

# PROLETARIAN LITERATURE IN CANADA

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MUCH has been written in recent years about the proletarian movement in American literature. Is there any evidence that such a movement exists in Canada? It is the purpose of this article to answer that question. Immediately another question arises:—what is meant by “proletarian literature”? There is no agreement among literary critics on this point. For the purpose of this article, “proletarian literature” is defined as literature which describes the life of the working class from a class-conscious and revolutionary point of view. It is literature in which the worker is regarded as the victim of capitalistic exploitation; as the instrument of revolution by which a new social order will be ushered in. He, himself, is of more importance as a factor in society than as an individual. Our capitalist system is regarded as responsible for the disintegration of society with its attending evils, and as the root of all wars.

The definition is not limited to mean literature of working-class authorship. Since few members of the labouring classes are articulate in the literary sense, practically no literature of that origin exists in Canada or in any other country.

It should be understood, also, that what follows refers only to English-Canadian writers and the works they have had published in Canada.

As might be expected under the existing publishing conditions in Canada, writers of revolutionary literature who want a Canadian audience have to rely almost solely on magazines for publication. For this reason it is of interest first to examine those periodicals which would seem likely to provide proletarian writers in Canada with a means of expression, before going on to discuss the actual evidences of proletarian thought discernible in Canadian poetry, fiction and drama.

## I. PERIODICALS

Numerous efforts have been made in Canada to break away from the traditional “Canadian” type of magazine to a more literary and experimental variety. *The Canadian Mercury* and *The Canadian Forum* are examples of such efforts. The

former of these was short-lived, only six numbers being published in the period between December, 1928, and June, 1929. Its explicit aim was the encouragement of the younger writers in this country. Leo Kennedy and F. R. Scott were on the editorial board, and were frequent contributors. Other promising young writers were Dorothy Livesay and Abraham Klein. These names are singled out because they now represent four of Canada's most socially-conscious poets. At that time, however, they showed no such awareness. Jean Burton contributed one or two stories about members of the working class, but the interest lay in the personal rather than the social conflict. There is no evidence in *The Canadian Mercury* of the class-conscious approach to literature which distinguishes the proletarian productions of to-day.

*The Canadian Forum* was established in 1920 by a group of liberal-minded people, who wished to provide a vehicle for the free expression of opinion along political and artistic lines. It has continued fairly loyal to these aims. From a literary point of view it has maintained high standards, and it has endeavoured to encourage young and unknown writers to write honestly and in their own individual way. Socialist and revolutionary ideas have been expressed freely, and, in recent years, a number of poems and short stories of a proletarian nature have appeared. These contributions are, for the most part, of a higher literary quality than those found in the more definitely left-wing magazines, but, with few exceptions, they are not so clearly proletarian. One feels that they were printed not primarily because they were revolutionary, but rather because they had artistic merit. The reverse is true of *Masses*, a Communistic product of the "depression" years.

The deepening of the depression in Canada was accompanied by an awakening of political consciousness, especially among students and youthful victims of the economic *impasse*. Literature on the Communist experiment in Russia was read eagerly; and this, as much as anything else, led to the realization of the possibilities of the arts as instruments of propaganda. In the United States revolutionary novelists and dramatists began to appear, and in Canada young radicals also wished to give artistic expression to their revolutionary thought. To meet this need a group in Toronto formed the Progressive Arts Club, with affiliated branches in Montreal, Vancouver and other Canadian cities. They hoped in this way to provide a meeting-ground for writers, artists and others who were interested in promoting

proletarian art. They organized workers' theatre groups which produced propagandist plays, and experimented in stage technique; and they published the magazine *Masses*, which ran through eleven numbers from April, 1932, to the March-April number of 1934. From the literary point of view, this magazine was poor. The writers were young, and their contributions revealed inexperience in writing and youthful arrogance in political opinion. There were among them, however, a few whose names have since become familiar in left-wing literary circles: William Lawson, formerly editor of *New Frontier*, now literary editor of the *Daily Clarion*; Joe Wallace, also on the staff of the *Daily Clarion*; and Dorothy Livesay, conspicuous among Canada's younger poets. *Masses* was blatantly propagandist; but in providing a vehicle of expression for revolutionary thinkers it did pioneer and experimental work in a field of literature which no periodical catering to the reading taste of the general Canadian public could afford to enter.

