

*Fred Cogswell*

## MOSES HARDY NICKERSON: A STUDY

IN MAY, 1886, at Barrington Passage, Nova Scotia, the *Cape Sable Advertiser* was born. It closely resembled the hundreds of struggling weeklies that provided a glimpse of the great world, local news, and politics to the scattered villages and townships of Canada in the late nineteenth century. The area which it served was poor and thinly populated, and the *Advertiser* was so small that it did not have a complete press. Before each issue could come out, the type-forms had to be loaded on the steamer *Arcadia* and taken to Yarmouth, where the paper was printed at the office of the *Yarmouth Times*. It is scarcely surprising that the *Advertiser* lasted only four years. Its editor, however, was Moses Hardy Nickerson, one of the most interesting men Nova Scotia ever produced, and its editorials throughout its brief life were thoroughly consistent with his personality.\*

For example, the issue dated December 30, 1886, carried but one editorial, "The Sere and Yellow Leaf." In this, Nickerson develops, for a fisherman audience, an attack upon Lord Tennyson which is both acute and self-revealing. He begins by rebuking Tennyson for having traded "his patent of nobility drawn from a higher source" for the borrowed robes of an English peer. His own singing robes, in consequence, are now said to fit him ungracefully. A good example is found in Tennyson's latest poem, "Locksley Hall, Sixty Years After." Nickerson does not quarrel with the poem's technique but with its content:

The ring and rhythm are there. We catch indeed the music of the first Locksley, but it is, to use the inimitable phrase of poor Keats, "music snarling like a god in pain." Tennyson sets up at last for a thorough-going cynic, a sort of new Timon with a vengeance, without a shadow of the reasons which that brave old man had for pouring forth his maledictions hot and heavy on all mankind.

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Nickerson admits himself completely baffled by Tennyson's "weird shriek of despair." During the past sixty years "numerous evils which cried out to heaven for redress have been happily stamped out." On this point, he would contradict Tennyson though he were "forty times a lord":

Is it not a theme for gratulation that old England has forever left behind those days when star chambers were recognized institutions, when popular rights were overshadowed by the royal prerogative and when the occasional recreation of a first lord of the treasury consisted in getting drunk and shinning up a lamp post?

This editorial illustrates the cardinal principles that unified Nickerson's personality as a man and as a poet: his complete lack of deference toward established notables living or dead; his conviction that what was of burning concern to himself was bound to be so to other men; and his unshaken faith in human progress. These qualities developed early and stemmed from the healthy egotism of a life of remarkable personal achievement against heavy odds.

## ii

Shelburne County is a low-lying wedge of land at the south-west tip of Nova Scotia. The soil is meagre, but the coastline is deeply indented, and there are many fine harbours with good fishing grounds off them. At the south-west tip of Shelburne County is a group of small islands, of which Cape Sable Island is the largest. Here, at Newelton, Moses Hardy Nickerson was born on September 10, 1844.<sup>1</sup> His parents were Jane and Phineas Nickerson. Superficially, his background was hardly a promising one for a future poet. The Sable Island people had been for generations fishermen who, for the most part far from market facilities and at the mercy of the merchants, eked out an existence from the sea. Educational opportunities were primitive and in Nickerson's home non-existent. His parents had taught him to read at the age of five, but two years later, to be near the fishing ground off Cape Sable, they had moved to Fish Island, a lonely hummock rising out of the Atlantic about a mile to the west of Cape Sable Island. There he was to live for the next six years. The journalist, Percy St. Clair Hamilton, describes this period of Nickerson's life as follows:

The Bible, Pilgrim's Progress, and a volume of Dibdin's sea songs constituted his library—were his treasures until he was thirteen years old. The heroic portions of the Old Testament, the stirring episodes of the pilgrimage and the gallant lays redolent of the great deep, filled the whole world of his imagination to the brim. The uncarpeted floor of a bed-chamber was his writing pad and on the boards with a piece of chalk he wrote a history of the hero of the songs. . . One day (when Mr. Nickerson was 13 years

old) an American student, who chanced to be summering in those parts, gave him a Latin grammar and some books in that language. Without help, he mastered them thoroughly and could soon read Virgil and Horace with ease and delight. I know he can to this day repeat the Pollio and long passages of Aeneid from memory, and, if anything, is still more at home with the odes of Horace.

At the age of fourteen he got a hint of French pronunciation from a wrecked sailor and, procuring an Ollendorf and Lexicon, was able to converse in French after three months of close study.

