A VERY LAUDABLE EFFORT

Standards of Literary Excellence in Early Nineteenth Century Canada

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ONE OF THE KEYS TO an appreciation of the print legacy of eighteenth and nineteenth century Canada is an understanding of the critical standards and terminology which residents of British North America applied to their reading material. Unfortunately for twentieth-century scholars, critical theory was not enunciated in any single text of the period. Although some basic rules for composition can be found in surviving elementary school books and in the texts from which Latin, Greek, and the classics of French and English were taught, more extended ideas of what was acceptable and unacceptable must be derived from an analysis of critical writing by a variety of individuals, published in the newspapers and periodicals of the time.

"Literature," as perceived by early nineteenth century Canadians included everything in print, as well as speeches and sermons. As an academic study, it excluded works written in modern languages. The definition of literature as "creative writing," with an accompanying body of "creative criticism," came about gradually in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and has been more fully developed in the twentieth. In the early period, criticism was as amorphous and undefined as was its literary subject. Neither was part of a developed intellectual institution. Both were in a state of becoming. The process of literary education varied from the eclectic reading of the auto-didact to the highly structured transmission of Latin and Greek classics in secondary schools and colleges attended by the children of the well-to-do. The literary world of 1840 was very different from that of 1990.

Twentieth century critics have taught readers to value innovation in both form and content. By contrast, in the earlier period, innovation was unacceptable since it was assumed that all possible forms had been established and all proper subjects outlined. The merit of a work thus resided in the author's skill at working within

the rules. An understanding of the reasons for their importance, as well as familiarity with the texts of Shakespeare and the classical giants of Latin and Greek was required of any writer in English; of Corneille, Boileau and, to a lesser extent, Latin authors, from writers in French. In both language groups writers were expected to be acquainted, as well, with aesthetic theories of the sublime and the picturesque. Just as twentieth century writers strive to produce the innovative works valued by their society, nineteenth century writers strove to satisfy the structured expectations of theirs.

In order to interpret the criticism of indigenous literature in the period before 1860 it is necessary to understand the context in which it appeared. In newspapers it was most often written by the editor, and usually consisted of a brief mention in the column devoted to local matters. A few sentences or a paragraph would announce that the work had been received and was recommended to readers. Occasionally criticism took the form of letters-to-the-editor contributed by anonymous subscribers, to which, if the comment was unfavourable, the author often replied. Reviews in literary periodicals were usually only a paragraph or two, although they were frequently padded by lengthy quotations from the work under consideration. Sometimes a work, or an author, was considered important enough to merit fuller treatment, but the grounds for this perceived importance were more often political or denominational, rather than purely literary.

Both newspapers and periodicals were basically regional in their circulation, with the result that works tended to be "noticed" only in the geographical areas in which they were produced. Because publishing was an entrepreneurial activity in which authors of books and publishers of new periodicals launched their enterprises at their own expense, few could afford the additional cost of distributing review copies beyond the market served by the newspapers and periodicals of their immediate district. Consequently — as with our present system — no free copy, no review.

Except where proprietors functioned as their own editors, we usually do not know with any certainty who wrote much of the literary criticism of the early period. Hired editors were most often completely anonymous, and because they were not generally well-paid they rarely stayed long in any job. No one individual stands out as a literary critic, and only S. H. Wilcocke in *The Scribbler* and John Gibson in the *Literary Garland* are known to have written criticism over a period of more than two years.

Just as there were no professional editors, there were also no professional writers. Before 1850, no person made his or her living by creative writing. As amateurs, they were almost all fully-integrated members of the society in which and for which they wrote. They accepted the prevailing literary values of the community, just as they accepted the prevailing social values.

Critics were principally concerned with the subject matter of a work. Questions of form were discussed only if the author had made serious errors in composition.

The critical vocabulary in which the content was discussed was limited, non-specialized, and easily understood by the general reader. The most common words to appear in laudatory criticism were "tasteful," "chaste" and "elegant." "Harmonious" and "sublime" were often applied to poetry. In two cases there are very positive usages unfamiliar to a twentieth century reader: "chaste" meant that a work was pure in style and without ornament, as well as free from indecency and offense; and "nervous" meant vigorous, powerful, and without weakness or diffuseness.