Two years after *Masses* ceased publication, a second magazine with definitely revolutionary aims came into existence. This was *New Frontier*. William Lawson was managing editor, with Margaret Gould, Leo Kennedy, Dorothy Livesay and J. F. White as an editorial board. *New Frontier* tried to encourage a proletarian approach to literature. At the same time it had artistic standards comparable to those of *The Canadian Forum*. It failed financially after a year and a half, having published seventeen numbers from April, 1936, to October, 1937.

The *Canadian Poetry Magazine* was launched by the Canadian Authors' Association in Toronto, January, 1936, and is now under the distinguished patronage of His Excellency, Lord Tweedsmuir. Its aim is the encouragement of Canadian verse, but so far its productions, in the main, have not been adventurous either in subject-matter or in form. It has published, however, a few poems of a proletarian nature, indicating that the editorial board is not wholly averse to proletarian themes.

Canadian labour is represented in Canada by some thirty journals.<sup>1</sup> Of these, we are concerned only with the *Daily Clarion*. This newspaper, published in Toronto by the Clarion Publishing Association, succeeded in 1936 *The Worker*, which was established in 1922 as the official organ of the Workers' Party of Canada.<sup>2</sup> The *Clarion Book Page* was instituted as a weekly feature November 15, 1937, with William Lawson as

1. Canada, Department of Labour: *Annual Report on Labour Organization in Canada*, 1936. pp. 222-5.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

literary editor. It includes an occasional short story, but specializes particularly in left-wing criticism of new books, not necessarily Canadian. This page is a definite contribution to Canadian literary criticism, because it represents a point of view not found in the book-review pages of other Canadian journals. It has published little, however, of a creative nature.

The latest venture in the field of Canadian left-wing magazines is *The New Advance*, established in Toronto, November, 1937. This is a magazine for Canadian youth. While it is concerned mainly with the interpretation of current social and economic issues, it publishes some poetry and fiction. This is usually proletarian in approach, but nothing outstanding has appeared so far.

This completes our survey of the journalistic possibilities for Canadian proletarian writers. Let us now examine the literature itself.

## II. POETRY

A great deal of the magazine verse of recent years has reflected the growing social and political consciousness of our time. Unemployment and relief, political corruption, anti-war sentiment, have been common themes, but rarely have they been presented from the point of view of the working class. Our most outstanding poets belong to one or other of the professions, and, although they are sympathetic with the proletariat, their outlook on life is remote from the realities of working-class existence. In general, their political consciousness is vague and undefined. They know that the times are out of joint, but they are not prepared to come out boldly on the side of any particular political party. An example of a poem reflecting this confused state of mind is *Hunger*<sup>3</sup>, by Mary Elizabeth Colman. In this poem the history of civilization is recorded in terms of hunger, war and unemployment. The problem of hunger, the poet points out, persists in spite of industrial invention and scientific discovery. It remains unsolved by Fascist and Communist states alike. The poet, herself, offers no solution, and there is no indication of clear political thinking on her part.

The poets who wrote for *Masses* were obviously in closer touch with working-class conditions and revolutionary programmes than the contributors to other magazines. Their efforts, however, showed more revolutionary ardour than poetic

3. *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, June, 1937, pp. 11-22.

talent. Only a few poems are worthy of mention. These include the contributions by Dorothy Livesay, *To a Prisoner*,<sup>4</sup> by Oscar Ryan, *Working Class Coinage*,<sup>5</sup> by Joe Wallace, and *Steel Town*,<sup>6</sup> by Bertram Chambers. Of these writers, Dorothy Livesay will be discussed later. Oscar Ryan and Joe Wallace are now on the staff of the *Daily Clarion*; the latter also contributes occasional poetry to American left-wing magazines. Bertram Chambers, alone, has shown no further interest in proletarian subjects. He had worked as an assembler in various automobile plants<sup>7</sup>, which accounts no doubt for the authenticity of *Steel Town* as well as his *Negro Worker*<sup>8</sup> and *Caisson Worker*<sup>9</sup> published at an earlier date in *The Canadian Forum*. All three are descriptive poems, and bear no indication of revolutionary intent on the part of the author.

