

# THE CENTENARY OF JOHN McPHERSON

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MY purpose in this article is not to exaggerate McPherson's claim to remembrance, nor to attempt a literary appraisal of his poetry, but rather, as an historian of our social and cultural evolution, to revive the memory of a young Nova Scotian schoolmaster, who strove in poverty and ill-health to express himself in unaffected verse and aspired to be the Bard of Acadia; to recall some of the circumstances under which he wrote and some of the poems which were warmly commended in his lifetime; and to place him in some sort of perspective in Nova Scotia's Age of Faith.

Though none of the historians of Canadian literature mentions his name, even as "a rude forefather", his poems attracted considerable attention between 1840 and 1845, when verse was a popular vehicle of expression in Nova Scotia and competition among versifiers was keen; and when he died in the latter year, the newspapers of Halifax, which were most devoted to the encouragement of local talent, *The Novascotian*, and the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Acadian Recorder* and the *Sun*, took editorial notice of his death and, in slightly different phrases, agreed that he had left behind him some verses which would long keep his memory green and should be collected and published in more permanent form. But it was not until seventeen years after his premature death, as a deferred fulfillment of the poet's own desire, that they were collected and published in one volume, with a sympathetic introduction by John S. Thompson, who had been editor of the *Novascotian* when some of McPherson's best poems were published in that newspaper, had given them an enthusiastic reception at the time, and had been made his literary executor by the dying minstrel himself.<sup>1</sup>

By 1862, however, many of the readers who had commended McPherson's lyrics were dead and a new generation that knew him not, nor felt the high exaltation of the 1840's, was too deeply engrossed in political and economic problems to take thought

1. *Poems, Descriptive and Moral*, by John McPherson. Styled by himself "Harp of Acadia." Halifax, N. S. Printed by Theophilus Chamberlain, 1862. Pp. xlvi, 250.

As the subtitle proved confusing, John S. Thompson wrote the Editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, on January 8, 1863, as follows: "Sir: Allow the correction of a mistake which occurred in noticing a volume of poems recently published. John McPherson styled his poems 'The Harp of Acadia', but certainly did not so style himself, as the notice alluded to intimates. The title was in accordance with his hopes and ambitions, and might be excused as the aspiration of a simple-minded, rather enthusiastic man who anticipated some kindly patronage for the posthumous publication of his verses."

for the unsophisticated minstrel of rural Nova Scotia, who had shared with Howe the faith that the obstacles to distinction in literature might be overcome by "the resources of genius, aided by patriotic self-devotion and an ardent pursuit of knowledge", and that there was nothing to prevent the ambitious youth of Nova Scotia from achieving celebrity through "the faithful portraiture of the human heart, the illustration of those virtues, passions and imperfections which have distinguished man in every country and in every age". Consequently, the publication of this collected edition of McPherson's poems did little to perpetuate his memory and now he is known only casually to the student or collector of rare books long out of print.

My interest in McPherson was awakened several years ago, before I discovered the collected edition, through reading the *Novascotian* year by year and noticing his poems as they appeared; and I was struck by the fact that he seemed to respond with a poem to many aspects of improvement and reform that were under way in the province, social, economic and political; and that in addition he was a pioneer in the poetry of nature which has occupied such a prominent place in Canadian literature. It is only recently that I have attempted to read the collected edition, and I confess that, if my approach had been to the volume first, I probably would have been discouraged from reading far, as the poems are arranged in certain rather formal groups according to subject matter, without regard to chronology, and too many poems, almost identical in subject matter, have been included, while others which I had noted as a response to current historical movements have been omitted. None the less, the mere existence of this volume is a reproach to the literary and social historians who have ignored McPherson: for he was both a product and a victim of pioneer conditions in Nova Scotia, and his poems reflect contemporary social and cultural conditions, thought and interests, with remarkable accuracy and unashamed simplicity. For these reasons alone his poems should not be forgotten and cannot be ignored with impunity by the social historian, who would give a complete picture of that period of our history. Moreover, his poems portray faithfully the spiritual struggles of at least "one human heart" and in so doing reveal an often-forgotten limitation of the movement for responsible government: that it opened a career to talent in the political field, but could do nothing to convince a pioneer community that poetry should have a commercial

value, or that a poet could not support himself and his family on an occasional friendly notice in the newspapers of the Capital. As Sarah Herbert wrote soon after his death:

