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ARCHIBALD MacMECHAN, CANADIAN ESSAYIST

IF ONE WISHED TO DRAMATIZE the difference between the work of Archibald MacMechan and that of the modern essayist, a ready contrast could be found in Hugh MacLennan. "The Montrealer", "New York, New York", or "The Lost Love of Tommy Waterfield" could never be found among MacMechan's papers. Such subjects were not part of his awareness. His attention focussed on the essential trivialities that make the individual human spirit vital, at least to itself. Not that he was unenthusiastic about life or unconcerned about even the most casual acquaintance, but rather that his world was more fundamental, less sophisticated, and infinitely more ordered. "I am still unreconciled to the kind of world I live in and I view many things with alarm besides myself, including most politicians and a good many voters", says MacLennan, who discarded the traditional concept of the essayist as a "man who lives a life of quiet but surprisingly cheerful desperation, reconciled to the facts of existence".¹ MacMechan, on the other hand, cherished "an English garden to work in, and leisure to write". That, he added, "is a life worth living".²

The essays of Archibald MacMechan are also unlike those of the genre among his Canadian contemporaries. For he was the first writer in this country to make the familiar essay his forte. It should not be surprising that he was also the most prolific. This need not be a virtue, but frequency of publication does provide a greater opportunity to succeed, or to fail. And while much of the writing in his first two volumes is ephemeral, his essays in general are unquestionably among the best of his time.

Except for that of Brandon Conron (whose analysis is cursory and at times ill-conceived), existing studies of the familiar essay in English Canadian literature neglect the development of the genre. It is true that the development of the essay has not been as steady as the literary historian might wish. There were only sporadic attempts in the form in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and not until the first quarter of the twentieth century was there anything like sustained activity. Even so, critics have not given sufficient study to the familiar essay in Canadian literature.

A principal factor in the dearth of material was the adverse influence of

journalism. Editors in the period sacrificed literary quality for melodrama, filling the remainder of their pages with articles on the prevailing materialism. *Saturday Night*, for example, could titillate readers with "The Demon of Homicide. A Weird Tale of an English Countryhouse", or with "A Fight With Bare Hands" — this tale being "the best description of a man-to-man fight to be found in recent fiction".³ Even the University Quarterlies, which avoided fiction, were keenly interested in current events. The *University Magazine* (earlier, the *McGill University Magazine*) said that its "main purpose" was "to express an educated opinion about the questions concerning Canada".⁴

Editors of mass-circulation magazines frequently published prose which resembled the periodical essay of the eighteenth century. Writers hid their identity behind a nom de plume to instruct and to amuse their readers. Moralizing or didactic essays, narrative essays, the anecdotal essay, the narrative sketch, humour, or satire best suited their purpose. Thus, factors likely to defeat the printing of quality prose, and of the familiar essay in particular, seem to have been present: a public demand for ephemeral literature, and a prevailing editorial interest in the industrial development of the country with the corresponding concerns of the new middle class. Apparently, public demand for a *Blackwood's* or a *London Magazine* or an *American Quarterly Review* simply was not present.

Whether there is any causal relationship between great literature and social conditions is questionable. A cultural lag may be characteristic of the frontier extension of old societies: certainly necessity is the "mother of invention" and, as Wilfred Eggleston has observed, belles lettres were not among the pioneer essentials. But that does seem to be a simple answer to the complex problem of literary unproductivity and to the mediocrity of much of the earlier work. Northrop Frye says that there are obvious features of life in a new country that are bound to handicap its writers:

Culture is born in leisure and an awareness of standards, and pioneer conditions tend to make energetic and uncritical work an end in itself, to preach a gospel of social unconsciousness, which lingers long after the pioneer conditions have disappeared. The impressive achievements of such a society are likely to be technological. It is in the inarticulate part of communication, railways and bridges and canals and highways, that Canada, one of whose symbols is the taciturn beaver, has shown its real strength.⁵

There was very little that was leisurely about the first two decades of Canada's century. The writer was confronted by a wealthy but divided and restless

industrial society. The editor knew that his popular periodical depended upon those subscribers for success. Writers, therefore, won their readers by writing about those things in which they were interested. Robert Service claimed in 1915 that he wrote of the things of the day for the people of the day, and they wanted melodrama, coarse brutality, crude sentiment, vigorous excitement, and thrills. An editor could ask justifiably whether or not the same reader would tolerate the familiar essay. Charles Lamb, says Walter Pater, is "a casual writer for dreamy readers". The followers of Dan McGrew can hardly be described as dreamy.