Dorothy Livesay, alone among Canada's leading poets, has definitely allied herself politically with the working class. She was born in Winnipeg, but lived in Toronto for a number of years. She graduated from Trinity College, Toronto, and studied in Paris in 1931-32. It was there she made the Communist contacts which aroused her class consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Her two books of poetry, *Green Pitcher*, 1928, and *Signpost*, 1932, show no sign of the proletarian interest manifested in her later contributions to *Masses* and other periodicals. Miss Livesay is now a professional social worker in Vancouver. Her proletarian sympathies have been expressed in numerous short poems, the most outstanding of which is *Day and Night*.<sup>11</sup> This poem, in which blank verse and dance rhythm combine to depict the monotonous routine, back-breaking labour and speed-up conditions in the modern factory, reveals the poet's faith in the ultimate revolutionary outcome of workers' unionization. There is no doubt that Dorothy Livesay has a clarity of purpose and political thought which her fellow-poets lack.

Montreal's four poets have shown, in varying degrees, an interest in contemporary social and political conditions. Leo Kennedy served on the editorial board of *New Frontier*, and wrote for that magazine in June, 1936, an article called *Direction for Canadian Poets*. In this article he criticized Canadian poets

4. *Masses*, Jan. 1934, p. 9.

5. *Ibid.*, June, 1932, p. 15.

6. *Ibid.*, June, 1932, p. 11.

7. *Canadian Forum*, July, 1931, p. 380.

8. *Ibid.*, Aug., 1931, p. 415.

9. *Ibid.*, Oct., 1931, p. 8.

10. Collin: *The White Savannahs*, p. 159.

11. *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, Jan., 1936, pp. 8-12.

for adhering to traditional themes of nature and sentiment, and exhorted them to write rather of contemporary life and its problems. He was not urging that poetry be specifically proletarian, but that it be at least contemporary in subject-matter and realistic in treatment. This advice is repeated in *Calling Eagles*<sup>12</sup>, and one or two other short poems. Other poems have treated of the war in Spain from the proletarian point of view. A. J. M. Smith, one of Canada's most talented poets, is too mystical and intellectual to figure as a proletarian, although some interest in the contemporary scene is manifested in the two poems *The Face*<sup>13</sup> and *Son-and-Heir*.<sup>14</sup> F. R. Scott, a professor of civil law at McGill University, a noted writer on economic themes, and an active member of the League for Social Reconstruction, is noteworthy for satirical verses ridiculing the weaknesses and contradictions inherent in the Canadian capitalistic order. He definitely takes sides with labour in *An Anthology of Up-to-Date Canadian Poetry*<sup>15</sup> and *Social Notes*<sup>16</sup>. Finally, there is Abraham Klein, the most fruitful of these four poets as far as proletarian verse is concerned.

Abraham Klein is a lawyer and a Jew. He is noted for his poetry on racial and religious themes, but of late years he has introduced also the economic motif. This interest appears first in the poem, *Diary of Abraham Segal, Poet*,<sup>17</sup> in which the poet is shown earning his living in the workaday world. More explicitly proletarian is *Soirée of Velvel Kleinburger*.<sup>18</sup> Velvel is a tailor who feels the odds are always against him. He resents the discrepancy between the ease of the rich and the hardship of the poor. He dreams of wealth and the luxuries it would bring. (Incidentally, this longing for bourgeois pleasure places Velvel in a category not approved by Marxian revolutionaries.) Klein, like Scott, has satirized the capitalistic system in a series of verses called *Of Daumiers a Portfolio*.<sup>19</sup> This is an ironical portrayal of law and justice as meted out under the existing order. Like Kennedy, he has revealed his class-conscious attitude towards the war in Spain in a group of three poems called *Of Castles in Spain*.<sup>20</sup> He returns to satire on the current scene

12. *New Frontier*, June, 1937, p. 14; reprinted in *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, Oct., 1937, p. 17.

13. *Canadian Forum*, Sept., 1936, p. 24.

