

THE WATCHED POT OF CANADIAN POETRY

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ANY study of Canadian poetry is not greatly hampered by tradition—rather more by the lack of it. Older and larger countries find it so easy to be definite and final in their verdicts. They assemble each year's aspirants for literary honours beside the giants of the past, and very effectually place them where they should be. We have, in prose, our *Sam Slick* and the *Golden Dog*, and no one can say we do not make the most of them; but in poetry we have a curious situation. We have no proper past, no heroic dead-and-gone figures to hold up before the young. Isabella Valancy Crawford, our outstanding early poet, was born just ten years before Charles G. D. Roberts, who belongs, chronologically at least, very much to the present. Consider the impoverished state of a country that has to depend chiefly for inspiration on artists who are still above ground, or who must be reckoned, at least, as contemporaries!

Canada has always been over anxious, perhaps, about her literature. Watched pots are exasperatingly slow to boil. As far back as 1887, when the Dominion was a bare twenty years old, critics were piling chips on the fire and bewailing the dearth of native literature. Mercer Adam wrote regretfully: "With Confederation Canadian literature burst into blossom, but the fruit, it must be said, has not quite borne out its springtime promise. For a time literary enterprise felt the glow of national aspiration and the quickening of new birth. But the flush on its face ere long passed off, and mental activity once more engrossed itself with material affairs".

He proceeds, in an article called *The Disesteem of Canadian Literature*, to prescribe for the infant Dominion, then engaged in the trivial tasks of discovery and development of its virgin resources, hushing up the Canadian Pacific Railway scandal, settling its fishery questions, suppressing rebellions and trying to bring about a semblance of political harmony between those somewhat clamorous and unruly provinces that had come into the union. Mr. Adam says: "What is wanted to help our nascent literature is a greater infusion into it of patriotic feeling and, among the people,

a wider diffusion of national sentiment. But we must not conceal from ourselves our weakness. We are a young, and as yet far from self-reliant people. For our own good, it is to be feared, we have been too long in a state of pupilage and of dependence, intellectual as well as political, on others. This has bred not only mistrust of ourselves, but disesteem of our literature."

We were a young nation in 1887, hopefully waiting for the time when we should burst over-night into the full bloom of maturity. We are still waiting, and we are still young. Literature is a plant of such slow growth! It cannot be forced. Even if we had reached full stature, how could we expect, out of our slender population, to see a rich flowering of genius? The percentage of great minds in thickly populated lands makes a small enough showing. Miracles do happen, but it is foolish to count on them.

The poetry of a country has a value, it seems, entirely separate from its quality as art. Early folk songs, however naive and unlettered, that have grown out of the life of a people and become a part of them, may not be literature, but they have a place that must be recognized. The word *literature* has two interpretations. It may refer to what is sometimes classified in libraries as Good Literature, meaning that its value has been recognized and accepted by the proper authorities as worthy of study. It may indicate the accumulation of native folk tales and songs, all the imaginative expression of a country which has survived over a period of years, with no regard for artistic merit.

The older provinces of Canada have begun to discover the importance of this literature. New Brunswick and Nova Scotia have always been inoculated with the rhyming virus. Every local calamity, every notable event in early days, brought on a fresh eruption of verse. We find it on old tomb-stones, in county histories, among yellowed papers in almost any house which still boasts an attic. It is a weakness which may quite safely be traced back to the Loyalists. We can scarcely picture the other groups of settlers, the practical Yorkshiremen, the dour Pictou Scots, the thrifty Lunenburg Germans, bequeathing such a legacy. There had been an outbreak of verse, a sort of battle in satirical rhyme, carried on in the American Colonies during the Revolution, some of it on both sides, incredibly vitriolic. Three of the most fluent of the versifiers had come as refugees to Nova Scotia, and the seed was sown.

Grace Helen Mowatt has unearthed an old manuscript among her family papers, which is less polished than the Loyalist poetry we have preserved, but more revealing. She prints it in her *Di-*

verting *History of a Loyalist Town*. It is called *The Loyalist*, and related the writer's experiences after the Empire was "rent asunder":

I then forsook my native home
Where I had been a lodger,
And in New Brunswick joined my fate
With many a toilworn soldier.

He goes on with the dramatic story of "grim winter's fierce, protracted reign," of how "lank hunger raised his pinching hand":

My children called aloud for bread,
Alas I'd none to give them.
I ranged the woods, I scooped the flood
For something to relieve them.