How does one explain this love of learning on the part of a boy who grew up out of contact with formal schooling and who, as soon as he could pull an oar, accompanied his father and brothers to the fishing grounds? To explain Nickerson would be to explain much that baffles the outside about Nova Scotia. Part of the answer lies, I believe, in the power of oral family tradition, and in those facets of environment that too often go unnoticed in our too-academically conscious modern judgement.

Like so many other Nova Scotian families, the Nickersons, though poor and uneducated academically, were never humble. They knew from their fathers who had learned from their fathers before them that in their veins ran the blood of men who had been somebody and who had stood for something big. Looming large in the family tradition was its American founder, William Nickerson of Norwich, of whom Moses Nickerson was to write:

My fancy paints him as an honest weaver  
Whose mind was rather larger than his gains;  
Who did not wear a helm, cocked hat or beaver  
To safeguard or to supplement his brains,—  
The pink of Puritans, a strong believer  
In one sole King that ever lives and reigns  
Above the heavens, likewise below the steeple  
And hears the prayers of His peculiar people.

So he went forth unto a strange new life,  
And on the slope that faced the rising morn  
Saw not the harvest angel of the strife  
Set his keen sickle to the embattled corn. . . .

William Nickerson's tradition of honest independence and non-conformity was to be transmitted through seven generations of Nickersons on Cape Cod and in Nova Scotia and gained, if anything, through family adversity.

The people of the "South Shore" of Nova Scotia were unlettered but not ignorant. Most were familiar with the ports of New England and the Maritimes; many had sailed to the far cities of the globe. Always while fishing there was time to swap experiences of outlandish places and

to make shrewd, home-spun comparisons in the picturesque, ungrammatical dialect of Cape Sable Island. A smart boy in a boat who kept both ears open could learn a good deal about the world and its ways without going to school at all, and Moses Nickerson was such a boy.

Adding pith to the native independence were the radical verses of the Scottish poet, Robert Burns, whom every Nova Scotian seemed to have got by heart at an early age. Finally, there was the sea, always in the foreground, a perennial source of wonder. Mix these factors of environment with the perfect health, unlimited energy, lively curiosity, keen intellect, and retentive memory that Moses Nickerson possessed, and his achievements as outlined below, though still remarkable, should be at least understandable.

### iii

At sixteen, Nickerson attended the departmental school at Clark's Harbour for thirty days to learn geometry, after which he received a grade "C" teacher's license. For the next fifteen years, he divided his working time between fishing and school-teaching on Cape Sable Island, and his leisure between learning languages and writing poetry. He also found time to marry, in December, 1868, Miss Mary E. Duncan of Sheet Harbour, who bore him two sons, Morris and Francis, and a daughter, Charlotte.

Moses Nickerson loved the pattern of similarity and difference which a comparative study of language presents, and he persevered at linguistics throughout his life. His self-taught achievements were considerable. In addition to his knowledge of Latin and French, he acquired a fluent reading and speaking knowledge of Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. He possessed a reading knowledge of German, Greek, and Hebrew, and in his old age attempted, and succeeded well enough to translate literally at least, Swedish, Norwegian, and Dutch. Not only did he make translations from all these languages, but he attempted original poetry in French and Italian.

Although he was to write occasional poetry all his life (I have a copy of a sonnet—certainly no worse than many of Wordsworth's—which he composed at the age of ninety-three), the best years of Moses Nickerson's poetic output were those spent at Cape Sable Island. A few of his early poems appeared in the Yarmouth and Halifax papers, but most of them had to wait until the appearance of *Carols of the Coast* (1892) and *Songs of Summerland* (1927).<sup>2</sup> A "fear of being thought conceited" by his neighbours kept him from attempting magazine publication. This was, however, the poet's only ruling fear. Nickerson had a strong bent

for satire, and in poems like "Major Bray of the County Militia" and "The Village Croesus", Cape Sable worthies were ruthlessly dissected. These poems evidently were privately circulated in the community, for in a retrospect "To J. A. Atkinson," Nickerson writes of those early days of care-free verse-making:

Our hearts were untainted, our heads were unschooled,  
Our minds no rich-freighted idea could float;  
But a few people's conscience we rigidly ruled  
By the law of the mischievous stanzas we wrote.

Elsewhere in the same poem he adds:

Then our first chanted rhymes, rather warm, I confess,  
Came out with a promise that very soon fades;  
Because of their peasant-like manner and dress  
They flourished and died in their own native shades.