Before 1860, the goal of the Enlightenment to better mankind through refinement and moral education combined with the theological assumption that human being were inherently bad and must be conditioned to follow the paths of righteousness to ensure that the objective of literature must be social good, rather than private pleasure. The content must "please and instruct," "plaire et instruire" — with primary emphasis on instruction. "Le Bon" was the first quality of "le Beau." Not only were individuals believed to be responsible for ensuring that their own virtue qualified them for salvation, they were also considered to be responsible for the moral atmosphere in which others lived. When reading and writing were skills possessed only by the upper and middle classes, who could be relied on to understand and obey both literary and social rules, the effect of literature on individuals did not pose any threat to society. However, as literacy expanded in the nineteenth century the moral and intellectual instruction of a new class of readers was perceived to be of urgent social importance. Literature was now expected to enlighten and indoctrinate the newly-literate agricultural and industrial working classes.

Social and literary values thus came together in the first question of all literary critics. Was the content of a work morally correct? Regardless of date or location, it was assumed that virtue must be depicted in a positive manner and rewarded with happiness, contentment, or life everlasting. Vice and evil must be depicted negatively and punishment must be meted out. Virtue tended to mean Christian piety, honesty, devotion to family, and the acceptance of God and the state as the source of all order. Vice meant atheism, alcoholism, brutality, sexual or economic profligacy, and excessive individualism. Beyond these general categories there might be some minor disagreement within Canadian society as to specific details of individual or collective behaviour, the interpretation of which could vary according to nationality or religious denomination, but the broad outlines did not vary. Thus, a review of John Richardson's *The Canadian Brothers* in the Kingston *Chronicle* (February 15, 1840) begins by assuring prospective readers that the novel is morally correct:

> ... the Characters, from the chivalrous and ever to be lamented *Brock*, to the detestable and guilty murderer and traitor *Desborough*, are appropriate and in keeping with their profession and spheres in life; and, while the clever *author* was

> "adorning a tale" he did not neglect to "point a moral." The brave, loyal, and virtuous, though often surrounded with dangers, are supported under their trials, and end their days in the paths of glory, — whilst the guilty reap the reward of their crimes, in disgrace and misery.

These criteria applied in French as well as in English. Although we are accustomed to thinking of Catholic literary censorship in Lower Canada as being particularly oppressive, almost all criticism published there would, if translated, not have appeared out of the ordinary in an English-language periodical of the same date.

There was also general agreement in Canadian society that "imagination" was not something to be encouraged. Even Shakespeare was not above criticism on the grounds that his over-heated imagination sometimes resulted in bad taste. The account of a lecture on the subject of imagination, printed in the Montreal *Transcript* on January 17, 1850, ends:

> The lecture was concluded by a few remarks on the propriety of curbing the imagination and keeping it in due bounds, the lecturer observing that although the possession of a refined and sensitive imagination was of infinite value as an intellectual gift, it was liable to be mistaken and to be abused.

One of the points on which there was some disagreement within the broad community was whether or not all fiction, regardless of subject-matter, was immoral. Because the well-being of society was the principal concern, those who felt that salvation was the reward for a life of piety believed that putting novels into the hands of the people meant putting temptation in their path, and possibly condemning them to perdition. Many devout Protestants, in particular, felt this way about even the most moral fiction. As the editor of the *Christian Guardian*, reprinting an article by an American cleric from the Cincinnati *Ladies Repository*, wrote on March 31, 1841:

> We finish the novel, lay it aside, and the charm being broken, the first labour of the mind is the recollection that this is a fancy-piece. All the circumstances wrought into the thread of the story are fabulous; and the issue, in which vice suffers defeat and virtue is made to appear triumphant and honourable, is understood to be equally unfounded.

Consequently critics always commented on the morality of any work of fiction they reviewed and novelists were careful to ensure that they did not give offence. Where a writer was sure that there would be objections to his or her work, the customary tactic was to claim to be more moral than the moralists, as Joseph Doutre did in his preface to *Les Fiancés de 1812*. Another authorial defence was to claim that the novel was not a work of imagination, but was "founded on fact."

Those who did not object to fiction claimed that it was the most effective vehicle for conveying moral instruction, particularly to the lower classes who were perceived to best receive their morals with a sugar-coating. Consequently, many reli-

gious tracts were written in story form, and the popular press published many tales promoting the temperance cause.

