

ICELANDIC-CANADIAN POETRY

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ALEXANDER Pope, in his *Epistle To Augustus*, grew sarcastic over the possible time-lag of a century in the recognition of poetic merit. This human frailty may have something to do with the obliviousness of our literary historians to the very existence of any Canadian poetry in languages other than English and French, while during the last half-century there has silently arisen a "third Canadian poetry" (written in Icelandic, Swedish, Ukrainian, Hungarian and Italian) which in bulk and quality may well challenge the supremacy of the two older traditions. Ignorance of these alien languages is probably a more important factor in this lack of acknowledgment; nor must we forget the great Pre-Cambrian wilderness, a gap not only geographical but also mental between the West where the poetry has been written and the East where the literary historians dwell.

Icelandic is by far the most important member of this newer group of poetries, and the one most entitled therefore to insist upon present recognition. The article that follows is a tentative outline of its major developments.

Icelandic settlement in Canada began about 1873, and received much encouragement from the sympathetic interest of Lord Dufferin, then Governor-General of the Dominion. After unhappy experiences in Ontario and Nova Scotia, most of the newcomers adjourned to the Western prairies and forests and made their homes there. Today there are about 20,000 Icelanders in Canada. Winnipeg, with 6,000 of them, is the chief Icelandic centre in America, with a larger number of that race than any town in Iceland itself except the capital, Reykjavik.

Icelanders brought with them to Canada the consciousness of a great literary tradition. The Norse nobles who colonized Iceland in the 9th century had been eminent in poetry; throughout the Middle Ages the island supplied the Scandinavian world with most of its skalds; and at the time of the 19th century emigration to Canada a new flowering-period in Icelandic poetry was at its height in the work of Grimur Thomsen, Steingrimur Thorsteins-son, and Matthias Jochumsson. It is small wonder that the stirring experiences of travel and settlement should find expression in poetry.

Newspapers in Icelandic were established almost immediately. "Framfari" (now extinct) was founded in Gimli, Manitoba, in 1877;

and the Winnipeg weeklies, "Heimskringla" and "Lögberg", have been issued without interruption since 1886 and 1888 respectively. These, as well as a number of annuals and monthlies, have been very generous in their printing of poetry, and have contributed beyond calculation to the development of an Icelandic literature in Canada. Many of these printing offices have also engaged in book-publication (in Icelandic), although authors frequently publish in Reykjavik in order to bring their work before a larger Icelandic-speaking audience.

Easily the most important Icelandic-Canadian poet is Stephan G. Stephansson (1853-1927). Born in Iceland, at Kirkjuhöll on Skagafjörður, a farm since deserted, he came to Canada with the first main contingent of pioneers in 1873 at the age of 20. After brief experiences at Hekla (Muskoka District), Ontario, and in Wisconsin and North Dakota, he finally settled in Southern Alberta, about thirty miles from Red Deer. Farming was his means of livelihood, and was faithfully attended to; but he lived for literature. One room of the little farm-house was lined with bookshelves, filled with the English and Scandinavian classics; in the midst stood a table and a chair; and there, for forty years, he devoted every available hour to deep study and creative writing. Recognition came to him early and in ample measure. Anglo-Canadians might not be aware of his literary existence; but his fellow Icelanders, both in Canada and in Iceland, were soon convinced of the emergence of a major poet. When he visited Iceland in 1917, he was given a royal reception by the whole nation as one of the great poets of modern times. Professor Sigurd Nordal of the University of Iceland has written quite categorically that Stephen G. Stephansson is the greatest poet in any language that has yet appeared in any of the British Dominions. So far as Canada is concerned, his primacy in extent of output is easily vindicated. His collected poetry, in five large volumes, totals over 1,500 pages; while his nearest competitors (in original verse) are Wilfred Campbell (660 pages), Wilson MacDonald (about 600 pages), and Bliss Carman (546 pages). A further 300-page volume of Stephansson's verse is now being prepared by his literary executor for posthumous publication. A comparison of poetic quality is a much more difficult matter, for differences of language must be weighed, and these are beyond the range of intelligible argument unless one's audience has a fair knowledge of both languages. Translation from either language into the other eliminates nearly everything of poetic value.

I should like to venture the opinion, however, that Stephansson is beyond question the equal of any poet that Canada has yet

produced in English or French—and may ultimately be recognized as superior to all. That opinion is based on considerations of prosodic technique, diction, imagination and intellectual scope.