The quality of the periodical and its continuing success are vital to the development of the essay. In England, the multiplication of newspapers, magazines, and reviews was made in answer to a demand from the reading public. The literary quality and financial success of these publications assured ready exposure for the essayist. The founding of the great American magazines and quarterlies also contributed to virility in the United States. Canada, on the other hand, did not have the equivalent of these periodicals in the first quarter of this century, the era during which the essayist was struggling most earnestly to establish himself. If, however, essays did not flourish widely in this period, they did take root; and their most finished and graceful practitioner was Archibald MacMechan.

"Archie" considered himself a native Nova Scotian, though born in Berlin (Kitchener) Ontario in 1862. He progressed through childhood without unusual circumstances to prepare himself for a versatile career as scholar, editor, poet, novelist, and essayist. He came in 1889 to Dalhousie University where he taught nineteenth-century English Literature until his death in 1933. Students have witnessed readily to the path of MacMechan's star during those forty-four years. No teacher, it was said, worked more diligently than he to set before Canadian students an ideal of style: "Would it be too much to hope", he had said, "that Dalhousie graduates might be recognized by their manner of writing?"⁶ MacMechan was no less meticulous about his person. Constant in his habits almost to the point of fastidiousness, he remained uncannily the same in his ways. It would seem, however, that MacMechan's calculated manner of living was not wholly self-controlled. He had a strong love of action and adventure whose expression was thwarted by his lameness. He never admitted publicly to any lack of fulfilment, nor did he do so, perhaps, even to himself. But his sense of frustration seems to have been real.

His disciplined, sophisticated and civilized response to life is reflected in his prose — "the style was the very man".⁶ His estate, then, may have been

small, but it was well governed: ". . . orderliness, control, nothing in excess. No savage gibes, no bursts of temper. Perhaps no moments of ecstasy, but no giving over of the spirit to darkness and despair. He had highland blood, but his was the Greek ideal."⁶

During those years at Dalhousie University, he published sea stories, essays, poetry, and professional papers: The Montreal *Standard* alone printed his articles and book reviews for a twenty-year period. In 1920 he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada; twelve years later he received the Lorne Pierce Medal from the same society. Throughout these years, the students came and went, remembering not the particulars "Archie" taught them, but the "pressure, unobtrusive and gentle . . . constant, consistent and in the right direction". "Students who stood in awe of him in the classroom learned to know him as a friend in the home at which he kept open house, or on the water, or in the brisk walks through the woods, on which the disciple was often hard put to it to keep up with his older companion so youthful in spirit and physique."⁷

MacMechan published three books of essays: *The Porter of Bagdad* (1901),⁸ *The Life of a Little College* (1914),⁹ and *The Book of Ultima Thule* (1927). Only five of thirty-six compositions have more than academic interest. These, as Thomas Raddall has said, are charming. But on the whole, fantasy and the romantic concern with life, both characteristic of youth, become cloying. By comparison, the later work is more appealing in style and approach to the subject matter. That the tone of *Bagdad* is characteristic of youth is curious, for the book was published when MacMechan was thirty-nine. The inspiration for much of the volume, however, seems to have been derived from impressions in earlier years. "Heartha", for example, was prompted by memories of his winter in Maryland in 1889 when he was doing doctoral work at Johns Hopkins University. It is derived from impressions rather than from experience because the book is mainly the product of imagination, and MacMechan even chose the phrase "And Other Fantasies" as the sub-title of his work. He intended to write "The Dreamer" from a world of his own creation. As a result, only nineteen of the thirty-six pieces can be classified as familiar essays. The remainder are fantasies or reveries, bearing closer relationship to the short story or to the narrative sketch than to the essay.