One of the most fundamental of literary conventions was that poetry was considered to be inherently moral and uplifting. Thus, whatever the subject, the final stanza of almost every poem written in early nineteenth-century Canada routinely thanked the deity for gifts of love, or hope, or nature, or expressed Christian resignation in the face of death, despair and loss.

IN THE WAKE OF THE French Revolution a second social factor, the concept of nation and nationality, had entered the vocabulary of literary criticism. A national literature was the concomitant of a national identity. To residents of British North America this meant that their dawning sense of nationhood must be accompanied by the development of a national literature. Whether written in French or English, it was not necessary that this literature be unique, it was sufficient that it be written here and that it do as well or better the things which were done internationally. Preferably it would describe the society, landscape, and history of Upper and Lower Canada in positive terms so that non-Canadians would recognize the greatness of the nation and the high quality of its citizens.

The question of morality in literature spilled over into the idea of nationalism as well, since no country could be considered worthy in which correct morality and refinement did not dominate its cultural productions. In all countries influenced by European civilization the question of whether or not a literary work was good, simply because it was written in that country, was a thorny one. If a work showed that young writers were developing their literary skills and adding to the corpus of national literature, thus showing that the residents were intelligent and capable, then the work could be considered good. In Canada East there were moral objections to Joseph Doutre's, *Les Fiancées de 1812*; nonetheless, a critic in *Le Castor* wrote (12 novembre 1844):

> . . . il nous semble bien écrit et nous croyons devoir recommander à ceux qui ont à coeur l'avancement des talents canadiens, de donner quelqu'attention à cette première oeuvre d'un jeune homme dont le début dans les lettres possède certainement du mérite, de l'attrait, et promet pour l'avenir un écrivain distingué.

Of the many parallel comments which appeared in the English press, the following, from the Montreal *Gazette* (May 21, 1835), referring to Robert Sweeny's recently published volume of poetry, is perhaps one of the most outspoken:

> We would earnestly recommend every person in the free unincumbered [*sic*] enjoyment of a half crown, to apply it in purchasing a copy of the "Remnants". In addition to the actual value of the article, it has other important claims to consideration. It is written, printed and published in this city. Authors are scarce

> commodities in this matter-of-fact country, and it is the duty of our citizens to use them well when they do make their appearance.

On the other hand, if the quality of the work was very evidently bad, thus implying a lack of education, ability and standards in the Canadas, then it could be severely critcized. This criticism showed that Canadians were sophisticated enough to make judgments, and also instructed the next generation in proper writing techniques.

Subject matter, in particular, was expected to serve national objectives. If Canada was described as a beautiful and fertile land with a glorious history, where one could achieve success through one's own endeavours, its residents would share in some of that positive description, outsiders would envy them, and new settlers would be encouraged to join them.

While French and English were as unanimous in their setting of national objectives for literature as they had been on the subject of morality, the nature of the two national objectives differed considerably where content was concerned. All French writers and critics were born in Canada, and saw themselves as part of a nation, which, if it had lost control of its space, nonetheless remained a spiritual unity with a distinct language of expression. For them Canada was an old country where their ancestors were buried. It was "la patrie." In defence of literature written in French they referred frequently to the heritage given them by their connection with France. In contrast, most of the writers, and all but one of the critics, in English were not native-born. For them, Canada was a new land where the boundaries were legal and geographic, and where the language and literary tradition was English. It had no past worth mentioning, but a great future, to which they had consciously committed themselves. The family graves were elsewhere. For the English immigrants, "progress" was almost a magic word, since the advancement of Canada was such an integral part of their own self-esteem. Progress in literature was linked to the progress of the entire society:

> ... the progress of literature has been co-equal with that of the settlement of the wilderness; and if the latter has been made to bloom and blossom as the rose, the literature of Canada likewise blooms and blossoms beauteously.
>
> (*Literary Garland*, January 1843: 2)

The native-born English, a minority in literature if not, according to the 1851 census, an overall minority, saw things somewhat differently. As with their French-speaking compatriots, Canada was their country, they knew no other, and saw no reason why they should apologize for this fact. They were less concerned with progress and much more likely to write about the past and present than the immigrants.