He sounds a different note from the despairing nostalgia which has characterized Loyalist writing. One emigré, at least, became reconciled. "Hard-hearted want at length retired", "smiling plenty" took its place, and the story has a happy ending. A human document like this makes more of a contribution to the literary history of Canada than the sterile imitations of Pope and Dryden which have come down to us from that period. No young country can afford to sniff at her folk poetry. It is the legitimate foundation for a native literature.

Writing poetry was everybody's business in the Maritime Provinces in the old days. Will R. Bird tells of one well-known, highly prosperous figure, Amos Seaman of Minudie, a son of Loyalists, who put his talent to practical use. He had forty-nine tenants and a number of hired hands. To communicate with them, he erected at the cross-roads in the village a large message box. "In it he left written instructions and notices about rents due, and dykes requiring repairs. Always the message was in rough rhyme". When he met a farmer on the trail, he would stop his horse, sit awhile in thought and then produce an appropriate verse. He would ride on with no more words. His diary has preserved a good many of his quaint rhymes, one in particular to celebrate every birthday.

Helen Creighton, in her *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*, has succeeded, with great pains and patience, in digging up an interesting collection of native ballads, telling tales of shipwreck, murder, children lost in the woods, all the stirring drama of pioneer days. Similar home-made songs exist in back settlements in every province in the Dominion. The great Miramichi Fire in New Brunswick, in 1825, called out a typical one beginning:

For this is the truth what I now tell you,
 For mine eyes in part did see
 What did happen to the people
 On the banks of the Miramichi.

Angus McAskill, the Cape Breton giant, who is on the way to becoming one of the most delightful figures in Canadian folklore, is the hero of a more recent ballad, with a dramatic quality and a genuinely native flavor. In it Stuart McCawley tells of how the giant outwitted the McLeods, who had asked his help in pulling a large fishing-boat inshore, plotting to pull against him and then, with one final jerk, to upset him in the water:

At the heave and the strain
 The McLeods braced again
 With the ebb of the tide giving help to their side;
 Not a foot or an inch did they budge her,
 For McAskill was having his fun,
 (He enjoyed their grunting and gouching)
 Then he took a fresh grip
 Of the bow of that ship,
 And tore her in two,
 Left the stern with the crew,
 And ran up the strand
 With the prow in his hand.

Regarded not too critically as a record of the nation's growth, and not altogether as an artistic accomplishment, there is much in the literature of our past that enriches the present. Mr. Adam may have been right in blaming colonialism rather than immaturity and pioneer preoccupations for our dearth of creative activity in his day; but in poetry Canada was doing her share, in proportion to population, compared with the output of verse in the United States or even England. Dr. J. D. Logan, in dividing our literary history into periods, gives us a "decadent interim", which he calls, ingeniously, the Vaudeville period. It comes near to coinciding with an equally arid interval in the United States, when it was quite generally believed that the art of writing poetry had died a natural death. (And just as well that it had! Why attempt to revive it, when anything done by contemporary writers was bound to look like doggerel after the lofty inspiration of Tennyson or the lilting music of the Lake poets?) And it was close to the Aesthetic Movement in England, represented by elegant and affected young men like Oscar Wilde, and engagingly satirized in *Patience*.

Poetry was no longer one of the vital arts, a throbbing part of the nation's bone and sinew. Even to acknowledge a liking for

it might be effete and, in a man, effeminate. Canadians as well as Americans were beginning to be conscious of a change and upheaval in their secure world, a change in which poetry, as it was, had no part. All the verse of the time could offer was a retreat into some sweet-scented, mythical Araby or Astalot, comfortably remote from coarse and difficult problems of living. Walt Whitman was to be a fresh breath in the stagnant air, bringing poetry back to lusty, everyday life, but his influence was slow in being felt. Kipling played his part later. Among the first indications of any shaking among the dry bones was *Songs from Vagabondia*, by Bliss Carman and Richard Hovey.

We need some comprehension of that sterile period to understand the impact which the Carman-Roberts group made on Canadian life. We are too far from the revelation of their first effulgence to appreciate it, and not far enough to get a proper perspective. Our reaction to them is affected to some degree by our having had them crammed down our throats by over-enthusiastic or patriotic teachers. But surely we have enough imagination to realize what it meant, after being surfeited with foreign words and allusions in literature, fed and nourished on the mavis and nightingale, on the primrose and eglantine, and the whole, exotic flora and fauna of the English countryside, to come suddenly on something that had a meaning. What a joy it must have been to our fathers to see the familiar names they knew dignified in poetry! No wonder they were carried away by Carman's salt-flavored songs of schooners "snoring down the Bay of Fundy", of the Minas coasting fleet, white fogs and swinging tides in the gray port of Saint John. But the sea had a recognized romantic value, and it must have been even more exciting to find the homely, common things they loved glorified in Charles G. D. Roberts's sonnets—buckwheat fields, bare, salt flats, burnt lands, herring-weirs. His sower, it is true, is a "plodding churl" treading a "glebe", and his pigeons feed in a "croft"; but he cannot help writing some genuine poetry, and he cannot quite change our country into a Millet landscape. The

brown, sad-colored hillsides, where the soil
Fresh from the frequent harrow, deep and fine,
Lies bare;

are still the Maritime Provinces. So is the shore where

Stealthily in the old reluctant way
The bare flats are uncovered mile on mile,
To glitter in the sun a golden while.

