

# IN MEMORIAM: WILLIAM E. MARSHALL

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THOSE who clamour loudest for a "Canadian Literature" would be the last to discern any real literature if it were suddenly to descend upon them. It comes with a voice so fine and small that it escapes the untrained ear; it remains merely as a remembrance after the voice is vanished.

Upon the same day come to me two letters. In the one I am asked to say some memorial words of Marjorie Pickthall; in the other, similar words of William Marshall. These two spirits were alike in shyness and delicacy. It was once my privilege to encourage both, by persuading the world to keep quiet for a moment, and listen. That is the only encouragement of literature that is of any value. Now both are dead.

William E. Marshall died at Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, in May. He left a book of verse entitled *Brookfield*, and in that book one poem which will serve as a text for the present writing. The poem was entitled "Brookfield", and from it the volume received its name.

By a certain instinct I saved the manuscript and all the letters bearing upon the publication of the poem and the book. A new reading of them revives and confirms the impression of the time, that "Brookfield" was the first Canadian threnody, and—as a dirge or song of lament for the dead—entitled to a place with those great thrènes of despair, *Lycidas*, *Thyrsis*, *The Scholar-Gipsy*, and *Astrophel*. It has in it also those precise qualities which are more elaborately displayed by the too comprehensively elegiac *In Memoriam*.

The theme is simple, as all great grief is. The poet died; he lay unheeded in the forest,—even his grave forgot. The Friend gave to the silent bard a home among the dead. A village festival was part of the ceremonial. Now the Friend himself is dead. That is all. William Marshall makes of this common fate a part of universal experience, ranging backward through the mind of Milton, through the mind of Vergil, and of the Greek anthologists, to the Hebrew prophets, those weightiest of all the exponents of

sorrow. He performs the last feat of elegy,—subduing Nature to the Mood; and that “Nature” is Nature as seen in Canada. It is in this sense alone that literature can be of the genius of the place:

And as he roamed the shores and woods and clears,  
 Seeking for aye the bloom of yesterdays,  
 The mayflowers smiled and lent their sweetest airs,  
 And violets curtsied from the road-side ways;  
 The red-veined slippers of the elves and fays  
 Were hanging near the rose and eglantine,  
 And mystic trilliums still did heavenward gaze;  
 The blue flags waved, and lilies ’gan to shine;  
 The golden-rods and asters thronged the steep incline.

Edmund Spenser could not do better. If there is any doubt, read the spring-time verse with which “Brookfield” begins:

Now hath a wonder lit the sadden’d eyes  
 Long misted by a grievous winter clime;  
 And now the dull heart leaps with love’s surprize,  
 And sings its joy. For ’tis the happy time,  
 And all the brooding earth is full of chime,  
 And all the hosts of sleepers underground  
 Have burst out suddenly in glorious prime;  
 And all the airy spirits now have found  
 Their wonted shrines with life and love entwined ’round.

Or the closing lines:

The wind upon the hill has sweetest hush,  
 The day is melting into tenderest flame,  
 And from the valley, where the waters rush,  
 Comes up the even song of the lone hermit-thrush.

This is literature, and Canadian literature too, although it does not contain a single mounted policeman, a vagrant miner, or a hairy lumber-jack. In spite of these defects, it is the great song of the Pioneer.

The poem is filled with the sound of the singing of birds. The Friend was a lover of the bird’s song; Marshall writes, “The bird, one might feign, was attendant upon him in life, as the song of nature’s joy; and hence at his death we might,—I did, I know, because I was with him often at even, and stopped with him to listen,—I say, we might think of the lone hermit-thrush singing its evensong with the sorrow of one bereft of mortal sympathy.”

“Brookfield” was published in the *University Magazine* in April, 1914. The manuscript was received in March, and on the 22nd I wrote to the author much more than a formal acceptance.

There is something pathetic in the importance to a poet of a poor editor's opinion. On the 27th he replied: "To think that any verse of mine . . . leaves me flushed and trembling . . . the happiness you have given me, a stranger . . . I am exalted, and stand in such relation that I can call you *friend*." At the moment of writing, news reached Marshall that the son of the central figure in his poem was also dead, and he adds, "It is hard for me to set to work upon your suggestions." But he did. Then follow the usual letters on textual matters, by which he thought the verse improved. He was especially pleased with *shy* Indian.

For the next five years I was beyond the reach of many friends, but from this poet I had poignant letters. Finally, when he was about to publish all his verse in a book, I was of some technical assistance to him; and now as I read his expressions of gratitude there remains a sense of pride, and also a sense of humility.

I never saw William Marshall. It was my intention to make a visit to him this summer. For this also it is too late. He added to human worth; he increased the beauty in the world. He has received his reward. In words of his own:

What matters it, that fortune passed him by  
With curious, knowing look . . .  
From spring to fall, love yielded all he sought;  
And, lo, when winter came, he was not poor.