Another factor, also national in its import, was mentioned in reviews of almost every book and periodical printed in the Canadas before 1860—a comment on the physical production itself. The quality of the paper, of the printing, and of the repro-

ductions, if any, was as much a suitable subject for review as the quality of the literary content. Here are two comments on the "New Series" of the *Literary Garland*, begun in December 1842, as examples, chosen from many such printed in the following year: ". . . let it suffice for us to say, that, in quality of paper and excellence of typographical execution, this favorite literary miscellany has not degenerated. . . ." (Brockville *Statesman*, October 18); "Elle peut rivaliser avec les ouvrages de ce genre publiés en Europe et aux Etats-Unis, sous le rapport du goût dans l'exécution typographique et du choix des matières" (*La Minerve*, February 9).

ALL THESE HIGH-MINDED CRITERIA for judging the quality of early Canadian literature frequently became subordinate to questions of personality, politics, or denominational religion. In what appears to have been a personal dispute, John Breakenridge and Dr. James Haskins criticized each other's poetry and called each other names in rival Kingston newspapers throughout the early 1840s. Haskins was allied with his medical colleague Dr. Barker, editor and proprietor of the *British Whig* and *Barker's Canadian Monthly Magazine*. After Haskins' death in 1845 Barker continued the vendetta against Breakenridge. As a result, there is a particularly venomous review of Breakenridge's *The Crusades and other Poems* in the July 1846 number of *Barker's Magazine*.

Matters of morality often degenerated into denominational prejudices, as when *The Church*, a weekly publication of the Church of England, criticized the first number of *The Calliopean*, a "literary periodical" published by the students of a Methodist school for young ladies:

> . . . we should regret anything which might injuriously affect the education of so many young persons. We hope that the addition of newspaper writing to the ordinary duties of the Female School, will not exert any prejudicial influence of the kind; yet we feel that it is an experiment which we should by no means recommend as being altogether safe, or worthy of imitation. Every one knows that some women have excelled in authorship; but they were remarkable women; and if their position in life was peculiar, we have reason to believe that God — who endowed them with their unusual talents — gave them also a counterbalancing strength and stability of mind. But whether, from their example, we are justified in concluding that our young women should be encouraged — as a general principle of education — to walk in the public and conspicuous paths of literature; this, we think, is a point which admits of reasonable doubt. (November 26, 1847)

Similarly, in politics, John Richardson's Tory sympathies earned him and his publications the enmity of the editor-critics of reform newspapers like the Toronto *Examiner*, the St. Catharines *Journal*, and the Quebec *Gazette*. The editor of the Montreal *Morning Courier*, commenting on Richardson's new newspaper, wrote: "The conductor of the *Loyalist* on the strength of having written several Tales or

Novels, trashy in style and disgusting in morals, sets up for a Literary Lion in Canada." (January 21, 1843)

Before Confederation the future political direction of British North America was not seen as a settled fact, but rather as a matter for intense debate — which debate frequently carried over into the literary sphere. Each one of these critics would have defended his comments on the grounds that the works savaged were injurious to public morality and to the good name of Canada because each sincerely believed that "their kind of people" — whether for personal, political, or denominational reasons — were the best for Canada, while their opponents were not. A modern reader of early Canadian literary criticism must always bear in mind the interests and prejudices of early critics, before taking them at their high-minded word.

To illustrate, I will elaborate upon three literary controversies of the early 1800s involving poets and critics. The first deals with the interrelated reviews of W. F. Hawley's *Quebec, The Harp and other Poems*, published in Montreal in September 1829, and Adam Kidd's *The Huron Chief, and other Poems*, published in the same city in February 1830. The second is concerned with the response to Isidore Lebrun's review of Michel Bibaud's *Epîtres, satires, chansons, épigrammes et autres pièces de vers*, published in *La Revue encyclopédique de Paris* in 1831, and the last is a letters-to-the-editor duel between the young poet Holmes Mair and one, "John Goodmeaning," published in the *Bathurst Courier* of Perth, Canada West, in 1848.

In the case of Hawley's *Quebec*, the brief notices printed in most newspapers were generally quite favourable. On October 31, 1829, the Kingston *Chronicle*, for example, praised "an originality of conception and design," mentioned that most Canadian literature had hitherto appeared only in "perishable" newspapers and magazines, and concluded by urging public support in order to "encourage the growth of native genius, and foster every effort likely to give us a literary character and literary taste." However, two articles in the Montreal *Vindicator*, on September 29 and October 13 of 1829, after conferring some hollow praise on the work, set out to hold it up to ridicule. Since the *Vindicator*'s resident poet and expert on all things literary at that time was Adam Kidd, there is a strong suspicion that he was the writer of the two critiques. The style is certainly similar to that of Kidd's various letters-to-the-editor on other subjects.