Especially interesting in *Bagdad* is the element of the sensual. There is in all MacMechan's work a delight with Nature: "Things growing out of the ground are part of the unconsidered miracle in which we live."¹⁰ In *The Porter of Bagdad* he delights also in the sensations of physical pleasure. This

is particularly obvious in "Anadyomene", MacMechan's response to a moment at sea when the waves against the bow of the boat obliterate time and space. Here, as in other pieces, woman is idealized. She is said to be enchanting, an "apparition of whiteness", a "goddess" who "gleams" like "living purity". She is pictured, too, in an obviously sensual context. Her "breasts" are "softly white . . . even in texture and . . . fine". She is "sea-born", "laughter-loving", "a queen". No human eyes can bear the sight of "her irresistible, naked loveliness". "White-armed" and "love-compelling", she is shrouded in a thin "gauze of mist and fine-twined veil of orange and purple". The sea from which she rises is itself "milk-veined". This sentiment and its manner of expression echo the Pre-Raphaelite and fin-de-siècle movements in English literature, but with one difference: MacMechan's emotion is not debauched.

The best essays in the book are "Ghosts", "Heartha", "The Ghost of a Garden", "Bess", and "Mrs. Lily Sweetwich's Coffee". Of all the essays MacMechan ever published, "Ghosts" best illustrates his sense of humour. The mock-serious tone is like that of Leigh Hunt's "Getting Up On Cold Mornings". Compare, for example, this passage of "Ghosts" with that which follows from the essay by Hunt:

Colonel Ingersoll has lectured on them, and there is a learned society in London formed expressly for their detection, so no one can entertain any doubts as to their existence. That there are such things is indisputable else how could *Blackwood* have "Open Doors" and "Houses by the River" in its columns? Yet, strange to say, no one has, up to the moment of writing this, even attempted an adequate classification of them. Let us, then, having demonstrated and settled the necessary preliminary fact of the existence of Ghosts, proceed to their classification.

An Italian author — Giulio Cordara, a Jesuit — has written a poem upon insects, which he begins by insisting that those troublesome and abominable little animals were created for our annoyance, and that they were certainly not inhabitants of Paradise. We of the north may dispute this piece of theology; but on the other hand, it is clear as the snow on the house-tops, that Adam was not under the necessity of shaving; and that when Eve walked out of her delicious bower, she did not step upon ice three inches thick.

MacMechan, of course, has not Hunt's felicity of expression, though he does write well. Unfortunately, echoes of Romantic sentimentality permeate this essay as well. In one paragraph the author describes the ghostly appearance of a mysterious woman whose "fair white hands at a piano touch into life the sorrow and longing of a wordless song". He also ends the piece on a note

of rather false despair — “Ah! the dreariness, the utter, bleak loneliness of it.” On the whole, however, the approach in “Ghosts” is traditional and the expression is apt.

“Heartha” is equally well done. The tone here is quite different. Humour is not an element of the essay. Nostalgia is the key mood. MacMechan reminisces about his winter in Maryland and the companionship of the hearth in his house. The visual clarity of the detail and his ease in handling it, both important to the success of *The Life of a Little College*, are strong elements here, and so is his expression, both familiar and natural:

Many other things I learnt from Goddess Heartha, whom I worshipped almost as my heathen forbears did. She was a benign, familiar and yet unearthly presence; and I needed no companion when I could have her. And so it grew upon me all winter in that pleasant room that looked to the south on the hills of Maryland. It grew so that I almost found it in my heart to regret the gentle message, wafted in at the open window, that I must lose my gentle companion, that the shrine of the goddess must be empty and her altar unhonoured till the changing season again brings winter's frost and rime.

The personification used in “Heartha” is employed frequently in this volume. Characteristic of the author, however, is a more direct reaction to the world around him, for MacMechan does not deliberate about life as William Osler would do. Rather, he reacts emotionally to stimuli. This response to experience is prompted partly by temperament and partly by the influence of Romantic Literature.

The Porter of Bagdad does not reveal, to most readers today, the “world of infinite delights” that Brandon Conron promised the thoughtful observer. The book is too uneven to be a good collection of familiar essays. In addition, none of the selections which belong to the genre equal MacMechan's best work in succeeding volumes. The more imaginative or fanciful descriptions in such pieces as “Fandango” are less convincing, because they are somewhat artificial, and it is not easy to be satisfied, as Conron was, with the author's celebration of “the fresh innocent beauty” of art and women.

