

BLISS CARMAN'S "LOW TIDES"

Thomas Vincent

THE PUBLICATION OF "Low Tide on Grand-Pré" in the *Atlantic Monthly* of March 1887 has been generally recognized by literary critics as the first significant milestone in Bliss Carman's development as a poet. It reflects an increased confidence in craftsmanship, a deeper maturity in poetic voice, and a greater clarity of poetic vision and direction. Carman himself acknowledged the importance of the poem by placing it first among the poems in his first volume of verse and by entitling that volume *Low Tide on Grand-Pré* (New York, 1893). Later, and with the benefit of hindsight, in a letter to H.D.C. Lee (29 September 1911), he expressed the view that he "did not write any poetry of any consequence" before the period in which he wrote "Low Tide."¹ As the importance of Carman's position in Canadian literature has become clearer, there has been a growing recognition of the significance of the poem in Canadian literary history generally. Today, few would dispute the view that it is a central work of Canadian poetry. And so, the existence of an early (if inferior) draft or version of the poem (see pages 134-35) provides an opportunity to take a new look at an important work. It provides an illuminating insight into the evolution of the poem, and an interesting view of Carman's development as a poet at a critical point in his career.

Carman wrote his first draft of the poem at Windsor, Nova Scotia, in June 1886, judging from the place and date notation found at the end of the first published version, reprinted below under its title "Low Tide on Avon."² At that time, he was staying with his cousin, Charles G. D. Roberts, who had been appointed to the Chair of English Literature at the University of King's College in the autumn of 1885. The milieu in which Roberts moved at King's (and into which Carman entered) was not only academic but also intensely literary. Upon arriving at King's, Roberts had immediately been elected (10 October 1885) President of the College's very active literary society, "The Haliburton," and through the early months of 1886 had been lecturing in various Maritime towns on "A Few Aspects of American Poetry," as reflected in the works of established poets such as Longfellow, Emerson, and Whittier, and in the works of younger poets such as Sidney Lanier and Joaquin

Miller. Carman himself had just returned from visiting Harvard and Johns Hopkins Universities in the United States in search of a compatible graduate school where he might further his studies in literature and philosophy beginning in the fall of 1886. Both men would have been present at the activities surrounding the Convocation ceremonies at King's College in late June, during which George Stewart, Jr., a fellow New Brunswicker who had gained national recognition as a journalist and literary critic, received an honorary D.C.L. and delivered the Encaenia Address entitled "The Literature of a Nation." Stewart was among the more vocal proponents of the pressing need for an indigenous literature as a fundamental element in the development of national consciousness and a sense of national identity.

In this highly intellectual, academic, and literary climate (fraught with nationalistic overtones) Carman set about the writing of his poem, "Low Tide on Avon," in June 1886.⁹ It was printed in October in the *King's College Record*,⁴ a monthly magazine published by the University, edited by students, and supervised by Roberts. No doubt it was Roberts who was instrumental in seeing it into print; Carman by this time had gone on to Harvard to pursue his graduate studies.

The early part of the "Avon" version focuses explicitly on the Evangeline legend and attempts to amplify that legend by projecting a vision of a ghostly, ethereal beauty in the guise of Evangeline, who returns to haunt the forests and fields of Acadie through the mystical hours of the summer solstice. In effect, we are given a kind of midsummer night's dream, but one that only distantly and tangentially reflects the imagination of Shakespeare. The perspective here is romantic, but is rooted in historical tragedy, not comedy, and is governed by a North American literary tradition and imaginative vision that reaches back through Longfellow to Emerson and Thoreau. Indeed, the dynamics of North American historical romance and literature so dominate the foreground or surface of this version that the poem appears to be part of the self-conscious search for nationalistic themes that characterized the work of many post-Confederation writers. One is reminded of Roberts' use of Acadian materials in his fictions of the 1890's.

Not far below the romantic surface of the piece, however, lies a meditative melancholy mood and a nostalgic tone that become the artistic vehicles for investing the poetic imagery with transcendental meaning, and for drawing the reader affectively into the poet's vision of a metaphysical reality embedded in the sensuality of the natural world. In the "Avon" version, this visionary element is somewhat obscured, buried in the poet's efforts to harness romance to historical and literary purpose. But in the mystical underpinning of "Low Tide on Avon" lies the poem we know as "Low Tide on Grand-Pré." When, sometime during the winter of 1886-87, Carman edited out the elements of historical and literary romance (only an echo remains in the new title and in the term "Acadie"), he allowed the mystical background to emerge fully and clearly into the foreground, creating a

more sharply focussed if not distinctly different poem. The specifics of time (summer solstice) and place (Avon River tidal flats) in the first stanza become lost in the sweep of the mystical vision that now strongly informs the poem's imagery. Most important, the central female figure, no longer confined by the particularities of historical and literary context as *Evangeline*, emerges as a sensual, mystical entity who functions as the key to unlocking and expressing both the emotional intimacy and intellectual significance of the poet's spiritual experience.

The suppression of historical specifics and the amplification of meditative mood and nostalgic tone in the "Grand-Pré" version have led some critics (unaware of the "Avon" version) to surmise that the poem grew out of a traumatic experience in Carman's emotional life and that his apparent growth in artistic maturity should be viewed in that light. Donald Stephens⁵ points to the death of Carman's mother in February 1886 and Sorfleet⁶ argues that he experienced a moment of profound mystical insight in June. Either way, the "Avon" version suggests that the writing of "Low Tide" did not begin as a direct response to his mother's death or to a mystical experience. The focus of "Low Tide on Grand-Pré" (however one may interpret it) emerged through a process of editing and revision that took place during the winter of 1886-87. At that time, Carman was immersed in his studies at Harvard, and was particularly absorbed in the philosophy course he was pursuing under Josiah Royce.⁷ Royce's lectures dealt with the intellectual basis for idealism and spirituality, and clearly had a salutary effect on Carman's understanding of the purpose of poetry and of the relationship between the sensual and the ideal in human experience.