The anonymous critic of Hawley's book claims to be a disinterested reviewer, writing only for the poet's instruction. His first article deals with the 15-page poem, "Quebec" and the second with "The Harp," a work of similar length. The critic

finds fault with "Quebec" because the description of the city is merely "what might be said of any village, where any two or three great illustrious men had perished." Strangers could not learn from his poem about the "fame and honors" of Quebec City. He concludes that "Mr. Hawley's mind is not expansive enough for a great subject" and that "when every schoolboy writes verses, more is required than the inditing [sic] a few stanzas to gain the character and reputation of a poet." In the second critique, where "The Harp" is described as "not of that species of poetry, which requires great depth of thought so much as a fanciful and elegant imagination," Hawley is accused of sacrificing sense to rhyme and of using words in the wrong context so that metaphors are jumbled and meanings misdirected.

> The expression of this part of the stanza must be considered conspicuously bad, and out of the power of all criticism to forgive; the poet was led away by his ear, and lost himself in the harmony of the versification. It is the worst contrived of the whole poem, wanting clearness and being without meaning according to the true acceptation of the words; for even figurative language, tho' there should be a transition from the strict sense, should be within the limits of the comprehension, and contain no particular violation of diction.

Among other 'minor faults of composition" are "puerile repetition and alliteration." Thus Hawley is faulted for both technical lapses and personal inadequacy.

With such a critique of Hawley's book almost certainly written by Kidd, Hawley's friends would have been waiting for Kidd's own book to appear. At the time, Kidd accused his critics of political bias, and there may indeed have been some of that involved since the two poets differed in their religious and political affiliations, but the long critique of *The Huron Chief* by "Q" in the Montreal *Gazette* on June 7, 1830 follows along the lines of the ones devoted to *Quebec*, published in the rival *Vindicator*, just closely enough to make it seem that literary revenge was the principal motive. A positive initial notice of *The Huron Chief* in the *Gazette* on March 4, had mentioned all the customary national reasons for buying a book about Canada by a Canadian, and similar notices appeared in other newspapers. "Q," however, launches immediately in to charges of plagiarism, especially from the works of the Irish poet, Thomas Moore, to whom Kidd's book is dedicated. The poet is also accused of too much alliteration, bad rhymes, lack of originality, and of "pure nonsense" in some of his images. On June 15 and June 18 Kidd published two lengthy defences in the *Vindicator*, condemning his opponent's lack of taste and education, and justifying his own poem because of the national importance of the subject. The whole affair is more amusing than edifying to a modern reader, since it is so evident that personalities, rather than literary merit, were at the bottom of the exchange. No one questioned the morality of either work and the idea of national value seems to have been more a rhetorical device than a sincere critical factor.

PERSONALITIES PLAYED AN equal part in discussion of the value of Michel Bibaud's volume of poetry, *Epîtres, satires, chansons, épigrammes et autres pièces de vers.* When the book first appeared in February 1830 it received brief laudatory mentions in several English-language newspapers, and *La Minerve* (February 11, 1830) commented: "L'auteur y montre partout beaucoup de patriotisme; cela seul suffirait pour le recommander. . . . C'est la première fois qu'un auteur Canadien se présente devant le public avec ses oeuvres. Ses compatriotes, n'en doutons point, lui feront l'accueil qu'il mérite." The book itself then seemed to drop unnoticed into limbo. A brief exchange between "B" and Bibaud, having to do with the quality of poetry written by each, appeared in *La Minerve* on the 10th of May and the 10th of June that year, but *Epîtres* is not specifically mentioned and it seems, as in the case of Hawley and Kidd, to have been a question of a poetic slanging-match between two individuals who were known to each other.