So far as *craftsmanship* goes, he and half a dozen other Icelandic-Canadian poets have talent far beyond our chief Anglo-Canadian poets. The Icelandic requirements of pattern, both in rhythm and in tone-colour, are subtle and complex beyond anything of which English is capable. Icelandic and Old Irish poems are in a class by themselves in this matter of elaborate intricacy. In *diction* likewise, Stephansson is manifestly superior to his Anglo-Canadian and French-Canadian rivals. Only E. J. Pratt and Paul Morin (and possibly Abraham Klein) are comparable to him in their assiduous study of vocabulary to enrich their art and render it more exact; but Stephansson actually undertook a rigorous survey of the whole range of Old Norse expression—sagas, Eddas, and even place-names—with a view to acquiring fuller capacity, finer connotations, and the sudden delight of unexpected beauty in phrase. The results are not uniformly successful; there are times when he lapses into crabbed harshness; but in his work as a whole he stands amply justified as a great creative worker with language. His gifts of *imagination* are equally notable. His portrayals of the commonplace take on unusual significance through the power of his figures and comparisons. For instance, the following description of a train crossing the prairies by night reaches its climax in a comparison with that Doom-ship of the Old Norse mythology on which, at the end of the world, the armies of hell cross the dark abyss to destroy Asgard:¹

FROM "FARING AND FLYING"

Out on the platform that coupled the cars,
 I drank-in the night-air alone;
 For drugg'd in the thick, heavy vapors within,
 Each passenger sat like a stone.
 On through the vastness and darkness the train
 Kept ever its shadowy way,
 With no halt in the heat of its thunderous haste,
 No hesitant falter nor stay.
 Far out in the infinite vault of the sky,
 The stars in their courses look'd on
 To mock the machine and its stertorous breath
 With flames that for eons had shone.
 But the prairies flowed by like an ebony sea
 Of boundless and billowless black,
 Where our train, a long Doom-ship with belly of fire,
 Sought Asgard, with death in its track.

1. This extract, and all others in this article, are translated by Watson Kirkconnell. All titles of books, likewise, are given in English translation instead of in the original Icelandic.

Only in *intellectual range* is there any doubt as to his supremacy, but even here a case may be made out for him. Like Wilson MacDonald, he lacked the foundation of a good education; but unlike MacDonald, he rose above this handicap by virtue of the inherent instincts of a scholar and the fundamental sanity of a man living close to the soil. Most of his poetry arises directly from his experience of Canadian life or his reaction to the Canadian scene. Description occupies a major place in his work, and gives a fuller and more magnificent picture of the Canadian West than is to be found in all other Canadian poets combined; yet were he simply a descriptive poet, he would be classed almost automatically as intellectually second-rate. Underlying his pictorial poetry, however, and expressed explicitly in another great area of his work, is the simple but profound philosophy of a deeply intellectual peasant—one who feels himself in the most fundamental and enduring of human occupations, and has a stern aloofness towards the wealth and social pretension of city life. His mood is that of Isak in Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil*, but an Isak to whom have been added powers of thought and self-expression.

The defects of verse translation have already been mentioned—*traduttore traditore*—yet I venture to submit another sample of Stephansson's work, a version which (to the detriment of beauty) preserves in English the strict alliterative rules of the original:

THE SPRUCE FOREST

Other trees, with taunts and brags,
 Try in vain, like thee, to grow
 Under sheer and shadowy crags,
 Shut in by black bogs below—
 There thy gallant groves aspire,
 Greenest woods that earth can show.

Surely winter oft has waged
 Wars of frost about thy feet:
 Stark as steel, blue ice has raged,
 Stamping on thy roots' retreat,
 Lashing all thy limbs with cold,
 Laming every joint with sleet.

Is thy view not vast and dire,
 Void of joy?—Beneath the hill
 Gapes a maw of fetid mire,
 Muck-devouring, hungry still;
 While a jaundiced jaw of stone
 Juts above thee, gaunt and chill.

Yet thou mountest, undismayed,
Meetly dressed in patient green—
Born to burdens, dolours laid
Brutally, with anguish keen,
On thy shoulders; still unshamed
Shake thy crests in peace serene.

When, with cruel blizzards, come
Cramping frosts all earth to hold,
Naked oaks, distorted, numb,—
Null, grey ghosts of forests old,—
Stretch their limbs like helpless hands,
Haggard with the ashen cold.

All alone thou lingerest
Lustrous green, O spruce, and sure
As if summer still possessed
Sovereign peace, in thee secure—
A mark of life on marred earth's corpse,
Making winter fair and pure.

Green thou art, yea altogether,
Growing from thy earliest birth,
Green against all winter weather,
Waxing ever out of earth
Young from root to needles, knowing
Naught of naked age or dearth.

Many a man in kindred fashion,
Moved on by the winter's blast,
Looks on livid bogs of passion
Lying rotten, black and vast;
Sees the yellow rock-jaw yonder
Yawning from the face of Caste.

Yet from shadowed, slimy slopes
Slips of life grow green and free;
Winter earth, unwarmed of hopes,
Watches still the sturdy tree;
Nor can blizzards' crescent crash
Crush that living liberty.