Life's flowers but thinly grew  
 Around his pathway, and the sunbeams bright  
 Too seldom cheered him with their clear warm light,  
 But rather, cloud-obscured, faint radiance threw.

And the desire of Fame,  
 To which his nature did so fondly cling,—  
 The hope that Death should not oblivion bring,  
 But in his country's pride should live his name,—

Burned with a flame too strong—  
 Too ardent—for his mind's abode of clay,  
 And joined with dark adversity, to weigh  
 His soul to earth, and sadden all his song.

Frequent lack of the bare necessities of life, and the constantly recurring frustration of his hopes for both health and comfort, not for himself alone but for his wife and child, account for the melancholy wail which pervades many of his poems and often drove him to the verge of madness. In fact, on one occasion he lost his self-control so completely that his wife fled in dismay to her father's home. This incident, followed by remorse, prompted the pathetic effusion, "Pleadings for Return", which cannot be read without emotion a century after its author has been released from life's fitful fever. In some of his earlier poems he was inclined to be querulous; but later he became reconciled to his lot and seemed to welcome the end. In *A Lucid Interval*, he writes:

When want restrained my youthful fire,  
 I bade my harp complain;  
 But now along each trembling wire  
 There breathes an humble strain:  
 The night that closed around my way  
 Is still without a morn,  
 But oh of sacred Reason's ray  
 A steadfast star is born.

Again, in *Departing*, he exclaims:

Why should my loving friends deplore  
 My premature decay?  
 I long to spread my wings and soar  
 To everlasting day.

And his last poem, addressed to his wife, concludes as follows:

But let not grief, too bitter, rend,—  
 But trust, and trusting pray,  
 The widow's God, the orphan's friend,  
 Will be thy staff and stay.

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John McPherson was born in Liverpool, N. S., on February 4, 1817, and died at Brookfield on July 26, 1845. His whole life, short as it was, was spent in Queen's County, except for a few months in Halifax and a voyage to the West Indies. His education was restricted to the common schools of the day, when, according to a contemporary report, "there was not only a great deficiency of books but those used were nearly as varied as the children's garments," and to private reading of such books as rural Nova Scotia afforded and such newspapers as penetrated into his community. According to Thompson, "He was fond of repeating passages from Campbell's and Kirke White's poems" in his school days and, just before his death, he refers specifically to reading the Bible and the sermons in *The Christian Monitor*. He early manifested the sensitiveness of the poet to melody and beauty, was always of a retiring disposition and delicate constitution, and fond of reading by the fireside or in the solitude of field and wood. The only occasion on which he indulged in boisterous play he suffered a fractured ankle, which gave him great pain, and confined him to bed for several months. In his seventeenth year, probably owing to the death of his mother, he went to live with his uncle, Donald McPherson, at Brookfield. In Brookfield he enjoyed for a few months the instruction and fellowship of Angus M. Gidney, a teacher of considerable literary ability, who later became in succession sub-editor of the *Novascotian* and *Morning Chronicle*, editor of the *Yarmouth Herald*, and of the *Weekly Register* of Bridgetown. While in the employ of the Halifax papers, Gidney again gave sympathy and encouragement to the aspiring poet, whom he had often moved to tears by apt quotation of Coleridge or Byron, and was later rewarded by at least two poems addressed to him personally, when the poet was in one of his rare happy moods and felt that he might yet "secure a proud poetic name" but would still "respond to friendship's gentle claim".