Sometime in 1830, Bibaud, who had been editor of *La Minerve*, and Ludger Duvernay, the proprietor, fell out both personally and politically. Isidore Lebrun's review, reprinted in *La Minerve*, October 20, 1831, was the starting point for the attack on Bibaud. The review is a curious one in a number of ways. Lebrun wrote a number of complimentary comments about *Epîtres*, and gave it the ultimate accolade of pronouncing it better than similar productions of provincial France. However, with metropolitan condescension, he objects to Bibaud's choice of subjects. Anyone can write of human nature: what Lebrun wants is something exotically *canadien*. What he means by *canadien* seems to be the following:

> Il existe encore des peuplades d'aborigènes, restes des tribus belliqueuses, aimantes et féroces, qui conviées à la civilisation par des moines, et non par des agronomes et des William Penn, ont préféré la vie indépendante. Leurs énergiques harangues, leurs assemblées, leurs chasses et leurs amours n'ont pas encore été traitées par la poésie. Combien d'épopées lui procurerait le Canada!

None of the self-appointed critics who then joined in the anti-Bibaud chorus responded to this prescription for French-Canadian subject matter; they all stuck to criticizing Bibaud's competence as a poet.

First in the field, on November 17, 1831, was 'W.V.', whose poem, beginning with personal insults, reproached Bibaud ". . . dont la muse inhabile/Emet en des nonsens la fadeur et la bile," for not writing anonymously, for insistently seeking signatures for his prospectus, and for producing the periodical *L'Observateur*. Bibaud's reply was printed in the same journal four days later. He asserts that 'W.V.''s poem neither rhymes nor makes sense, that his opponent can't even get the number of syllables right, and that Lebrun would have criticized 'W.V.' far more harshly than he had Bibaud.

'W.V.' returned to the charge (November 28), calling Bibaud a pedant who

"Affrontant le pays par ton chétif recueil." The insult to Bibaud's nationalism brought another rapid response (December 5).

> Car je m'y moque un peu des sots écrivailleurs,
> Des censeurs maladroits, des ignorants brailleurs,
> Dont le plat verbiage ou l'aveugle cririe,
> En les déshonorant, fait honte à la patrie.

He recommends reading, study, and a knowledge of the rules of poetry to 'W.V.'

The "so's your old man" level of this poetic debate brought the intervention of 'Parnassi Abortivus' on December 15. This critic suggested that they should both be "ramener à des sentimens plus dignes de la Muse Canadienne, qui, jeune encore, s'effraie de marcher dans des sentiers si opposés à ses goûts et à ses habitudes qui jusqu'ici m'ont paru pacifiques." He tells them that there are better subjects for their talents.

> Ses fastes déroulés présentent à vos yeux
> Des sujets abondans, grands, nobles, merveilleux.
> Regardez à la voix de notre illustre Chambre
> L'iniquité pâlir, la justice se rendre
> Ce sont nos citoyens de vrais *Canadiens*,
> Qui sont de tous nos droits les plus fermes soutiens.
> Voyez, voyez les flots de leur mâle éloquence,
> Repousser les abus, reprimer la licence.
> Passez de là les mers. . . . C'est un *Canadien*
> Placé par notre choix auprès du souverain.
> Il parle, et aussitôt à sa voix la justice
> Nous apparait brillante et se montre propice.
> Voilà de quoi chanter:

This chastisement seems to have been effective. Bibaud never did reply, at least in the pages of *La Minerve*, and 'W.V.,' claiming that he had only been doing his civic duty in bringing Bibaud's defects to light, wrote on December 19 that he would suspend his comments if Bibaud would admit that Lebrun was right. A long poem by 'Z,' published on December 29, seems to have ended the dispute. 'Z' does not approve of Bibaud or of Parisian critics. He writes of the beauties and genius of Canada and ends, with these lines, which he places in the mouth of "la patrie":

> S'il faut des orateurs pour maintenir mes lois,
> Des guerriers valeureux pour défendre mes droits;
> Il ne me faut pas moins encore des poètes,
> Pour chanter mes succès et publier mes fêtes!
> Sans eux, je ne saurais, dans mes prétensions,
> M'asseoir, à juste droit, parmi les nations!

At the beginning of January *La Minerve* published a complimentary review of Bibaud's new periodical, *Le Magasin du Bas-Canada*, and the matter came to an end, at least in print. Bibaud used the first number of *Le Magasin* to make a

detailed reply to Lebrun in which he states that he was writing for French-Canadians, not for Parisians, so that what the latter might find obscure, the former did not, and also that *canadiens*, being familiar with native peoples, did not find the subject to be of literary interest.