There is nothing fresh, although they are innocuous, in such expressions as the following: “soft, creamy, white”; “enchanted perfume”; “longing music”; “the impulse of the sweet sounds”; “slender waving arms of the dancing girls”; “sweet, kissing mouth”; “mystery-coloured eyes”; “Beauty came with whiteness as new milk poured in the sun”; “cold purity of the sea”; “convulsively”; “beloved and worshipped body”; “her loose white robe with red”; “that beauty,

that was too rich for earth, is softly pale"; "tired eyelids droop"; or "faint aromatic odour".

Certainly, there is here a tiresome echo of the Pre-Raphaelite and fin-de-siècle writers. Rossetti, for example, speaks of "this sweet bank", and "her mouth's culled sweetness by thy kisses shed/On cheeks and neck and eyelids . . ." Swinburne writes of "some sweet shameful way"; "heavy white limbs"; "hard eyes that grow soft"; "sweet lips"; "beautiful, passionate body"; "the white implacable Aphrodite"; "love's tired eyes"; "the sea's heart"; and "sweet life". Or, again, Arthur Symons could write:

I gaze upon her, as she goes,
O white she is, and white as cream,
And soft as any little lamb,
And rosy as a little rose.

The Pre-Raphaelite and decadent influences in MacMechan's work were confined to diction, mood, and atmosphere. He did not accept the decadent's law of the gradual dissolution of one's energy. He does not share the aesthete's concept of art for art's sake, nor their hostility to orthodox religions; neither does he accept love as an absolute, exclusive of religion. "Love", said Morris, "is enough: have no thought for tomorrow. . . ." While this search for absolutes led the aesthete to a life of sensations not excluding perversions, MacMechan was content to create in *The Porter of Bagdad* a lush imaginative world activated by the supernatural, titillated by the sensuous, and pervaded by a vague sort of melancholy. When the influence of the Pre-Raphaelite and decadent movements was absent, as in "Heartha" or "Bess", the essay was most appealing. None of the essays in this volume, however, are as arresting as those in his later books; and none are remarkable contributions to the genre.

The title piece of *The Life of a Little College* (1914) is not a familiar essay at all, but an article, and this despite the author's reference in the dedication to "these little college essays". The selections, moreover, are "college" chiefly in the sense that they were written by a professor, and they do not appear to be concerned with a particular university as much as one would suspect from the title of the volume. There are excusable "deceptions" commonplace with persons who want to enlarge a book or publish prose that does not fit conveniently into any of the more popular genres. The title piece, as has been noted, is an article, and the final selection, entitled "Virgil", is a speech. In both, the author intended to create something quite different from the familiar essay — and he succeeded. The prose between the first and the final selection, how-

ever, may be classified as familiar essays — and some are very good.

The themes are varied. There are tributes to two professors, neither of whom lectured at Dalhousie University, which, supposedly, inspired the volume; there is amiable comment on the work of Tennyson, Browning, Longfellow, Carroll, and Melville; there are observations, to use the author's own word, about "co eds" at Dalhousie in "Little College Girls"; and there is an excellent essay on travel. All of these subjects are explored more fully than are those in *The Porter of Bagdad*, and the style is now more reserved. MacMechan is still spending his inheritance from Romanticism, but there is less youthful sentiment in the coinage and, in short, the work in this second volume is superior to that in the first.

"The Vanity of Travel" is the best essay in *The Life of A Little College* and among the best that MacMechan ever wrote. His theme is developed from this passage: ". . . it must be clear that, for the majority of mankind, travel is a modern superstition, another symptom of the universal unrest, that it is almost barren of real profit and true pleasure, that it does not always benefit even men of genius, or soften national prejudices. . . ." MacMechan disagrees. To support his thesis he calls upon traditional authority: Shakespeare, Bacon, Lamb, Milton, Addison, Gray, Walpole, Goldsmith, Sterne, Johnson and Boswell, Wordsworth, Scott, Byron, Coleridge, Winckelmann, and Goethe. To this number he adds Basil Hall, Mrs. Trollope, Arnold, Emerson, Hawthorne, Meynell, Thackeray, and Bourget. MacMechan asserts that there is a temperament "which finds in travel supreme satisfaction and delight". This is borne out by Stevenson, Boswell, Froissart, and Sir Espang de Lyon, whose enthusiasm and curiosity for all things great or small enriched their lives. But the greatest good in travel, he concludes, is in wandering; and "pleasant enough in cities though wandering be, it is only in the open country that it reaches the full growth of delight". MacMechan never rejected what he considered to be Nature's rejuvenating power. This contention is a predominant theme in his work.