It was much that a village our works should discuss,  
It was more that some persons detested the sound;  
Approbation was never so pleasant to us  
As the anger which showed that our satire could wound.

In 1878, Nickerson abandoned school-teaching and fishing for politics, journalism, and business. After an unsuccessful candidacy for the legislature in the Liberal interest, he moved to Halifax where he became a reporter on the *Chronicle*. He was at once recognized among his fellow scribes as "a finished and elegant writer of prose, an instructive and fascinating conversationalist, and a veritable living encyclopaedia of literary information."

He evidently left Halifax to become editor of the *Cape Sable Advertiser*. Following the failure of the *Advertiser*, and a still more short-lived venture as editor of the *Daily Sun* in Sydney (a task for which he received, he tells us, \$10.00), he founded his own newspaper, *The Coast Guard*, in 1896, at Clark's Harbour. Unlike the other papers mentioned, *The Coast Guard* was not primarily a political organ but a weekly devoted to the interests of the fishermen of western Nova Scotia. It was extremely successful, and Nickerson devoted all his energy to it until, in 1900, he was elected to the provincial legislature as a Liberal member for Shelburne.

Before election, Nickerson had worked hard to improve conditions in his local area. He had been a school commissioner at Barrington. He had taken a prominent part in the agitation to establish the Halifax and Southwestern Railway. In 1899, he had gone to Ottawa as a member of the Commission on Lobster Fisheries. He is said to have invented the

pan car device for keeping fish alive before shipping, and he was an official of the American Lobster Company which pioneered that process. In parliament, his interests widened to include all matters affecting Nova Scotian shipping and fisheries. He is credited with the establishment of processing plants at Canso, Halifax, Liverpool, Yarmouth, and Lockeport. He also drafted and put before the House a bill to incorporate the Fishermen's Union of 1905.

Around 1911, Nickerson was made Inspector of Life Saving Stations for Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. While in office, he established, for the first time, telephone communications between the island lighthouses and the mainland, and he re-located the station at Cheticamp, Cape Breton. He closed out his public life by a four-year term as Director of Fisheries for Nova Scotia.

Early in World War I, Nickerson, a pronounced pacifist, retired and went to live with his family, who had gone to Massachusetts. His retirement consisted in helping to found and edit, at Boston, *The Atlantic Fisherman*; in successfully representing Nova Scotian interests before a Congressional committee of inquiry into the advisability of restricting American imports of lobsters; in writing letters to the papers on every conceivable topic; in composing poetry, and translating from various languages; in attempting to prove that Leif Erikson landed at Cape Sable Island. A remarkably active and clear-minded old man, Nickerson died in 1943 at the age of ninety-eight, leaving behind a staggering number of unpublished manuscripts.<sup>3</sup>

Nickerson's unpublished work—which, if still in existence, should be recovered by either the Dominion or the Nova Scotian government—consists of translations from foreign poets, original poems, and prose essays. The translations include much of Ovid's work and the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius from the Latin; the first part of Goethe's *Faust* from the German; two Cantos of Camoens' *Lusiad* from the Portuguese; Erik's *Saga Rauda* and several Icelandic Eddas; Teyne's *Last of the Vikings* and several other Swedish poems. Unpublished original poems include "Angelica, a Tale of the Middle Ages"; "The Phocaeans, or the Greek Colony of Marseilles"; "The Sea Flight, an Imaginary Tour of the World written before the Invention of Airplanes"; "The Higher Patriotism, a Plea for Universal Peace"; a sheaf of two hundred sonnets; "The Christiad, an Epos of the Prince of Peace"; also, several burlettos and a large collection of miscellaneous poems.

Nickerson's prose essays fill twenty-six folios—each one as large as a shop ledger. The content comprises essays on the origin and diffusion of languages, on creeds and customs of antiquity, on germinology, on the

seven great racial stocks of humanity, on governments, and on Scandinavian origins. He also preserved a common-sized chest full of his letters on religion, politics, philosophy, and the fisheries.

## iv

The foregoing brief account of Nickerson's achievements illustrates the extraordinary capacity for work and the range of interest that the man possessed. This capacity and range were not, so far as I can discover, any feverish attempt on Nickerson's part to compensate for a personal or social maladjustment. The circumstances of his home life were evidently happy. His parents indulged him, as far as they could, in his pursuit of learning, and his retrospects of his boyhood and young manhood are invariably happy. Photographs in old age show Nickerson as a ruggedly handsome man with strong chin and nose, clear eyes, and a lofty forehead. There is in his expression intelligence and confidence with no signs of strain. There is every indication that he was personally popular. Percy St. Clair Hamilton called him "an instructive and fascinating conversationalist," and Hamilton's testimony is borne out by the following extract from a letter in the *Yarmouth Times* describing a visit some of his old cronies paid him in his ninety-third year in Boston:

Many were the reminiscences of those days. Mr. Nickerson, as fine an entertainer as in the days of yore, with his ready flow of wit, despite an unfortunate accident, which deprived him of the use of one leg for the time being. He kept us well entertained for a few hours.