In the poetic squabble about the quality of *Epîtres*, the national identity of French Canadians was one of the dominating factors — to be called a disgrace to one's country was an insult of th highest order. Suitable subject matter, glorifying French-Canadian history and customs, was assumed by all to be an important element in acceptable literature. That Bibaud's satires — against avarice, envy, sloth, and other sins — had been critical of French-Canadian society was probably a contributing factor in producing opposition to his work.

ANOTHER FORM OF NATIONALISM entered into the dispute between Holmes Mair and 'John Goodmeaning.' Mair, an older brother of Charles Mair, had been publishing poetry over his own name in the *Bathurst Courier* for some months when John Goodmeaning decided that it was time he was taught a few lessons about writing poetry. The specific poem which triggered Goodmeaning's first outburst was "The Two Roses" published on May 26, 1848. Before launching on the lessons, Goodmeaning pointed out that other poets, familiar to readers of the *Courier*, like Mrs. J.P. Grant and 'J.S.M.,' although residents of the area, were not, because they had been raised elsewhere, poets of the Bathurst District.

> To "H.Mair" alone, of all that largely contribute for the "Poet's Corner" of the Bathurst Courier, belongs the honour of being a *native* of the District. Of him we say, *"he belongs to us";* and *because* he belongs to us, and we are convinced that he possesses poetic talent of which the Bathurst District may yet be proud, we intend a little liberty with him . . . for the purpose of shewing wherein he may excel as a poet. (June 2, 1848)

He then goes on, after faint praise, to damn the young poet with the accusation of an uncultivated mind:

> Some sentiments in the piece, though ill-expressed, are really of the first order. Others, and they predominate, are so unnatural, inapposite, unreasonable, improbable, and so utterly destitute of meaning and connexion that some would say . . . that he who wrote them is no poet.

Most of the commentary, however, is taken up with what can only be described as nit-picking. "Poetry must be true to nature." asserts the critic, having queried the image of the poet reclining on grass "moistened with dew." Because he himself "would have dreaded an attack of Ague or rheumatism too much to be guilty of such egregious folly" the poet is perceived to be at fault, not the critic. Sympathy

for Mair arises, not because his poetry is great, but because the criticism misses the mark so completely.

It is not, therefore, surprising that Holmes Mair replied a week later (June 9) accusing John Goodmeaning of having a prosaic mind which did not understand poetry. In the same manner as Goodmeaning had recommended study and maturity for Mair as a poet of the Bathurst District, the poet also recommended study for his critic if he wished to become the critic of the District:

> . . . so that he can view things in the simple and in the abstract, judge of a line of prose from a line of poetry, draw a line of demarcation between sense and nonsense, imbibe the chivalry of the art, so that he may know how to be honourable in his strictures and moderate in his nervous system, so that in a reply he can bridle his imagination and keep it from flying off into absurdity.

A temporary lull, in which Mair had the temerity to publish another poem, "A Picture of Indian Times," was ended when John Goodmeaning indignantly entered the lists again on August 4. Returning to the "The Two Roses" he complains that the poet has actually listed seven roses. He also disapproves of the use of the word "picture" in the title of the latest Mair poem and devotes a few paragraphs to ridiculing the concept of a poem as a picture, but most of the more than two columns is taken up with discussions of when rose-buds open and close, and whether that phenomenon can be linked to a human life.

Mair, of course, replied (August 11) that there were only two roses, the "rose of life" and the "natural rose," and that the other five were metaphorical extensions of the two basic ones. "Too much learning" had made his adversary "mad." Goodmeaning is more interested in "the idea of a man's learning" than in what he actually writes.

Nothing daunted, Goodmeaning returned to the attack in the next number of the newspaper, a week later. He states categorically that juvenalia should not be published; says he will not be personal, but is; quotes Horace (to prove his education); repeats that seven roses are not the same as two; and concludes that Mair's "understanding is not competent." Mair's reply, a week later, admits that he has made errors, but says that Goodmeaning is prosaic and not a critic, nor does he show any good will. He defends himself against the accusation of being ignorant.

The following week, on September 1, John Goodmeaning states that Mair has demonstrated his ignorance by being unaware of his errors. Goodmeaning then goes on to make political statements about the importance of quality in local education, and says that Mair discredits the District as well as himself. A new Mair poem "The Last of the Mohecans" give him a chance to state that "squaws" cannot be "fair," and similar quibbles. Mair's reply, on September 8, is that he would rather give up writing than have the public subjected to another long prose criticism from John Goodmeaning. He will not reply further because his critic is not worth the effort.