It is not clear from Thompson's account what McPherson did between his school-days at Brookfield and his school-teaching at Kempt, except that some time between 1835 and 1841 he worked as a clerk in a mercantile establishment in Halifax and went on a voyage to the West Indies; but it is clear from his poetry that neither the life of a clerk nor of a sailor was to his liking, and that although his experiences at sea inspired him to write at least six poems, he rejoices only in the thought of escaping "to the quiet scenes of my native shore, and the dear delights of home."

Whatever McPherson was doing in the interval to earn his daily bread, I have no doubt he was writing verse in every spare moment, and watching with keen interest the progress of the temperance movement, which was in the first deep flush of enthusiasm in the 1830's, the flux and flow of immigration and emigration, which then as now was disturbing to patriotic Nova Scotians, the struggle that was being waged by the Reformers for responsible government, and the wonders of steam-communication as symbolized by the achievement of Cunard.

The earliest poem of his that I have found with the date attached was written at Brookfield in 1838, and deals in a rather sentimental fashion with a farmer of Queen's County, who had foolishly responded to the lure of Illinois, suffered severely from the sickness incident to the climate, and finally returned, worn with long travelling, to his native country to prove the fulfilment of the promise—"Dwell in the land and thou shalt be fed." In this youthful effort, though the verse is bad, the purpose is good, and the moral of the last stanza is in line with Sam Slick's tale of Pat Lannigan, who also was glad to return to Nova Scotia after a trial of conditions in the United States:

Wife—kindred—and country—Oh! these are the ties  
From which are derived the endearments I prize!  
Adieu then to wand'ring in sorrow and pain,  
I am blessed in my own little cottage again.

In two poems, *Stanzas* and *Misanthropic*, written in January and April, 1839, McPherson seems to be struggling with the problems of life, death and immortality, and though in the first he concludes that "the soul shall never die, but flourish in the realm of endless day, rejoicing in her immortality," in the second he seems to have lapsed into one of those gloomy and self-defensive moods which frequently beset him later and sug-

gest that both the thought and the verse-form are tentative and immature. The first line of the following stanza indicates that he himself is not sure that he means what he says:

Perchance my words are dark and wild,  
 But life was darkened in its spring—  
 And I have been misfortune's child;  
 And now I am a weary thing  
 Cut off from every earthly tie,  
 With nought remaining but to die,  
 And hide in earth's unbroken rest  
 A sunless brow—a joyless breast.

In any event, a year later McPherson has shaken off his gloom and is rejoicing in the progress his countrymen are making, both political and economic. The following two stanzas from a poem entitled *The Cunard Enterprise*, which is dated, Liverpool, September, 1840, glow with pride in the achievement of the reformers, who had just obtained the recall of a lieutenant governor because he would not take advisers in whom the Assembly had cause to confide, and of Cunard who had just succeeded in establishing regular transatlantic communication by steam in twelve days. Whatever may be said of the poetic form, it cannot be denied that these lines reveal accurately the spirit of his countrymen in one of their most exalted moods:

\* \* \* \* \*

How great the change that in a few short years  
 Even in our still neglected land appears!  
 Behold her people taught their worth to feel,  
 And take the stand that best secured their weal.  
 Behold the Parent mindful of her Child  
 Whose voice has reached her from the northern wild,  
 And nobly granting what we long have sought—  
 The sacred rights for which her Hampden fought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cunard, Acadia's Enterprising son,  
 Thy noble work is gallantly begun—  
 And it shall prosper if a people's prayer  
 For such improvement be the Almighty's care.  
 Thy youthful Country's benefactor, thou,  
 We bind the laurel on thine honored brow!  
 Thy name, great man! to every Patriot dear,  
 Our children's children from their sires shall hear;  
 And, taught by thee, in future time shall rise  
 High spirits meet for equal Enterprise!