And the scene in *Potato Harvest* is movingly and unmistakably native, in spite of the fact that the potato-cart becomes, ludicrously, a "wain".

However we may estimate the complete works of Roberts and Carman to-day, it is easy to explain how they came to be elevated to a pedestal from which, for many, they can never fall. And because poetry has a way of weaving itself into the very fibre of a country, there is no denying the part they have played in the life of the Dominion. They, along with Lampman, Wilfred Campbell and the two Scotts have been lauded, quoted and re-quoted and diligently studied in text-books. Their work, as we look back now, seems curiously off the same piece. They all wrote a great deal about nature, which was to be expected in a new country where the seasons, as someone suggests, have a way of thrusting themselves dramatically upon us, demanding attention. They were all more or less colonial, leaning heavily on the established traditions of the Motherland, convinced of their own audacity in attempting to break new ground in Canadian themes, by no means sure that our homespun words had poetic value. We must not blame them too much when they lack originality. There were no poetic experimentalists then, no pronounced individualists. And there was still a definitely poetic language—words considered tremendously effective in poetry that no one would have been caught using in everyday speech, such as "azure", "zephyr", "swoon", "supernal" and "vernal". There was no literary precedent for substituting "spruce" and "hacmatac" for the "storied oak", "rooster" for "cock", the call of the loon for Philomel's voice, or blueberry barrens for the English heath.

These early poets have been responsible for some fine nature poems by later writers; but they must also take the credit for that treacle-sweet stream of lyrical verse, rhapsodizing on "apple blossom time", the "blackbird's burnished wing", "elfin bells" and "the souls of violets". They were the progenitors too of another tendency in Canadian poetry of the time—what Lionel Stevenson calls "a more intimate sense of kinship with nature". He blames it all on the evolution theory. "Since man was shown to be no longer a superior being, created to enjoy the submission of all other creatures, but had been shaped by the selfsame forces from the selfsame matter, he felt himself a brother to the beast and flower, for like them he was a son of the Ancient Mother Earth". As Bertrand Russell would say, man had dwindled.

Wherever the bright thought originated, the "orphaned poets", as we might call them, rang the changes on it tirelessly. Lampman never thought of the earth except as "the great mother heart":

Our broad strong mother, the ancient earth,
 Mother of all things beautiful and blameless,
 Mother of hopes that her strength makes tameless. . . .

Charles G. D. Roberts sings valiantly:

Fighting at last I have fallen, and sought the breast of the
 mother:

and pleads:

Back to wisdom take me, mother,
 Comfort me with kindred hands.

Wilfred Campbell in *Earth* apostrophizes the "Swart Mother" from whom all life flows. Frederick George Scott and Duncan Campbell Scott have a similar obsession. Bliss Carman goes further, and with a sweeping gesture begs to be mothered by almost anything, "Mother April", "Canada, great nurse and mother," the sea,

Beautiful, weariless mother of mine,
 In the drift of doom I am here, I am thine,

and so on and on. He is the one most given to carrying the kinship with nature from the physical to the spiritual.

Some critics can read a good deal of "metaphysical questing" and deep insight into this phase of Canadian poetry. V. B. Rhodenizer is impressed by Roberts's speculations on "cosmic processes". Lionel Stevenson considers at length the poets' doctrines and theories, quoting pompous and quite meaningless phrases like "the august infinitude of man". What seems probable is that that group of writers was more concerned over discovering a fresh approach to a hackneyed subject than in "the unconditioned world-soul". It was not a bad idea they had at first, but it was like an outbreak of measles. Once it had started, it was hard to check. It keeps bobbing up in unexpected places yet, and not only in our own poetry. Edna St. Vincent Millay, in her third sonnet in *Fatal Interview*, speaks of "being like my mother the brown earth", and no one has ever accused her of being serious about Pantheism.