Others began to intervene and suggest that the dispute had gone on long enough. The critic, however, attacked again on September 15 and 22. The first letter objected to Mair's next poem; the second analyzed a perfectly dreadful poem, not by Mair or anyone else in the Bathurst District, but which Goodmeaning managed to imply Mair was somehow responsible for.

By the end of the dispute, Mair was implying that he knew the name of his pseudonymous critic, and that the purpose of the attacks was personal, rather than poetic. In a small community like Perth it would certainly have been difficult to preserve anonymity, so personalties would be bound to enter into any disagreement. The morality of Mair's work was not in question, but his perceived errors as a poet were ascribed, in a political comment, to the poor quality of local education, and Mair himself was condemned for bringing disgrace to the Bathurst District and, by extension, Canada, in publishing his poems.

LITERARY CRITICISM, AS IT appeared in early nineteenth century Canadian newspapers and periodicals, was generally both laudatory and perfunctory. These examples are unusual in both their length and their negative intent. On these three occasions, aspects of the book or poem which were acceptable were mentioned in passing, if at all, since the purpose of the critique was to hold the author up to ridicule. What was "good" was less the converse of what was "bad," than an unexplored category of investigation. National objectives figure in the rhetoric of all three, but the morality of the works being acceptable, that particular criterion is not under discussion. Personalities, and political or religious differences did, however, enter into the background to each example, despite the critics' claim to impartiality. Since the authors were perceived to have committed errors of form and diction these points were discussed at length, showing the erudition of the critic at the same time as the poet's shortcomings were brought to light. National pride is used as an excuse to berate each writer — since they are all said to have described Canada inadequately, and to have disgraced the nation by producing inferior work.

Just as there is no "typical" early nineteenth century book, so there can be no "typical" review. But, taking them all into account, it can be said that in most cases, since author and audience were part of the same society, the writer's objectives and the reader's expectations were inextricably mixed. Whether they expressed themselves in English or French, writers and readers saw themselves as part of a long and glorious literary tradition, stretching back through the history of their linguistic mother countries, and pointing forward into the future. Both author and audience, whether self-taught or university educated, had learned the classical rules of form and style and did their best to uphold and follow them. They also conformed without question to the accepted moral standards of their day and were aware that they

had obligations to the country in which they lived — although the manner in which they perceived it varied according to the language in which they wrote and the country in which they were born.

A society does not normally subject to public appraisal those conventions which it takes for granted. Thus, the critics, who were as much a part of the everyday life of the Canadas as were the writers, accepted these tenets and used them as criteria when commenting on Canadian writing. They did not see their public function as one of setting new standards, and their relationship to the writers of the period was seen to be that of a schoolmaster transmitting the wisdom of the past, not that of a cultural seer spurring authors to move in new directions. However, to use the correct classical form, to be morally and nationally correct, still left a great deal of room for individual creative expression on a wide range of subjects — a whole spectrum of investigation rarely addressed by critics of the time. Critics were also sufficiently well-integrated into society to be part of the complex interplay of personalities, politics, and denominational rivalries in British North America. Before we sneer at their lack of impartiality, cloaked in objective comment, we should consider some of the critical disputes of our own day, where, in some instances, different political visions of the nation's future and, in others, straightforward personal animosity — all expressed in the best and most disinterested post-modern terminology — have determined the critical evaluations of particular works by particular critics. The early nineteenth century agendas may not have been the same as ours, but they were no less influential in their own day.

The writers and critics of pre-Confederation Canada held considerably different attitudes and objectives from those of today. They were not, as our present "Whig interpretation" of literature implies, shadowy and imperfect forerunners of our present selves, but lively, committed Canadian individuals, who lived in a very different world from ours. Nineteenth century Canadian authors, as writers have always done, and always will do, sought to communicate with their fellow citizens. They did so by bringing their creative energies to the accepted literary forms and social objectives of the time. They produced, as the *British Colonist* (December 26, 1848) said of the *Maple Leaf for 1849*, "a very laudable effort." They should be judged first, as the early writers of other nations are, by the standards of their own day.