the commitment had been made, the range of variation irrevocably narrowed. A new style could come only from new and very different circumstances and these were not to appear when the promise that had brought forth Howe and Haliburton had been fulfilled. With the achievement of responsible government in 1848, Howe too had done what he had been given to do. Only thus can one account for the falterings and confusions of his later career. Confederation has been made a scapegoat for far-flung and complex changes in industrial techniques and their political consequences which left the Maritime Provinces isolated on the periphery of a continental economy to which they were in due course made tributary. It is doubtful if much else could have happened to them, and in any case the pattern of political and cultural life was beginning to re-form on a wider basis than could be contained within the bounds of a single province. In the moment of their greatest intensity the conditions that had subsumed these characteristic expressions of Nova Scotian life inevitably passed away.

IV

The development in New Brunswick that culminated in the Fredericton school of poets was entirely different. The

passing of both provinces through analogous political stages in the nineteenth century should not obscure how entirely different it really was. It will be instructive to pause for a moment to compare the time-frame of Nova Scotia with that of the neighbouring province. *The Clockmaker* was published 87 years after the founding of Halifax in 1749. Charles G. D. Roberts' *Orion* appeared 97 years after the founding of Fredericton in 1783. The span of time between the two periods of creativity can thus be explained in part by the later formation of an effective community in New Brunswick, but the longer period of incubation in the latter was due to peculiarities of the local scene that have a bearing on the problem. For one thing the geographical and social particularism of the Maritimes as a whole was accentuated in New Brunswick, where the inhabitants of each river valley tended to develop a separate life of their own. More than half a century after the founding of the Province, the Madawaska district was still almost totally isolated from the others, and the settlements on the North Shore until a comparatively late date had few intimate contacts with those of the Bay of Fundy and the rivers that flowed into it. Moreover, the growth of the Loyalist community of the St. John valley was retarded by the reversion to primitive conditions imposed by the exigencies of settlement in the wilderness, and the community was out of touch with the rest of the Province. In addition, the city of Saint John, rather than Fredericton, grew to be the commercial metropolis, and thus the capital could never dominate New Brunswick as Halifax did Nova Scotia. Fredericton remained a small community, but the one in which the Loyalist pattern was longest preserved, and it was here that the cultural tradition that had had its inception in Loyalist times was to flower belatedly in the writings of Carman, C. G. D. Roberts, Theodore Goodridge Roberts, Sherman, and others. The creative impulse of the Nova Scotian writers had sprung from the life of an entire province. The Frederictonians were impelled to create by the impact of English Romantic nature poetry and Darwinian science upon the slowly formed but increasingly receptive intellectual heritage of a sharply restricted community. It was here, during the greater part of the nineteenth century that intellectual excellence was sought, and class distinctions were maintained. Elsewhere agriculture was disrupted and an ordered social existence rendered impossible by the lawless and speculative spirit of the timber trade. This spirit both

animated and debased almost every other part of a Province that was to have been "the most gentlemanlike on earth." The rise of the timber trade after 1816 tended in most areas to engulf gentility in a sudden wave of unaccustomed prosperity, but the Fredericton bureaucracy, before it lost control of the casual and territorial revenue in 1837, could enjoy the fruits of that prosperity without having its good manners corrupted. The expansion of the trade brought hordes of poverty-stricken Irish to New Brunswick, decimated the forests, and bled the province of its wealth, but provided a modicum of revenue for the support of the little body of civil servants, lawyers, judges, clergymen and professors who made up the governing class of the capital. These Anglicans and Tories survived the loss of their political dominance because the establishment of responsible government was delayed in New Brunswick, and did not, in any case, mean as sharp a break when it did come as was the case elsewhere. Moreover, it was a closely knit company of experts and adepts in administration, education, and religion, and the Province continued to depend upon it for some of these services until long after Confederation just as it had in the early days of "Family Compact" rule. To this circle of professional people the Carman and Roberts families belonged.

In the education of its members and in the formation of their literary standards and tastes the University in Fredericton played a part that can hardly be exaggerated. This institution had had a long history, as long as any in what is now Canada. It had been projected back in 1783 by a group of New York Loyalists before the migration. The one college that was to have been founded in Nova Scotia necessarily became two when New Brunswick was made into a separate province. Kings College at Windsor, N. S., and the College of New Brunswick were thus coeval and stemmed from the same source. The institution at Fredericton was open at least two years before the Nova Scotian college received its first charter in 1789, but it was not incorporated until 1800. Among its founders were Ward Chipman, Edward Winslow, Chief Justice Ludlow, late of the Supreme Court of New York, and others of high distinction in the old colonies. They included Jonathan Odell, the leading Tory satirist of the American Revolution, whose literary propensities helped indirectly to form the tradition in which Carman and Roberts were nurtured. The slow growth of the college that they inaugurated, thus