There are serious drawbacks to the study of Canadian poetry. One might be a lack of unanimity among critics. We have almost no fixed values so far. One authority regards Carman as our greatest poet, another Roberts, another puts Marjorie Pickthall above them all. One group proclaims Wilson McDonald as our "poet laureate", and another pins the label on the Newfoundland-Canadian E. J. Pratt. It is most confusing. Too many slender books of

verse have been hailed as genius, for the laurel and bay to be taken seriously. What we need in Canada, and always have needed, is ruthless irreverent criticism. Our reviewers in general, in prose or verse, have been too kind, too ready to measure native efforts by native instead of universal standards. We might also pray for more discrimination in our anthologists.

There is some difficulty too in assembling the poetry of Canada to be studied. We have always, even in the "decadent interim", had an abundance of verse-writers out of all proportion to the work produced. Our anthologies are remarkable less for the quality of content than for the number of writers represented. Charles Garvin considered seventy-five poets worthy to be immortalized in his *Canadian Poets* in 1926. Eliza Ritchie selected forty-nine contributors for her *Songs of the Maritimes*, five years later. One of the recent modest little Yearbooks of the Montreal Branch of the Canadian Authors' Association contains forty names. Our bards are on the increase. A few contrive, even in these difficult times, to get their collected work between covers, but the bulk of contemporary Canadian verse is scattered anywhere and everywhere, in the pages of our magazines, the columns of our newspapers. And every once in a while some unknown appears with a disconcertingly good poem—as good as those we have been accustomed to quote and praise.

Our earliest poets had so little to sing about! They were too near to pioneering days to see their value, with some exceptions, as in *Malcom's Katie*. Religion was a field that had been pretty well covered. Love has always been a difficult theme in this country. If it is a genuine passion, it means that the writer must give too much of himself away. Love in our poetry has been, mostly, a genteel emotion on a purified, ethereal plane. There was only nature left. The farm offered material, but it was a prettified farm life, not the kind Raymond Knister pictured in his verse. Unthinkable that pigs should decorate the pages of literature!

Canadian poetry has been growing gradually more individualized. No one would be likely to take E. J. Pratt's work for Robert Norwood's, or either for that of Louise Morey Bowman. The younger writers are showing distinctive traits. Whatever they may owe to the Roberts-Carman tradition, it is not much in evidence. Whitman, Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Yeats, Masefield, Edna Millay, T. S. Eliot and H. D. are among those who have set their thumbprint unmistakably on our contemporary verse. Fresh fields are being explored, and the old one approached

in an entirely new spirit. April in Leo Kennedy's *Rite of Spring* is not the bland, flowery-handed mother-deity Bliss Carman invoked. It is a surging, overpowering force that leaves youth shaken and afraid:

a month for subtle spells
And incantations changed from old poets
By tremulous girls who are sick with April weather
And boys whose glances are craven and bold together.
April is no month for burials

The sea of which Charles Bruce sings is the same sea Nova Scotia poets have always loved, but there is a difference—more intensity, more subtlety, less evidence of what one critic calls “the Maritime curse of wordiness”.

This contrast in treatment may be seen by comparing two poems on the same theme, L. M. Montgomery's *When the Dark Comes Down*, from Garvin's anthology, and Dorothy Livesay's *Prince Edward Island*, from Theodore Goodridge Roberts's magazine, *Acadie*. Miss Montgomery's conventionalized Arcady might easily be anywhere on earth. She carols blithely:

When the dark comes down, oh, the children fall asleep,
And mothers in the fisher huts their happy vigils keep;
There's music in the song they sing and music on the sea,
The loving, lingering echoes of the twilight's litany,
For toil has folded hands to dream and care has cased to frown,
And every wave's a lyric when the dark comes down.

Dorothy Livesay gives us in unpretentious, unrhymed verse the very flavour of the real “Island”—red, sandy soil, quiet fields, night sounds of the country:

The slow moving of hooves,
The soft breathings of friendly cows among the grasses,
Or the sudden thunder of a young calf...

She tells us how the farmers

shut out evening from their eyes
And welcome morning
With whistling, milking, the drawing of water,
The sound of voices...
They know not evening,
These people of the farms.

The new poetry in Canada should be more rugged, less romantic and cloyingly sweet. It is bound to be more cosmopolitan. The people who have come to us, huddled miserably in emigrant ships,

have sons and daughters who, with their heritage of a rich, imaginative background from the older countries, will infuse warmth and colour into our austere and somewhat pallid literature. One of the most talented of our young writers, Abraham M. Klein, is of pure Semitic extraction. He puts the plight of the Jew in our kindly Gentile civilization in very clever verse:

Now we will suffer loss of memory,
 We will forget the tongue our mothers knew,
 We will munch ham and guzzle milk thereto,
 And this on hallowed fast-days, purposely...
 To Gentile parties we will proudly go
 And Christians anecdoting us will say:
 Mr. and Mrs. Klein—the Jews—you know.