15. *New Frontier*, July, 1936, p. 14.

15. *Canadian Forum*, May, 1932, pp. 290-1.

16. *Ibid.*, March, 1935, p. 220.

17. *Ibid.*, May, 1932, pp. 297-8, 300.

18. *Ibid.*, Aug., 1932, pp. 424-5; reprinted in *New Provinces*, pp. 35-8.

19. *New Frontier*, Sept., 1937, pp. 10-11.

20. *Canadian Forum*, June, 1938, p. 79.

in *Barricade Smith: His Speeches*.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not Klein will develop further as a class-conscious poet, remains to be seen. In any case he has a unique contribution to make to Canadian literature, for whatever theme he touches, be it religious dogma or the distress of the poor, is always treated in an essentially Jewish manner.

The best known of the poets under consideration here is E. J. Pratt, Professor of English at Victoria College, University of Toronto. For years Pratt's name was associated chiefly with epics of the sea and Newfoundland life, and to him, more than any other, the credit is due for leading Canadian poetry out of its supine sentimentality and away from its imitative vocabulary. But recently Pratt has gone further in experimentation. His latest volume, *The Fable of the Goats*<sup>22</sup>, contains several poems, including the title-piece, which show his concern over the plight of the world. These poems, however, are not proletarian. That is, they are not about the working class, and they are not politically revolutionary. They reveal Pratt to be anti-war and anti-Fascist in his views. He is, however, liberal rather than radical; humanitarian rather than proletarian.

The most dauntless reformer and one of the most socially conscious of all Canadian poets is Alexander Maitland Stephen, of Vancouver. Stephen has led a colourful career, during which his occupations have ranged from trapper to teacher; from soldier to journalist and lecturer. He has been active in educational and social reform in British Columbia; and his literary activities have embraced drama, poetry and fiction.<sup>23</sup> His interest in contemporary problems has been manifested in several short poems, notably *Bring Torches*<sup>24</sup>, in which the world of reality is offered as a substitute for the "ivory tower"; *Madrid*<sup>25</sup>, which proclaims his faith in a victory for the workers' army in Spain; and *Before Pilate*<sup>26</sup>, a condemnation of man's worship of money, the god that leads to war. These few poems, however, are insufficient evidence on which to form a judgment as to the nature or degree of Stephen's revolutionary convictions.

One other poet deserves consideration. This is Alan B. Creighton, a native of Nova Scotia and author of *Earth Call*.<sup>27</sup> A few poems in this volume deal with unemployment, the econo-

21. *Ibid.*, Aug.-Sept., 1938, pp. 147-8, 173.

22. Toronto, Macmillan, 1937.

23. *Maclean*, April 15, 1931, pp. 84, 87.

24. *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, Oct., 1937, p. 26.

25. *New Frontier*, May, 1937, p. 9.

26. *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, Oct., 1937, pp. 24-6.

27. Toronto, Macmillan, 1936.

mic uncertainties of our time, and the threat of war, but the poet's thought seems vague and lacking in direction. He does not impress one as having the stuff of revolution in him. He may have an individual contribution to make to Canadian poetry of love and nature, but not, one feels, to the poetry of the proletariat.

It is seen that, although a number of our leading poets are opposed to the existing capitalist system, Dorothy Livesay is the only one who is explicitly proletarian. It is true that the other contributors to *Masses* were proletarian in point of view, but none of them has produced sufficient evidence of poetic ability to be important among Canadian poets. Abraham Klein, on the other hand, is one of Canada's finest poets and has, moreover, expressed in his poetry, strong proletarian sympathies. It is not clear, however, if his sympathies are supported by political conviction.

### III. FICTION

Canadian novelists have never been as notable as Canadian poets. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the field of proletarian fiction even less remarkable than that of proletarian poetry. Those authors who are sincerely concerned about exploitation of the workers under the capitalist system are not promising as writers. Conversely, those who show a definite talent for fiction seem little inclined to use it for the advancement of a revolution.