The year 1841 is a landmark in the poet's life: he ceased to imitate other poets, and acquired a style of his own; he received and acknowledged a tribute in verse from a fellow-poet; and he married a wife and decided to become a school-master. Henceforth, he aspired to a place amongst the lyric poets: the natural beauties of his locality, "the pleasures and pains of his lot, the fears and hopes which excited his own breast", rather than more abstract themes, claim his attention; and he adopts a simple verse form appropriate to the mood of the moment. Generally, he makes no attempt at elaborate word painting; but his poems abound in "picturesque suggestion, illustrative of kindly sympathies and moral or religious aspirations", as the following stanzas from *Wild Flowers*, one of his poems on external nature published in 1841, illustrate:

But one, our Country's Emblem dear,  
 The lovely flower of May,  
 Springs in the wild our hearts to cheer  
 While vernal suns delay!

I love its amaranthine leaf,  
 I love its simple bloom;  
 It whispers, "Hope!"—and counsels Grief  
 To look beyond the tomb.

It breathes of some untroubled scene—  
 Some land divinely fair;  
 Of skies ineffably serene—  
 Of pure immortal air!

In August, 1841, in answer to the tribute of a fellow-poet, McPherson wrote a long introspective poem of eight stanzas, one of which depicts and explains his loneliness as follows:

No happy home—no gentle wife—  
 No household band have I;  
 The tender ministries of life  
 My cruel stars deny.  
 Like some lone bird whose wearied wing  
 Droops o'er a shoreless sea,  
 I cannot lift my voice and sing  
 As if my soul were free.

Four months later, he married his cousin, Irene McPherson, who proved a loyal and devoted helpmate during the last four years of his life, and could not rest content until the collected

edition of his poems was published as a monument to his memory seventeen years after his death. During the first two years of his married life, he taught school in Kempt, then for a few months at Maitland, Annapolis County, and finally returned to the Brookfield district, where he attempted to build a little cottage with his own hands, to cultivate a small farm, and to eke out a living from his writings. Kempt Settlement at that time had the fatal gift of beauty, which inspired some of his best poems of nature, but otherwise it might have been the prototype of Goldsmith's *Rising Village*; and the school-house in which he taught, was equally primitive; but he found inspiration in his walks to and from school and strove earnestly to inspire his pupils with love of nature and of learning, while continuing to compose lyrics for their edification and that of his adult countrymen. Two of his poems, *May* and *Longings for Spring*, were published in the *Novascotian* in 1842, and brought McPherson the most widespread recognition that he had yet received. They were reviewed at length by the editor, who in discussing the originality and felicity of the poet's style, said that he seemed "far removed from the imitator", might be named "without disparagement" in the same sentence with Campbell and Wordsworth, and that "either of these celebrated writers might feel pleasure and pride at being the author of *Longings after Spring*. He regarded the following stanzas of the poem as "a perfect gem, on the interregnum between winter and spring in Nova Scotia:

Oh, I remember one still night,  
 That bless'd the world of yore,—  
 A fair maid with an eye of light,  
 Was with me on that shore.  
 I look upon the same calm brow,  
 But sweeter feelings throng,—  
 She, wedded, sits beside me now,  
 And smiles upon my song.

The Robin has returned again,  
 And rests his wearied wing,  
 But makes no music in the glen,  
 Where he was wont to sing.  
 The Blackbird chants no jocund strain;  
 The tiny wild-wood throng  
 Still of the searching blast complain  
 But make no joyful song.



The ploughman cheering on his team,  
 At morning's golden prime,—  
 The milk-maid singing of her dream,  
 At tranquil evening time,—  
 The shrill frog piping from the pool,—  
 The swallow's twittering cry,—  
 The teacher's pleasant walk from school,  
 Require a kinder sky.

Oh! month of many smiles and tears,  
 Return with those bright flowers,  
 That come like light, from Astral spheres,  
 To glad Acadia's bowers!  
 Young children go not forth to play,—  
 Life hath small voice of glee,  
 'Till thy sweet smiles, of genial May,  
 Bring back the murmuring bee.