And an elderly resident of Shelburne whom I questioned said of him wistfully, "He was a great old fellow."

These may be only straws in the wind, but their direction is confirmed by the tenor of Nickerson's writing. His achievement stems from a union of optimism and healthy egotism. A firm believer in evolution, Nickerson seized upon the element of gradual progress inherent in Darwin's theory. Right, as he saw it, must ultimately prevail throughout the universe. He, Nickerson, served Right with all his brain and heart. Therefore his life was meaningful. Sustained by this syllogism, Nickerson faced the blows of life with confidence—comforting himself when thwarted by the example of a favorite hero—Columbus, Bruno, Burns—who, after temporary eclipse, had shone in a blaze of brightness. He was quick, too, to pounce upon the slightest contemporary occasion that might justify optimism. For example, when Eugene Debs was in prison in Atlanta during World War I for advocating pacifism, Nickerson had smuggled into his prison cell a poem which closed:

. . .the Brute surrenders slowly  
 To the Godhead of his dream:  
 But the poets and the sages  
 Far adown the future ages  
 See the human-hearted hero  
 Reign supreme!

More than a decade later, in October, 1929, another socialist and pacifist was in America. This time, however, the socialist (Ramsay MacDonald) was a guest of the White House, and the pacifism that had placed Debs in the penitentiary was now an honoured cause. Nickerson, now an old man of eighty-five, pounced upon the occasion and wrote:

. . .That hideous outlawed shape, the god of war,  
 That bogey of the nation's frenzied brain,  
 Is numbered with the things good men abhor,  
 Itself upon the good God's altar slain.

The White House fetes the man, who nobly burst  
 Tradition's fetters forged in fires of hell.  
 Yet Eugene Debs, who spoke God's message first,  
 Was doomed to languish in the dungeon-cell.

'Twas always thus. Some messenger is sent  
 To warn the viper brood in every land;  
 His voice, as in the desert, cries "Repent!  
 The Kingdom of the Just is now at hand."

Atlanta's prison walls are strong and thick,  
 And Debs in musty straw must make his bed;  
 This kept him silent. . .He was old and sick,  
 Now he proclaimeth loudly, from the dead!

Lo! what a mighty change in ten years' space,  
 The victory of sweet Peace has more renown  
 Than war, as heav'n beholds, with smiling face,  
 The lorn earth roll its reeking idol down!

It needeth neither sceptre, sword nor mace  
 To rule the world; nor yet the iron rod;  
 Who wins by friendship every warlike grace  
 He reigns as ruler by the grace of God!<sup>14</sup>

The flaw in Nickerson's sustaining syllogism is, of course, his conviction that the views of Moses Nickerson were always identifiable with those of Ultimate Right. Nickerson never realized how much his attitude toward life was unconscious in origin. Family tradition and an early



fondness for Burns had given him his essential radicalism. Along with it, he had absorbed from his home and community the spirit of Christian ethics. Constant success and good health had strengthened his optimism. Nickerson found his philosophy in Darwin and in other writers because it was in himself first. Not realizing this, he believed that it had been determined from his reading and thinking. He had only, therefore, to write and others would be persuaded. His was essentially a positivistic mind; the brooding introspective nature of a Tennyson and the religious transports of a mystic were equally beyond his comprehension. Despite his health and range, there is therefore an ultimate superficiality and shallowness about his thinking that can be at times disappointing. Nevertheless, the very limitations of the positivistic mind are the source of its ability to accomplish work without complication and undue strain. Although it evaluates them differently, the world owes as much to the achievements of a Franklin or a Nickerson as it does to those of an Edwards or a Lampman.

## v

Apart from newspaper verse, Moses Nickerson published two volumes of poetry, *Carols of the Coast* (1892) and *Songs of Summerland and Other Poems* (1927). Both were printed at his own expense and attracted only local attention. There is little difference in quality between them.