"The Vanity of Travel" is a model essay. Many of the traditional qualities associated with the genre are here. MacMechan establishes an amicable relationship between himself and the reader. He holds to opinion, seeking to persuade, but is never argumentative. Familiar but not fond — he respects the reader — MacMechan exercises that "frail but precious instrument", self-revelation.

Mere progression, mere moving from place to place, continually toward the unknown, even what dull people call "a prosaic railway journey" is the traveller's

joy. Vistas open out on either hand, alluring towards the sky-line. What he sees is strange and new, but there is beyond that hill something still more wonderful which he will never see. Aimless explorations of foreign thoroughfares, drifting with the tides of life along unfamiliar streets, are long adventures crammed with episodes. The joy of wandering is slow to pall, and it is to be enjoyed at the full when a man shakes himself free of all aids but his native powers and marches forth alone into the world (p. 79).

He writes of "his own meagre, personal experience", sounding very like Lamb, who "had no ear for music". MacMechan also is introspective: ". . . the world of books is never barred; the abyss of the starry sky and of your own mind always await your exploration. . . ." But introspection has not led him from reality. "Pleasure is a pure good, say the philosophers, reacting on and heightening the vitality. But, after all, the pleasure of travel is only a pleasure, like any other; and it passes. It perishes in the using" (p. 80).

Life perishes as well, and MacMechan, who never thought living plain, or people common, was impatient with those who postponed involvement. As for style, "The Vanity of Travel" is the mature MacMechan: controlled, direct, simple and natural, devoid of extremes of emotion, intimate and yet restrained.

To despise a fellow mortal is always easy and rather cheap; 'Tis not in folly not to scorn a fool'; but the universal attitude towards the tourist is not to be explained so readily. To understand the *pecore di Cook*, as Italians call them, the tourists of all nations who bear the 'mark of the beast' i.e., Baedeker, is somewhat harder than to repeat stale gibes. I wish I felt equal to the task (p. 59).

"Afoot in Ultima Thule" is the finest familiar essay in MacMechan's last collection, *The Book of Ultima Thule* (1927). There are twenty-three essays in all, each seeking "to seize and reveal the spirit" of Nova Scotia. In his preface, MacMechan called himself "an Aged Lover". His designation is appropriate to the volume—a kind of song of songs in a style, as Thomas Raddall has said, that is delicate. But this could be said of the body of MacMechan's work, and it is not, after all, offered as criticism. For there is much here that is passed by with reluctance, and even the thoughtless reader should be hard put to reject these "attempts" that reveal as much about the spirit of the man as they do of the land.

Four essays—"Clamming", "Potato Patch", "Nereid's Embrace", and "Lucullus in Acadie"—share an effective mock-serious tone that is good fun. With the possible exception of "Lucullus", none of these pieces is a remarkable example of the genre, but all are well worth re-reading.

MacMechan's praise of his adopted province in "Afoot in Ultima Thule"

is not so insistent as it is in some other pieces. Here, the spirit of the author very nearly predominates. He responds, a "tramp-royal", to the road, "an end in itself". Having been a devotee of the open road since childhood, he confides that he has written the essay to fix in his memory a pleasant summer month's exploration of "Ultima Thule" for the "enrichment of less happier times to come".