Morley Callaghan, Canada's most outstanding short-story writer, is not proletarian. *Now That April's Here*<sup>28</sup> contains several stories dealing with the effect of poverty and unemployment on the lives of people, but the interest is in the personal element rather than the social, and the characters themselves are drawn usually from the lower middle classes rather than from the proletariat. Of his novels, two in particular have an economic theme. The first of these, *Such is My Beloved*<sup>29</sup>, is about a Roman Catholic priest who undertook to put his love and religion into practice by helping two prostitutes. The economic cause of prostitution is brought out, and also the capitalistic basis of the Church. The priest failed because he alone could do nothing; and he brought the anger of the Church upon himself when he tried to interfere with the moral and social order for which the financial supporters of the Church stood. Nevertheless, the

28. Toronto, Macmillan, 1936.

29. Toronto, Macmillan, 1934.

main interest in the story is not in the economic implications, but in the conflict that developed in the mind of the priest as his desire to help the girls was frustrated by the Church.

Similarly, although *They Shall Inherit the Earth*<sup>30</sup> is a "depression" novel, the real interest is in the personal and psychological conflict. Michael's poverty, which was brought upon him through his stubborn refusal to accept help from his father and his inability to obtain employment in his own engineering profession, forms the background of the story. The economic issue is evaded, however, in the author's neglect to show how Michael managed to live and to support his wife and child for months at a time with practically no work. There is considerable discussion on economic themes, but all the characters seem to be in a bewildered state of mind. The dominant theme is Michael's feeling of guilt for his step-brother's drowning, and pervading all are Anna's unselfish love for Michael and his father's longing for a reconciliation. There is no evidence either in Callaghan's novels or in his short stories that he looks upon the working class as the hope of a future state. He is sympathetic with them in their hardships and perplexities, but not in their political dreams.

Mary Quayle Innis, a talented short-story writer of Toronto, has written a number of stories presenting unemployed workers. Her sympathy for the people she describes is genuine, but she is more concerned about the futility of the lives led by the foolish, bored and vain middle-class wives whom she portrays than about the distress of the working class. This is brought out in *Staver*<sup>31</sup>, a story of an unemployed man who kept pestering a well-to-do housewife for odd jobs; and in *Two Ears*<sup>32</sup>, which presents a comparison in conversations heard on a street-car between two bourgeois women on the one hand, and a destitute man and his wife on the other.

Another promising short-story writer is Kimball McIlroy, also of Toronto. Here again one doubts the political intent of the writer. McIlroy is young and his tales are clever, but he seems more concerned about his technical skill than about the social implications of the situations he describes. Nevertheless *Late November*<sup>33</sup> and *A Letter For Mr. Henderson*<sup>34</sup> are very sympathetic portrayals of two unemployed members of the working class.

There are numerous short stories by young and unknown writers who show promising talent and proletarian sympathies,

30. Toronto, Macmillan, 1935.

31. *New Frontier*, April, 1936, pp. 18-21.

32. *Canadian Forum*, Aug., 1933, pp. 418, 420-1.

33. *New Frontier*, Sept., 1936, p. 27.

34. *Ibid.*, May, 1936, pp. 16-20.

but whose political consciousness is not clearly defined. Such stories are *The Rooster Which Walked in a Circle*, by Matt Armstrong;<sup>35</sup> *Mr. Cooney Makes It Right With God*, by Robert Ayre<sup>36</sup>; *The Enchanted*<sup>37</sup> and *The Wheels Squeaked*<sup>38</sup>, by Yvonne Firkins; *Sea Piece*, by Guy Mason<sup>39</sup>; and *Production* by J. K. Thomas.<sup>40</sup>

Finally we come to those writers whose political convictions are clearly Communistic and whose subject-matter is primarily proletarian. Outstanding among these is Jack Parr, a young man from Winnipeg who contributed numerous short stories to *New Frontier*. Jack Parr has undoubted talent. Although his stories are of the propagandist type, there is evidence that he could write on other themes if he so desired. At present he is an ardent revolutionary. His stories show the worker to be a good fellow, likeable and human, while the employer is a villain and a cheat, prone to having faulty machinery which results in bloody accidents to innocent workers. Hospital management comes under his scrutiny in regard to its careless treatment of the patients and its slavish demands of the nurses. Parr's stories bear the stamp of authentic experience and sincere conviction. If he could better control his spleen, he would be more effective with his propaganda.