early was symptomatic of the fact that there was not then a sufficiently mature economic and social foundation for the province's institutional superstructure, but by 1826, when it acquired a new charter and the new name of "King's College, New Brunswick," it could look forward to an expanded programme of studies on a firmer basis. The bitter sectarian and self-styled reformist attacks upon it in the 'forties and 'fifties have diverted attention from its high standard of scholarship and the intelligent direction and leadership given by the members of the faculty in many spheres of provincial life. James Robb, Professor of Chemistry and Natural History, who was already well-known in European scientific circles when he came to Fredericton from Scotland in 1837, was a geologist of note, and New Brunswick's first systematic botanist. Through his encouragement of agriculture and home manufactures he hoped to wean the province away from too exclusive a dependence upon an industry that in the 'forties seemed shattered by the repeal of the Imperial timber duties. This was but one aspect of a concerted effort to conquer the pessimism of the moment by inaugurating a more diversified and self-sufficient economy, and to achieve that sense of community that had always been weaker in New Brunswick than in Nova Scotia. The old Loyalist attitude of dependence on the Mother Country had been accentuated by the almost exclusive reliance of the province on the British timber market during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Now for the first time, during the government of Sir Edmund Head, with the prospect of railway communications and reciprocity with the United States, with the initiation of new industries and the inauguration of responsible government, the whole society of the province gathered momentum, constructive energies were released, and a vigorous and self-reliant outlook took possession of its people.

Out of the new mood of confidence and the surer grasp of the times came the great educational reforms that involved the recreation of King's College in 1859 as the University of New Brunswick, on a non-sectarian basis, and with an expanded curriculum of studies in letters and the sciences. Already in 1848 Baron d'Avray had founded the first provincial normal school, and as newspaper editor, chief superintendent of education, and professor of modern languages at the university he gave an impetus to scholarship that bore fruit in the creative achievements of the poets. Sir George Parkin and the father

of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, to whom the poets acknowledged their greatest debt, were among his students in English and French literature. His romantic background, his fresh and vigorous English, his fine sense of what was best in the literature of Europe, and his "charming dry wit" were sources of inspiration that these men handed on to their successors. He was one of a distinguished company that included some of the greatest teachers in the history of a province where teaching was practiced as an art. Edwin Jacob, James Robb, George Roberts, William Brydone-Jack, Montgomery Campbell, George E. Foster, Henry Seabury Bridges, and their colleagues, were not the mediocrities that reviewers and writers of superficial biographies would have us believe. Parkin testified otherwise when he wrote to Loring Bailey years later that in all his wanderings he had "seldom found social surroundings and intellectual influences more helpful and inspiring. "There was," he said, "an old-fashioned courtesy and dignity—a real interest in things of the mind and spirit" in the University circle of Fredericton in the days of his youth. Far from being a curious and inexplicable growth from a sterile soil, the poetry of Fredericton represented the flowering of a tradition that had been four generations in the making on the banks of the St. John; and behind that, across the divide of the Revolution, lay the colonial centuries.

The scholars provided the intellectual preparation without which the poetry could not have been written. Parkin's return from Oxford in 1875, with a novel and exciting message, provided the moment of inspiration. One can only guess at this late day as to the "spiritual circumstance" that caused the hearts of Roberts and Carman to beat faster at the sensuous images of Keats and the pre-Raphaelite poets. An ill-defined deism inherited from the Enlightenment, reinforced by the Darwinian thesis, may have instilled in them a sense of loss that the poetry helped to assuage. It could have given them another kind of hope that led them later to Emerson. But their first elegiac poems of nature were conceived in the long twilight of a governing class whose political ideals had never been fulfilled. Howe and Haliburton had met a political challenge emanating from the body of their provincial society. Carman and Roberts experienced a crisis of the spirit after the political battle had been lost, and something of the world along with it. In the realistic prose of the Nova Scotians Man had been the argument, but in the poetry of the pagan land-

scape and the New Brunswick woodland Nature had taken his place. There was a mood in which Roberts could sing the praises of the new nation whose birth Howe had opposed. Reared in a province that had always been more continental in outlook than Nova Scotia, it is extraordinary that no students of his work have remarked upon the fact that Roberts graduated from college in the year of triumph of Sir John Macdonald's National Policy. But the most distinctive thing about the new poetry was the intimation of spiritual renewal that its authors caught from the wooded valleys and seascapes of the land where they were born. The origin of the school of poetry that began Canada's first national literary movement is worthy of examination by all those who are concerned to read with serious intent the pages of their country's history.