

THE SONNETS OF ARTHUR S. BOURINOT

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THE discerning reader of the poetry of Arthur S. Bourinot cannot fail to recognize the importance of his sonnets. Among "The Group of the 60's" there were many who found the sonnet, to use the words of Sir A. T. Quiller-Couch, "a lovely form to fit and hold lovely thoughts." The sonnets of Lampman have come to be regarded as one of the glories of our young literature. Roberts too found this form a favourite for many years and his sonnet sequence, *Songs of the Common Day*, remains probably the best known of all his poetic work. Fine sonnets have also been contributed by Duncan Campbell Scott, Frederick George Scott, Helena Coleman, Ethelwyn Wetherald, and many others, including Robert Norwood of a younger generation whose first volume, *His Lady of the Sonnets*, derived its title from a sonnet sequence. Thus, it is not surprising to find a Canadian poet of a still younger generation turning often to the classic form that has been used by many of the greatest poets in the English language.

Although a sonnet sequence, *Sonnets in Memory of My Mother*, was published in 1930, and many additional sonnets in preceding and succeeding volumes, few readers realized, until the publication of *Collected Poems* in 1947, what a strong hold the sonnet had on the imagination of Mr. Bourinot. His lyrics, long a favourite with the Canadian poetry-reading public, still continue to attract more popular attention; nevertheless, a collection of his sonnets alone would constitute a significant contribution to Canadian literature.

Mr. Bourinot has always been a skillful and conscientious craftsman. Hence, his sonnets are invariably marked by an adequacy of technique as well as by the charming delicacy of expression and singular lyrical quality which are distinguishing characteristics of all his poetry. They reflect many moods and are of widely divergent themes.

Love of his native land was naturally a source of inspiration, and the trilogy entitled "Parliament Hill" is a tribute to the statesmen and poets who, within sight of Parliament Hill, worked and dreamed and "loved the beauty of this height."

Several sonnets are included in the group of poems that

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ere written in a German prison camp and vividly depict the stark loneliness of prison life. Stirred by the tragedy of war, Mr. Bourinot wrote with deep compassion of the comrades who never returned but who are "sleeping in foreign soil." Chief of these poems is the sonnet, *For the Fallen*, which concludes with the memorable lines:

Oh, life must be immortal for their sake;
Oh, earth will rest them gently till they wake.

Closely related in thought is *A Prayer in Time of Peace*. Never does the poet forget

. . . the ties that bind
To those who gave, and giving all, designed
A permanent and everlasting peace.

There are sonnets also that were inspired by the work of other poets: *When You Are Old* (after the French of Pierre de Ronsard); *Keats*, to whom he refers as "Immortal bard of beauty;" *To the Memory of Rupert Brooke*, who "loved to live his life with laughing lips;" and *To John Masefield* (after reading his *Sonnets and Poems*), with whom Bourinot claims companionship in his quest for beauty.

I too have sought the guerdon hard to gain,
Elusive river sweeping to the sea,
But well I know a glimpse is worth the pain
Of seeking that which ever seems to flee.
O Beauty, thou hast one disciple more,
Another traveller knocking at thy door!

The poet's keen awareness of the beauty of nature revealed in many sonnets. *Realization*, essentially a tender love poem, contains what Richard Watson Gilder calls in *The Sonnet*, "a little picture painted well."

For in the past I ever loved to let
Mine eyes find their delight where eagles wheel
Above the cliffs, seeing the slow night steal
From deep, abysmal caverns dewy wet.

The descriptive passages, however, particularly in the later sonnets, are usually linked with some facet of the poet's philosophy. Probably of all Mr. Bourinot's sonnets none are

more significant than *Two Sonnets on Beauty*. The perfect blending of description and philosophy is exemplified in the following lines:

I have found beauty in the scarf of snow
That winds fling o'er the bosom of the earth;
I have seen beauty in the ebb and flow
Of the life of man, in sorrow and in mirth.

* * * * *

I have found beauty in the wild plum bloom
All misty pink along the fence in May,
I have seen beauty in a red, wet boom
Of logs and chanties of men on their way.
Beauty eludes us with her mystery
Until the flesh takes immortality.

The sequence of eighteen sonnets, *In Memory of My Mother*, appeared first in a volume by the same title. It begins with the note of desolation at parting and changes into an enduring spiritual awareness. Sonnet X, perhaps the most richly suggestive of his devotion and admiration, concludes with the following striking lines:

And when Death came for you there was no fear,
You welcomed him as you would greet a friend,
Or little children when they gathered near
To hear the story read at daylight's end.
Facing them both you lived courageously,
Life had no triumph, Death no victory.

The poet's love of nature, a love he shared with his mother becomes a secondary theme running like a thread of gold, through the sequence. Consequently, many singing lines are an intermingling of tender memories and exquisite description.

The Trilliums dancing in the leaf strewn wood
Nodding their pale white faces as you passed,
And the strange, pale Indian-pipes that stood
Like sentinels, were loved until the last.
The loveliness of earth was dear to you;

* * * * *

And now the loved earth folds you to her breast
And the deep silence of imperishable rest.

To Mr. Bourinot *nature* is largely associated with the Laurentians and so, in this sonnet sequence, there are many references to "these old blue hills, ageless, serene from strife."

As with the individual sonnets the descriptive passages usually become interpretative. In the final sonnet the poet turns "unto the hills for comforting" and the sequence closes with a proclamation of his faith.

I know from you Death's darkness lasts not long.
That Love shall never perish, but rise strong
Immortal in her glory and her might.