Dorothy Livesay writes stories as well as poems, but not so successfully. She shows concern about the sufferings of the unemployed, especially the evils resulting from the existing system of dispensing relief. She endeavours, through the medium of fiction, to agitate for reform. The result is ill-disguised propaganda. Her stories sound amateurish, and have little or no literary value.

The stories in *Masses* show less talent than the poems. They are crude in execution and obvious in intent. Official authority is personified by the bullying policeman and tyrannous employer, while the worker is the innocent victim and the worm that finally turns. Sometimes, however, the actual working conditions inside an industrial establishment are convincingly described, as in *One Day Service*, by Ruby Ronan.<sup>41</sup> This story depicts one day in the plant of the Five Star Cleaners which advertises one-day service at a dollar a dress. On the whole, the

35. *Canadian Forum*, April, 1937, pp. 23-4.

36. *Ibid.*, April, 1934, p. 267.

37. *Ibid.*, Dec., 1937, pp. 315-16.

38. *Ibid.*, Jan., 1937, pp. 25-6.

39. *Ibid.*, Sept., 1937, pp. 206-7.

40. *New Frontier*, July, 1937, pp. 24-5.

41. *Masses*, Sept., 1933, pp. 8-9.

stories in *Masses* are of little value except as examples of the earliest type of class-conscious proletarian fiction in Canada.

One Canadian novel, at least, has appeared purporting to be a sociological novel based on the depression, unemployment and suggested remedies. This is *Forgotten Men*, by Claudius Gregory.<sup>42</sup> The author explains in a note of acknowledgment that the ideas expressed in the book are those of Thomas Dyson Lisson, with whose printing establishment he was associated at the time. The characterization and plot are his own. With all due respect to the sincerity of Mr. Gregory and Mr. Lisson, the novel must be judged a failure from whatever point of view it is considered. It is weak in characterization and sentimental in treatment. The ideas, which the author would have us believe to be epoch-making, are unoriginal and diffuse. Economics and the Christian religion are confused in the analogy between Christopher Worth, founder of the Society of Forgotten Men consisting of twelve members who meet in an upper room, and Christ with His twelve disciples. The ease with which ministers of the Church and representatives of the law and big industry are persuaded by Christopher's ideas is unconvincing. Undoubtedly Gregory was concerned about the economic dislocations resulting from the depression, and felt he had a message to give. His conception of the remedy, however, is so mild a form of Socialism in comparison with the platform of any existing Socialist or Communist party that it seems feeble in the extreme. The book is interesting as an example of a Canadian novel with propagandist intent, but it cannot be regarded as a contribution to Canadian literature.

The truth is, there is no proletarian fiction of any importance in Canada. Jack Parr, the most outstanding contributor of proletarian stories, cannot yet be ranked among Canada's leading short-story writers.

#### IV. DRAMA

The field of drama is more encouraging than that of fiction. Perhaps this is because it is easier in Canada to get a play performed than to get a story published. Various amateur dramatic groups are willing to experiment in new forms of drama and to give new playwrights a chance, whereas Canadian magazines have always been extremely cautious about accepting a story not in the romantic tradition. This statement, of course, does

42. Hamilton, Davis-Lisson, 1933.

43. *Masses*, May, 1933, pp. 14-15.

not apply to the commercial theatre, which draws almost exclusively from American and English sources.

When the Progressive Arts Club was in existence in the early nineteen-thirties, workers' theatre groups were organized in Toronto and other cities. These groups produced plays which were pure propaganda. The characters represented types, such as workers or capitalists. Masks were sometimes used, and mass recitations were introduced. Examples of this sort of drama are *Unity*, by Oscar Ryan,<sup>43</sup> and *War in the East*, by Stanley Ryerson.<sup>44</sup>