As one reads these books, one encounters paradox. On the one hand are reams of rhetorical verse on ephemeral themes, narratives marred by garrulity, rhymed statements of the commonplace, hundreds of clichés and translations of corpse-like stiffness. On the other hand, embedded in this mass of mediocrity are some classic epigrams, a few literary essays in wit of amazing dexterity, a handful of angry satires written with pith and power, and a half dozen lyrics which, while they say little, suggest much. How can such unevenness in the work of a single poet be explained? The answer lies in the clash between Nickerson's temperament and his poetic ideals.

Nickerson was an intelligent egotist gifted with tremendous energy that was always finding fresh channels through which to flow. His chief enjoyment lay in finding new ideas and occupations rather than in reflecting upon, sifting, and refining old ones. To such a man idea in poetry is primary, and expression a mere mechanical necessity. Nickerson, I feel, poured his ideas into whichever of the several moulds suggested by his reading occurred to him first; having done so, he lost interest and proceeded to fresh creation. His was not the temperament to refine the ore

he had discovered, nor was he compelled by the criticism of his peers to do so. Newspaper editors published his verse when he submitted it because it was topical and manifestly better than that of contemporary Nova Scotian newspaper poets, and when a magazine returned one of his poems with criticism, Nickerson submitted no more poems to the magazine.

*Carols of the Coast* and *Songs of Summerland* contain, then, the first drafts of poems rather than the finished products. For a first draft of a poem to succeed a miracle is required. An even greater miracle is needed when the poet's poetic assumptions are so greatly at odds with his temperament as Nickerson's were.

Nickerson's early reading—the Bible, Dibdin, the Latin classics—fixed in his mind the nature of poetry. It was to illustrate, more strikingly than prose, general truths. His development as an intellectual in an essentially rural community led him to add to general truths contemporary events. Public poetry, however, depends for its effects not upon the quality of its ideas so much as the form and polish those ideas acquire. Commonplaces only become memorable by the manner of their expression. With an essentially romantic technique, Nickerson attempted classic poetry. Other poets before him—notably Landor and Burns—had done this and succeeded. In his far fewer and more limited successes, Moses Nickerson resembles Burns and Landor.

Landor-like in its cold perfection of form—form in which passion is more implicit than stated—is "Speranza" from *Carols of the Coast*:

Her face has the radiance of dreams unsung,  
Like that of an infant newly woke;  
Men call her Speranza in that sweet tongue  
Which Beatrice in Heaven spoke.

Less frequently, as the years roll on,  
Have her visits been,—but the very tear  
Which mourns her now as forever gone  
Is the secret gem that draws her near.

As deceptively simple and as flawless, but more closely allied to the Nova Scotian background of the poet, is "The Fisherman's Wife" from *Songs of Summerland*:

Her home is on the clover lea;  
The afternoon is long;  
And sweeter than the honey bee  
She hums a cradle song.

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The blossoms on the cherry tree  
 Beside her window blow:  
 She glances only toward the sea;  
 The sun is sinking low.

Through Dibdin, Nickerson inherited the metre of the Restoration songs, and there is, despite a certain stiffness, a manly ring in his lines that sets them apart from the more softly modulated but often flaccid lines of his Canadian contemporaries who echoed the British Romantic and Victorian poets. He was, moreover, one of the few Canadian poets of his day who knew how to handle emotion. The fanciful "The Holocaust," in which the poet's wit matches its subject to a T, is a remarkable product of the Nova Scotia of the mid-nineteenth century. It is a paste imitation of a Restoration diamond—but what perfect paste!

These letters, innocently bold  
 In all their tender yearning,  
 Must now be tried like virgin gold;  
 Yea, let this mass of wealth untold  
 Be purified by burning.

There lies the substance and the sum  
 Of deathless love recorded!  
 'Tis not the first time faith has come  
 From lock and key to martyrdom  
 And gone to get rewarded.

Its body in the fire must die  
 Without a drop to drench it.  
 The flame must riot red and high:  
 The tear founts' rather scant supply  
 Can lend no aid to quench it.

That sweet, confiding, melting style,  
 Oh how I once enjoyed it!  
 Now, as I light the funeral pile  
 It would be sacrilege to smile,  
 Yet how can I avoid it.

The smile which I cannot control  
 Is less profane than stupid.  
 It issues from an honest soul  
 That sees its incense upwards roll  
 As nonsense burned to Cupid.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust!  
 And now my heart is lighter.  
 Did not those traitorous scrolls combust,  
 They might some day betray my trust  
 As did their pretty writer.