Next in importance in the older generation is Kristinn Stefansson (1856-1916), who likewise came to Canada as a lad with the first contingent of pioneers in 1873. Most of his life was spent as a carpenter in Winnipeg. His extensive poetry was published in two large volumes, *West of the Ocean* in 1900, and *From Lake and Prairie* in 1916. In metrical dexterity he is comparable to his older compeer, and in diction he is not far inferior. In force, imagination and range, however, he comes distinctly second to Stephans-

Dr. S. J. Johannesson, Winnipeg physician, has published five volumes of poems and short stories. He is at his best in poetry for children, but is also capable of sounding deeper notes, as the following specimen may indicate:

WHAT ART THOU, LIFE?

What art thou, life?
 A billow that rises and surges,
 Driven through surf of flesh in the gulf of time,
 Onward and upward, forever, as ever urges
 A procreant power, eternal and sublime?
 What art thou?

What art thou, life?
 A bubble that sinks and disperses,
 Borne from a wailing cycle the years devour,
 Where drowning spirit expires with bubbling curses?
 Art thou the dying dream of a giant power?
 What art thou?

Magnus Markusson is a Winnipeg business man, who has published two books of verse, *Poetry* (1907) and *Fragments of Melody* (1924).

Two intermarried families have contributed four notable names to Icelandic-Canadian poetry. These are Gisli Jonsson of Winnipeg (born 1876), his younger half-brother, Einar P. Jonsson (born 1880), their sister-in-law, Mrs. Jakobina Jonsson (born 1883), and her father, Sigurbjörn Johansson (1839-1903). The last-named was a farmer near Argyle, Manitoba. He published in 1902, not long before his death, a volume of poems which, while somewhat untutored in expression, was a direct revelation of pioneer experiences in Western Canada. His daughter Jakobina was a school-teacher before her marriage to Isak Jonsson. She has translated extensively from Icelandic poetry into English, and has contributed a great deal of original Icelandic verse to Winnipeg periodicals. She is strongly feminine in her sympathies and subject-matter. Einar P. Jonsson, for many years editor of the weekly newspaper "Logberg," is one of the most gifted poets now writing in the Canadian West. He is at his best in the lyric, where he combines beauty with an undeniable force of emotion. The following poem suggests these qualities, even in translation:

THE CLOSE OF SUMMER

Funeral tollings are heard to-day,
 Murmuring coldly through woods a-sway,
 Swept by the winds of ocean.
 The skies in the mourning of grief are drest,
 All haggard and wan with a wild unrest
 And a heavy heart's commotion.

The beacons of summer are burning out,—
 Flaming birches are put to rout
 In the waves of the wind's deep thunder.
 Its organ-tones of autumnal Doom
 Announce the coming of frost and gloom
 To trample the pale leaves under.

Sorrowing ever, the human race,
 That seek in vain for a resting-place,
 Waver in that pale hour;
 Their eyes are glassy with doubt that grieves,
 And they read their fate in the yellow leaves
 That fall in a drifting shower.

All things pass with expiring breath,
 Songs of the future and songs of death
 Blend in the doomsday weather;
 The strange, vast drift of the autumn sky,
 The sighing plains, and the hill-tops high,
 And the dead trees, march together.

Over that ruin, the storm-clouds sweep;
 But seeds of summer lie safe and deep
 That a far-off day may love them.
 Dark and barren are glade and tree;
 But the mould of earth hides flow'rs-to-be,
 Though the cold winds rave above them.

Sickles gleam in the pallid grass,—
 Through heaven and earth two forces pass
 That blend in the stream of fate;
 Autumn's assertion of death and cold,
 And faith that summer will come as of old—
 The dream that our hearts await.

Gisli Jonsson, a Winnipeg printer and publisher, is also predominantly lyrical in his work. The following simple poem was written soon after he had emigrated to Canada, leaving a young son temporarily behind him in Iceland:

GOOD-NIGHT

The ample earth now slumbers slow,
 But heaven smiles with starry glow,
 The drooping flower dons its hood,
 The zephyr croons in accents low,
 The thrushes whisper in the wood:
 Good-night!

Guttormur J. Guttormsson is noteworthy as the only Icelandic-Canadian poet who has been born in Canada. His birthplace was Icelandic River, Manitoba, in the same backwoods colony that produced Vilhjalmur Stefansson a few months later. His parents were pioneers, and he himself has never known anything but the back-breaking life of a frontier farmer. He is married, and has six children. His education ceased with the elementary schools of the province. Such auspices might well seem unfavorable to literature, and in a sense his development has been seriously thwarted; yet he has published three volumes of poetry and one of drama, and has set the stamp of masterly originality on nearly everything that he has written. Others may excel him in craftsmanship and diction, but even Stephan G. Stephansson does not show an equal force of intellect. Basing his work with stark sincerity on the limited world of his personal experience, he is able to suffuse that subject-matter with the most profound significance. In the following poem on the keeping of bees, for instance, he uses a familiar episode of bee-keeping to adumbrate the spiritual tragedy of his own life:

THE CARE OF BEES

Honey-bees of my high ideals
 Have I imprison'd in this my winter,
 Night and day in the chilling darkness
 Down in the cellar beneath my spirit.