The great triumph of the Progressive Arts Club, however, was in the production of the play *Eight Men Speak*.<sup>45</sup> This play was written by four members of the club—Oscar Ryan, E. Cecil Smith, H. Francis and Mildred Goldberg. It was prepared as part of a campaign to force an investigation into an alleged attempt to shoot Tim Buck in his cell during the riots in Kingston Penitentiary in the fall of 1933. It drew attention to the causes of the riots; to the official attitude towards prisoners' complaints; to the unfairness of the trial of the eight Communists who were convicted under Section 98 of the Criminal Code. It tried to refute the charge that Tim Buck was guilty of fomenting the riots; to expose the attempt of the prison authorities to have him shot; and finally it showed how organized workers in Canada suffer at the hands of the police during strikes. With these manifold objectives and its multiple authorship it is not surprising that the play is poor in construction. Scene follows scene in bewildering confusion. All lawyers, judges, prison and government officials are naively villainous, whereas the workers and Communist leaders are honest and devout. They are the prophets of the future. This play was performed in the Standard Theatre, Toronto, on December 4, 1933, then future performances were forbidden in Ontario. It was announced for a Winnipeg theatre, but the manager's license was cancelled before the production. It was performed in part several times in defiance of the law, and possibly contributed to the force of public opinion which caused the famous Section 98 to be revoked and Tim Buck's prison term to be considerably shortened.

In 1935 the Theatre of Action was formed in Toronto by a group of people who wished to see a social theatre develop in Canada. New Theatre groups of similar aims were organized in other Canadian cities. The Theatre of Action has been

44. *Ibid.*, March, 1934, pp. 13-14.

45. Toronto, Progressive Arts Club, (1934)

active in Toronto, giving public performances of plays such as *Waiting For Lefty* and *Bury the Dead*, in addition to frequent performances for small audiences of peace clubs and various workers' organizations. The Theatre of Action is trying to build up a national repertory for all the New Theatre groups in Canada, hoping eventually to set up a national theatre organization similar to the New Theatre League in the United States. Two play contests have been announced. The results of these have been disappointing. The 1936 contest was won by Mary Reynolds for her one-act play *And the Answer Is...*<sup>46</sup>. *Kill the Bum*, by Edna Earnest<sup>47</sup> was also chosen for the repertoire of the New Theatre groups. The 1937 contest brought forth no play considered worthy of being given a prize.

*And the Answer Is...* presents the conversation of a group of poor working men and women, most of whom are unemployed, who gather around a war memorial in a city park. In contrast with this is the shallow, selfish talk of three club women who, incidentally, interfere in the lives of a young singer and her fiancé whose morals they suspect. There is no action in the play, so that the interest rests entirely in the dialogue and in the social problem presented. *Kill the Bum* concerns a young man, unemployed and hungry, who stands on a street corner begging for a dime. All the passers-by are too engrossed in their own conversation and affairs to take his plight seriously. In desperation he tries to hold up a man, is caught by the police and shot while trying to escape.

If these two plays were representative of the work of social-minded Canadian playwrights, the prospects of a vital social drama in Canada would seem poor indeed. Fortunately other plays on sociological themes have appeared. The best known of these is *Twenty-Five Cents*, by W. Eric Harris.<sup>48</sup> This play was produced by the London Little Theatre in the Dominion Drama Festival, 1936, when it won both the Bessborough and the Sir Barry Jackson trophies. The author is a writer on economics as well as a dramatist, so his interest in the problems presented may be regarded as something more than a passing fancy. In the space of one act, Harris has compressed the effects of the depression on the lives of a factory-worker's family. The father loses his job, the son is caught stealing, the daughter discovered to have sold her virtue and the mother deprived of

46. *New Frontier*, March, 1937, pp. 15-21; also published: Toronto, Theatre of Action, (1937).

47. Toronto, Theatre of Action, (1937) mimeographed.

48. Toronto, Samuel French, 1936.

her one pathetic form of release—going to the movies. The effect of this telescoping of events is slightly melodramatic. Otherwise the drama is a convincing portrayal of the disintegrating effects of the depression. It is probably the best sociological play written so far in Canada.

Harris has written a second play on a contemporary theme, namely, the danger of Fascism in Canada as evidenced by police suppression of free speech in public places. This play, *Such Harmony*,<sup>49</sup> is not as successful as *Twenty-Five Cents* from either the dramatic or the sociological point of view. Some of the speeches are too long, and the intrusion of irrelevant poetry contributes to the sentimental effect.