Mercer Adam would be grieved to-day to find our poetry showing less, not more, of nationalistic (or, if you like) patriotic sentiment. But the roots of every true poet strike deep into his native soil, even though ours may have ceased to proclaim it as loudly as Pauline Johnson. They are less moved to flag-waving, and more to a growing concern for the people who make up our country. Poetry has come down to everyday living. Tailors, undernourished office clerks, club-women with "pendulous chins", who indulge in "a teaspoonful of art before and after cards", have the spotlight in Klein's verses. Pratt's weatherbeaten fishermen in blood-stained oil-skins would be most uncomfortable on a picture postcard sea, where "every wave's a lyric" and "care has ceased to frown".

The West has found a voice, not to trill sentimentally of the billowing prairies or the sublimity of snow-capped peaks, but to give expression to working people, miners of Estavan, grain-stabbers in Winnipeg. G. A. Newman writes of these:

"Ten cars
 on forty five, train moves within an hour."
 Feet shuffle, thump, and bodies grunt themselves
 awake. By lantern light they file across
 the tracks or sneak beneath the heavy bulk
 of cars chuck full with grain.

Norman F. Priestly puts words in the mouth of a prairie farmer, broken by a succession of bad years, yet gloating again over his young crop, alternately hoping and fearing:

They tell of green fields lashed and smashed to pulp.
 Men have gone insane at the sight.
 On sultry days fear clutches at my heart.
 High Heaven! hurl not hail!

Poetry is too slight a vehicle to be loaded with propaganda, but anything that vitally concerns men and women may have a place in vigorous, full-bodied verse. It is a healthy sign when our poets show that they are at last coming to grips with life.

We are, fortunately, not called on to make a final appraisal of our contemporary verse. The ablest critic has never been able to do that for his time. Out of the considerable number of candidates we have for immortality, no one can say which will last, or even which will achieve the greatest reputation in his own day. We are only beginning to sift the wheat from the chaff of our earlier poetry. It might be interesting in this connection to know how much of the popularity of our writers, whose names have become household words, was due to the quality of their work, and how much to their indefatigable journeyings from Sydney to Victoria, reading their verses in schoolhouses and halls, and picturesquely autographing copies of their books.

We are not even able to make predictions regarding the future, based on the general trend of modern poetry, for no one seems to know where that trend will lead. Various possibilities are held out to us, some of them not reassuring. The obscurantists may carry us so far that the attempt to convey any intelligent thought in verse may be abandoned, and the ordinary reader may be left to thread his way through a maze of words that are little more than vocal noises and spell only incomprehensibility. Or some entirely new and simpler phase may conceivably develop from present poetic forms. The gloomiest prospect offered us is that of a lack of social stability smothering individual expression, and causing all poetry that is not mechanically state-controlled propaganda to be temporarily extinguished. This is possible; but it appears, fortunately, quite remote.

Whatever happens will definitely affect the work of serious Canadian poets, and we can do very little about it beyond keeping our eyes open to what is going on. Not being too greedily expectant, we may hope that our country will make her fair contribution to the development of all the arts. The outlook for poetry here is hopeful. We are, from coast to coast, poetry-conscious. Our verse-makers have little prospect of making money, but they have a fair opportunity to-day to make a name. They are assured of an audience. And though the poet writes to please himself, the audience is not without responsibility. What our poetry of to-morrow will be, depends not only on him but on what the public demands of him. Will we ask for beauty or prettiness, passion and intensity or facile emotion, intelligent thought and technique

or pleasant sounding words strung in musical rhymes, flesh and blood Canadian people or gypsy-folk and pixies? Will we be open-minded, friendly to original ideas and, it may be, new patterns, knowing that experiment is essential to growth? Or will we be very sure that the past has a monopoly of all that is artistically worth while?

We have celebrated the attaining of our literary majority too many times, on lecture platforms and in critical columns, to do any cheering here. Woven together, thread by thread, year by year, the web of Canadian poetry is gradually taking shape. We may not find a great deal of startling importance in the work of our poets of to-day. They may be, at times, arrogant, precious, derivative:—young poets usually are. But they are on the right track. We may have, speaking literally, no poetic past, but all that we have had, that is authentically our own, is a source of enrichment we must not belittle. And what we possess in the present we are learning to value. With all this to draw on, there is every indication that we will one day have a richly-coloured fabric of verse that will be a true expression of our people, that will be not only genuine poetry but distinctively Canadian.