Honey had grown too hard to gather,
 Ghastly and pallid, the flow'rs had wither'd;
 Burdensome drifts had bent them under;
 Blizzards lay deep on my fields and orchard.

Honey-bees of my high ideals
 Had to wait for my life's warm summer.
 Freely they'd rouse at the first spring sunshine,
 Fly from the cellar beneath my spirit.

Then they would cling to the fragrant clover,
 Clammy cells of exceeding sweetness,
 Harvesting honey of praise and honour,
 Happy in breezes of golden springtime.

Spring came at last, but the lingering winter
 Levell'd its snows on the frozen farmlands.
 Ere the fields were ploughed and planted,
 Pinching hunger assailed their vitals.

Time went by, and I raised the trap-door,
Took to the ladder and sought the cellar.
Stygian voices I heard distinctly
Stir in the subterranean darkness.

Savage hunger and sullen rancour
Sang in the clouds of that dim inferno;
Borne from the depths like a blast of brimstone
Buzz'd the rage of their venomous cursing.

Bees that were pang'd to the point of murder
Prick'd at my flesh in the soul's deep shadows;
Stabb'd me in rage and install'd their poison;
Stung, I scream'd like a wolf half-scalded.

Scars are my due till my day is over,
Deep-sunk eyes and a throat all swollen.
Loathsome I feel in my mutilation,
Less like a man than a fallen angel.

Intellectuality and humor are commonly associated, and Guttormsson does not lack the latter grace. He is, indeed, the wittiest of all the Icelandic-Canadian poets, and is famous for his epigrams and satires. The following brief poem deals in a gayer vein with the way in which life has cramped his poetic efforts:

A DREAM

I dreamt that I heard from on high
The beating of effortless wings
Like the echoes that unwritten verse
Through a lone worker's consciousness flings.

I sought far and wide through the blue
In the gleams that to visions belong,
And I saw on the path of the sun
The wing'd horse of unperishing song.

The dream was too fair to be false;
There was truth in its radiant charm;
And I tethered great Pegasus fast
In a cow-shed down here on the farm.

It is perhaps well that this sketch, which began with Stephan G. Stephansson, should end with Guttormur J. Guttormsson. These are the highest peaks at the respective ends of the mountain range we have been exploring. It would be possible to extend the list of poets much further, with such more recent writers as Pall Gudmundsson and P. S. Palsson of Winnipeg, Mrs. Nanna Ander-

son of West Selkirk, S. E. Björnson and B. J. Hornfjörd of Arborg, Mrs. S. B. Gunnlaugsson of Baldur, Magnus Johannesson of Vogar, Paul Bjarnason of Wynyard, and J. H. Hunfjörd of Elfros; but most of these have still a very limited output. A much more important addition might be made by including the Icelandic poets in the contiguous state of North Dakota, whose work has been published, for the most part, in Winnipeg. Such men as Kristjan Niels Julius, Thorbjörn Bjarnason, and Professor Richard Beck are all really important; but they should probably be omitted, as they are technically citizens of the United States. The evidence for an Icelandic-Canadian poetry is, in any case, amply supported by the thirteen poets whom I have treated in greater detail. Were nothing further to be written in Icelandic in Canada, the poetry already in existence would be an enduring monument to the inspiration of a great epoch.

That such poetry is only a transient chapter in our literary history, I am regretfully confident. It is significant that the only Canadian-born poet among them all is Guttormur J. Guttormsson, and that he grew up in an Icelandic-Canadian frontier settlement. Icelandic-Canadians of the third generation rarely speak anything but English, and courses in Icelandic at the University of Manitoba have died out because students are no longer asking for them. It is almost certain that without the continual introduction of fresh settlers from Iceland the ancestral tongue will have died out in Canada by the end of the present century.

That ultimate melting away of Icelandic in the warmer seas of English speech will not, however, alter the fundamental value of the Icelandic-Canadian poetry already written. That will be a possession forever, the record of pioneer experience treasured up by the poet's art in the beauty and power of one of the world's great literary languages. The pioneer generations of the English and French in Canada were poetically inarticulate or worse. It is the glory of the Icelandic settlers that in their first generation among us they have created a poetry, based on Canada and their experience of it, that is worthy of challenging comparison with the best that three centuries have produced in their foster-country.