It is difficult to judge from these two plays how deep is Harris's proletarian conviction; whether he is merely an emotional sympathizer or has definite political ideas for the improvement of conditions in Canada.

The Dominion Drama Festival has brought to the spotlight another "depression" play. This is *Relief*, by Minnie Evans Bicknell.<sup>50</sup> Mrs. Bicknell is an entirely inexperienced playwright from Marshall, Saskatchewan. The play presents in dramatic form the intolerable conditions existing in the West, where farmers have been forced to part with most of their implements and livestock owing to repeated crop failures and the pressure of the banks, the mortgage and implement companies. The play is thus seen to be proletarian both in origin and in subject. The political import is not so clear. There is a suggestion that the government is partly responsible for having allowed conditions to become so hopeless before trying to relieve them, but this theme is not developed. The play is interesting mainly as an example of a spontaneous effort on the part of a non-professional writer with no knowledge of technique but with an insistent impulse to depict the conditions she sees around her. It is gratifying to know that the group of four amateur actors from this little western town won the Cameron McIntosh trophy in the Saskatchewan Regional Drama Festival in March, 1937, and won honourable mention in the Dominion Drama Festival at Ottawa in April of that year.

Jameson Field, a young playwright of Toronto, has had two propagandist plays produced. The first of these, *Till Hope Creates*,<sup>51</sup> is an ambitious effort in blank verse. It consists

49. Toronto, Samuel French, 1936.

50. Toronto, Macmillan, 1938.

51. Toronto, 1936, (typescript).

of a trial scene and ten episodes depicting the life story of a labourer on trial for murdering a "scab" in a strikers' fight. This play was produced by the Centre Stage Productions at the Margaret Eaton Hall in March, 1937. *The Build-Up*<sup>52</sup> was produced by the same group in Hart House in December, 1937. This one-act drama deals with the problem of the exploitation of fighters by promoters in the prize-fighting racket. Toby Moore, preparing for a championship fight, discovers he has been drugged by his manager. He is not aware, but the audience is, that the manager is the tool of the capitalist promoter. Owing to the witty dialogue and the suspense, this play stands on its own merits quite apart from the propaganda. Jameson Field shows a talent for dramatic technique which, combined with his interest in sociological problems, gives promise of significant plays to come.

The state of Canadian proletarian drama is thus seen to hold some promise. The Dominion Festival serves to draw attention to any Canadian play that reaches the finals. The New Theatre groups are definitely encouraging propagandist drama. The Centre Stage Productions and kindred groups are producing new plays experimental both in subject and in technique. Dramatists of Socialist convictions and technical ability are allowed to experiment and develop their craft. Under these conditions perhaps a Clifford Odets or an Irwin Shaw may yet arise in Canada.

## V. CONCLUSION

Although there is considerable evidence of proletarian interest on the part of numerous Canadian writers, very few of their works are truly proletarian according to our definition. Where the theme is that of the unemployed worker, he is usually regarded as one bewildered by his difficulties rather than as the class-conscious forward-looking proletarian of Marxian revolutionary literature. Where the capitalist system is satirized and its evils exposed, the remedy, if any is suggested, is seldom the establishment of a workers' state. Those works, on the other hand, which are clearly proletarian, where the worker is depicted not only as the exploited victim of capitalism but also as the dynamic force in the coming revolution, are generally lacking in literary value.

The stream of Canadian literature is disturbed here and there by ripples of revolutionary thought, but there is no indica-

52. Toronto, 1936, (typescript).

tion of a vigorous current threatening to sweep the stream out of its placid course. The fate of this proletarian trend depends largely, no doubt, on the turn of events in the future. Should prosperity be just around the corner, Canadian poets will return, in all likelihood, to the inspiration of nature, Canadian fiction writers to the romance of the North, and Canadian dramatists to Canada's historic past. If, on the other hand, the prophecies of the left-wing economists come true, and the depression of the 'thirties proves to be the least of the depressions in the series to follow, we may expect a swelling in the ranks of the proletarian writers, and a decided veering to the left in the trend of Canadian literature.