This notice gave great encouragement to the struggling poet, but, unfortunately, an unsympathetic correspondent of the *Acadian Recorder* robbed him of half his reward by attacking Thompson's review. Under the pen-name of "Reason", he enquired if Thompson had been really serious in allowing his pen to place McPherson on "literary equality" with Campbell and Wordsworth, "compared with whom the strains of McPherson's lute are as the chirping notes of our Blue Bird to the powerful and melodious tones of England's Thrush." Thompson replied that he had not placed the Nova Scotian poet on a "literary equality" with the English poets; and that "Reason" would have written to more purpose if he had read his review carefully, and undertaken "to prove that the verses alluded to were below the estimate given", instead of "making unfair comparisons, with a degree of definiteness which does not argue any extraordinary judgment in the matter"; but he did concede that in his own comparison he was thinking of "the smaller works" of Campbell and Wordsworth.

However, as a result of this controversy and of other poems which appeared in the meantime, McPherson received a very warm welcome from the literary-minded people of Halifax, when he visited it in the following year, and he began to long for the freedom of an open air life.

It was the warmth of this reception and some small donations from the Highland Society, the Literary Society and Hon. Wm. Young which led him to hope that he could give up the irksome task of teaching and build the cottage of his dream:

A cottage veiled by waving pines  
 That taste had left to please the eye—  
 A home that held some sacred shrines,  
 Looked upwards to a smiling sky.  
 Farm-buildings, barn, and lattice near,  
 Screened from the north by circling trees;  
 An orchard there—a garden here—  
 And gay flowers fragrant to the breeze.

It was a modest wish, but ill-health and the infinitesimal returns from his writings frustrated his hopes, and though he bought 24 acres of land near Fairy Lake, and attempted to build a small cottage with his own hands, he had to move into it before it was finished, and fate decreed that he was to have only one dreary winter beside his own fireside. The walls were unshingled, and "quilts were suspended along the walls to turn aside the chilling wind and to stop the drifting snow, which would else have fallen on his bed". He and his small family lived under these conditions from December to May, when completely broken in health, he was removed to his uncle's home in Brookfield, where he died on July 26, 1845. He was buried, according to his wish, at sunset, on the east side of Lake Tupper, on a hill which commanded a view that he had long loved.

Despite the privations and frustrations of his last days, 1844 had been one of the most fruitful years in the number and quality of his poems; and, in addition, had produced some articles on education, and a passionate plea for the removal of prohibitive restrictions on the admission of American republications of English works and American publications in general. Of the poems in the collected edition, those classified as personal, devotional and occasional are interesting still for the biographical detail they contain, and as the reflection of the struggles of a simple mind with complex problems. His poems on the temperance movement have both an historical and a contemporary value, although they would find fewer patient readers now than when they were published. But his poems of nature remain as a permanent contribution to pioneer literature: for with McPherson, love of nature was neither a cant phrase nor

a vague emotion. It was innate and concrete. He loved to stray "o'er sunward slopes, in forest nooks, o'er meadows green and gay, and down by alder-shaded brooks, that mummur on their way"; but above all he loved the native flowers of his beloved Acadia, was never weary of expressing this affection in verse and of enjoining the love of flowers upon youth: "Not for their loveliness alone, their influence on the air, but for the deep inbreathing tone with which they soothe our care". Whether writing on the months or the seasons, on morning or evening, or on almost any subject, the flowers got into his poem as inevitably as the head of Charles the First got into the manuscripts of Mr. Dick. In *Walks in the Woods*, he says:

For me—a bard—the love of flowers  
Is deep within my soul,  
And blooms in dark desponding hours,  
To make my spirit whole.

But, though McPherson's love of nature is ever-present in his verses, and he constantly seeks consolation and refreshment from the woods, flower-strewn fields and murmuring brooks, he is not content with this alone, but longs for the fellowship of kindred spirits to share and thereby to sweeten the joys of sense and mind. It is this gentle love of the natural beauties of his locality and of fellowship with kindred spirits that permeates all his work and has still no small appeal to his fellow countrymen.