The essay is characteristic of the best MacMechan. His tongue-in-cheek humour is never strained, despite the quaint reference to cars as "fire-chariots". His tone of intimacy and affability is, today, still appealing: "I live them over again, as I write, this cool morning, when the seasonable rain is falling so softly on the welcoming soil". One is aware, too, of the breadth of his reading, and of its civilizing effect upon him — among others, the roll call includes Stevenson, Milton, and Walton. Though his style can be rather precious, ("It is the darling flower of Ultima Thule"), and sometimes elevated, ("Every morning was devoted to books and the labour of the pen"), it is not offensive. He sometimes disappoints with commonplace imagery, "icy breath of winter", or "yellow wealth of dandelions"; but on at least two occasions the evocative power of his words excels: "A single thorn stands before my open window, a snowy, incense-breathing pyramid in the softly falling rain", and, better still, "Drilled battalions of apple-trees are drawn up on every southward facing slope".

"Afoot in Ultima Thule" has been published in secondary-school literature texts. This is unfortunate only because the editors might better have chosen "The Vanity of Travel". The later essay is over-long, repetitive, and not the equal of that model essay on travel. "Lucullus in Acadie", on the other hand, is a short, tightly constructed familiar essay in the tradition of the genre. MacMechan invites the ancient Roman epicure to a Nova Scotian banquet "far richer than any of those Rome wondered at: and all the cates should come from the soil, the forests, the inland or coastal waters of the delectable province called Acadie". One cannot miss the enjoyment that MacMechan took in writing the essay: "The game course should be simple, of one dish only. A roast partridge, as grouse is called in Acadie, trussed upon his own slice of hot buttered toast, soaking with the ethereal inexpressible emanation of himself, known to the vulgar as gravy, and accompanied by a bread-sauce breathing delicately of the homely onion and the exotic clove is a dish for any Roman epicure" (p. 324). This piece is likely to be turned to on a casual evening — and, greeting the gourmet in it, to be thoroughly enjoyed. The other essays in *The Book of Ultima Thule* are not quite equal to the two reviewed. Written over a period of some thirty or more years, they struggle to survive and serve

best the visitor to the province who might seek information that can be intimate, personal, and entertaining.

MacMechan is endeared to the reader by his convictions about the dignity and the worth of the human spirit and his delight, unspoiled by sentimentality, with the conditions of his own life. These qualities infuse his work. Resolved, like the Dolcefaro of "Ultima Thule", to live in a rational way and to "secure recreation from the fleeting days", MacMechan was suited in temperament and condition to be an essayist. He read widely in the literature of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. He often quotes Milton and Shakespeare. He speaks familiarly of Sir Roger de Coverley, Mr. Spectator, and Samuel Johnson, and although he never seeks to recover his readers from the Vice and Folly of the age or "to enliven Morality with Wit, and to temper Wit with Morality", he does possess more of their reserve than he does of the Romantic essayists' subjectivity. He would agree with Ruskin about the glories and beneficence of Nature, and—if one can judge rightly about his activity in Fort Massey Church—he would pay dutiful recognition to Providence. He could share, too, Leigh Hunt's quiet sense of fun. And, with Robert Louis Stevenson, he might conclude of life in Nova Scotia, as that essayist has done about a night among the pines, "I have not often enjoyed a more serene possession of myself, nor felt more independent of material aids".

NOTES

1. Hugh MacLennan, *Thirty and Three*, (Toronto: Macmillan), 1954, preface.
2. Archibald MacMechan, *The Book of Ultima Thule* (Toronto: MacClelland and Stewart), 1927, p. 297.
3. Rex E. Beach, "A Fight With Bare Hands", *Saturday Night* (Toronto) XIX, no. 27 (May 12, 1906), p. 7.
4. Editorial, *The University Magazine*, XVI, no. 1 (February, 1907).
5. Northrop Frye, in *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klinck et al. (University of Toronto Press), 1965, pp. 827-828.
6. Wilhelmina Gordon, "Archibald MacMechan", *Queen's Quarterly*, XL (November, 1933), pp. 635, 638.
7. G. G. Sedgwick, "A.M.", *Dalhousie Review*, XIII, no. 4 (Winter, 1933), pp. 451-458; C. L. Bennet, "A Scholar and a Gentleman", *Dalhousie Review*, XIII, no. 3 (Autumn, 1933), pp. 379-381.
8. Archibald MacMechan, *The Porter of Bagdad and Other Fantasies* (Toronto: George M. Moran), 1901.
9. ———, *The Life of a Little College and Other Papers* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin), 1914.
10. *The Book of Ultima Thule*, pp. 297-298.