Where Nickerson resembles Burns is in the sledge-hammer directness and brutality of his epigrams and in the caustic sarcasm with which he deals with local pretence and humbug, particularly in religious form. "False Witness" illustrates his ability in epigram:

I cannot combat anything like these:  
I fight the fakir lion, not his fleas.  
So Hercules would only swing his bat  
To crush a dragon, not to brain a gnat.

From many good poems satirizing Cape Sable Island characters, I have chosen to reproduce "The Village Croesus." This poem is no "Holy Willie's Prayer"; it does, however, possess a Burnsian vehemence and gift of plain speech. It also anticipates the metre and something of the manner of Edward Arlington Robinson's much later "Bewick Finzer":

To see him you would scarcely think  
He was so very great,  
Till you hear his tumid pockets clink  
To his self-important gait;  
Then other people's pockets shrink  
For six months after date.

At church what meekness does he wear;  
But the home-life lifts the mask:  
The family bible on that shelf there—  
On this, a whiskey flask;  
That closet used for secret prayer,  
And this for a smuggled cask.

But when the village chapel swarmed  
With clergy and with lay,  
We saw him suddenly transformed  
That yearly meeting day;  
His charities were roused and warmed  
Like a snake in the month of May.

We saw him near the altar stand  
With penitential air,  
And hold an offering in his hand  
To make the worldly stare—  
An offering with this meek demand:  
Five dollars' worth of prayer!

Revolting thought! perhaps the sum  
In such oblation spent  
Was the clear revenue of rum  
All vitrioled cent. per cent!  
Howe'er it be, it did not come  
A worse way than it went.

I thought of Simon Magus' rash  
 Yet similar desire;  
 But I looked in vain for the answering flash  
 Of holy, withering ire  
 Condemning the hypocrite and his cash  
 To hell's eternal fire.

## vi

Nickerson's work has been almost completely neglected by Canadian critics and anthologists. Only in two anthologies is he represented and in both by the uncharacteristic "Cape Sable," a poem of purely physical description. Three factors go far to account for this neglect. His work was published and circulated obscurely in Western Nova Scotia. The dross in the five hundred pages published tended to overlay the scant veins of genuine gold. Canadian critics, moreover, in 1892 and in 1927, the years of his publications, were looking for other qualities in verse than those of eighteenth-century classicism. Nickerson, nevertheless, has written a handful of good poems, and his work is certainly as impressive as that of Alexander MacLachlan, Charles Heavyside, and Charles Mair, three other self-educated poets who at one time or other were contemporaries and who now find ready recognition in all our standard anthologies. Much space has been devoted to Sir Charles G. D. Roberts' long patriotic poem "Canada," but I prefer the selection of Nickerson with which I close this article, the Melville-like "My America." However gnomic and literary this poem may be, it is the product of an essentially noble spirit and as such deserves remembrance:

"*Steure, muthiger Segler*"—Schiller

Ay, though the social martyr-stake  
 Be planted for opinion's sake,  
 It is not self-deceiving  
 To hold, unawed, unrecompensed,  
 Despite a thousand creeds incensed,<sup>6</sup>  
 One simple steadfast faith against  
 A whole world unbelieving.

Before the true-souled Genoese  
 There rolled the most unknown of seas.  
 All other shipmen shunned it.  
 Dark mystery on its outmost edge  
 Lay like an adamant hedge.  
 His bold prow cleft it like a wedge  
 And found a world beyond it.

Thus must I too pursue alone  
A course peculiarly my own  
Far in the dangerous distance.  
I heed not warning, threat or sneer,  
While conscience whispers, *Do not fear,*  
*For thy America is here*  
*Or nowhere in existence.*

## NOTES

1. Of the two newspaper accounts of Nickerson's life, one gives the date of his birth as 1846. His obituary notice, however, confirms the 1844 date, which I have accordingly used.
2. The bibliographical details are as follows:  
*Carols of the Coast*. Halifax: Nova Scotia Printing Company, 1892. 288 pp.  
*Songs of Summerland, and Other Poems*. . . Boston: David D. Nickerson Company, 1927.
3. The chronology in both newspaper accounts of Nickerson's life is confused. I have followed in this section what seems to me to be the most logical sequence.
4. I found this poem in a scrap-book belonging to the poet's niece, Mrs. Annie Maxwell of Jordan, Nova Scotia. It is dated opposite the poet's name, October 12, 1929.
5. Note the ironic double meaning conveyed by the word "incensed"; Nickerson's poetry is studded with subtleties of this kind.