While it is hard to specify exactly what Carman drew from his academic experience at Harvard in 1886-87, there is no doubt it precipitated a significant maturation in his understanding of human realities and in his poetic sensibility. The difference between "Low Tide on Avon" (June 1886) and "Low Tide on Grand-Pré" (March 1887) is a convenient, even remarkable, yardstick by which to measure that change. Where the "Avon" version strains to stitch together a self-conscious concern for nationalistic and literary myth-making with the emotional and perceptual complexities of a moment of special mystical insight, the "Grand-Pré" version focuses sharply and confidently on the import of that moment in all its subjective intimacy and exclusivity. Carman does not back away from the inherent difficulties involved in exploring and articulating intuitive insight in an emotionally and intellectually coherent form. He trusts his perceptions and he trusts his poetic ability to communicate them. His intention and focus are clear, even if the logic of the narrative is at times vague.

But that vagueness itself can be seen as an appropriate (perhaps even unavoidable) attribute of the poet's sense of his subject and his approach to it. In the "Grand-Pré" version, narrative structure is made clearly subordinate to lyric impulse. In the process, the controlling, referential effect of time and space are sus-

pended and the force of some other controlling power is made imaginatively and affectively clear through sensitive response to natural imagery and nostalgic memory. The what, who and when of narration are less important to the poet's intention and to our understanding than the tone and mood of the poetic moment that flow from the pattern of image and sound.

In light of the muddled form and intention of his earlier effort, "Low Tide on Grand-Pré" becomes clear evidence of significant maturation of the poet's eye and the poet's voice. A new-found confidence in lyric effect is matched by an increased trust in intuitive awareness of the presence and importance of dimensions of reality that lie beyond the empirical. In the context of the poem, this awareness is presented as a remembered thing, implicitly lamented as a moment now gone, but the effect of the lyric itself (the record of memory if you wish) is to recreate that intimate moment for the perceptive reader. The medium here is art not nature and perception functions in imagination rather than through memory, but the proof of a forceful reality that transcends the empirical rests in the lyric effect of the poem. The poem is the imaginative gateway the poet offers the reader as evidence of the ideal world which intuitively he knows lies all around him in nature and in his art.

NOTES

The two versions of "Low Tide" are reprinted on pages 134-35. For the 1893 printing of "Low Tide on Grand-Pré," Carman returned to the indentation pattern of the stanza form used in "Low Tide on Avon."

- ¹ Noted by J. R. Sorfleet, "Transcendentalist, Mystic, Evolutionary Idealist: Bliss Carman, 1886-1894," in *Colony and Confederation*, ed. G. Woodcock (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1974), pp. 189-210. Full text of the letter is in *Letters of Bliss Carman*, ed. H. P. Gundy (Kingston/Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 189-191.
- ² Sorfleet identifies June 1886 as the date at which "Low Tide on Grand-Pré" was written. He appears to be unaware of the first published version and that it is substantially different from that published in the *Atlantic* in March 1887.
- ³ Avon is the name of the river that runs past Windsor and into the Minas Basin at the eastern end of the Bay of Fundy. While historically related to the Acadian Expulsion, it carries none of the literary connotations invested in Grand-Pré by Longfellow's poem *Evangeline*.
- ⁴ King's College Record 78 (October 1886): 5-6.
- ⁵ Donald Stephens, *Bliss Carman* (New York: Twayne, 1966), pp. 42-43.
- ⁶ See Sorfleet, p. 190.
- ⁷ Royce was the author of *The Religious Aspects of Philosophy* (Boston, 1885; rpr. New York: Harper, 1958) which had deeply impressed Carman before he went to Harvard. See Sorfleet, p. 194.

LOW TIDE ON AVON

Bliss Carman

“Avon” Version: June 1886

The sun goes down, and over all
 These barren reaches by the tide
Such unelusive glories fall,
 I almost dream they yet will bide
 Until the coming of the tide.

And yet I know that not for us,
 By any ecstasy of dream,
He lingers to keep luminous
 A little while the grievous stream,
 That frets uncomforted of dream.

I know too well that not for thee,
 And not for any smile of thine,
He stays, but failing utterly,
 Some day across a waste of brine
 Shall draw to prayer those hands of thine!

A grievous stream that to and fro,
 Athrough the fields of Acadie,
Goes wandering, as if to know
 Why one beloved face should be
 So long from home and Acadie!

And every year in June for him
 There comes a dream — Evangeline,
As on that day her loss made dim!
 Through all the years that intervene
 His deathless love Evangeline!

At evening fall in midsummer,
 Just when the radiant fleurs-de-lis
From trammel of winter and the stir
 Of breathing Death one hour are free,
 She comes with radiant fleurs-de-lis!

Above the ageless hills there breaks,
 Over their purple bloom of pine
And blue ravines, in crimson flakes,
 Her light whose hands are come to twine
 Shadow of rose with shade of pine.

LOW TIDE ON GRAND-PRÉ

Bliss Carman

"Grand-Pré" Version: March 1887

The sun goes down, and over all
These barren reaches by the tide
Such unelusive glories fall,
I almost dream they yet will bide
Until the coming of the tide.

And yet I know that not for us,
By any ecstasy of dream,
He lingers to keep luminous
A little while the grievous stream,
Which frets, uncomforted of dream, —

A grievous stream, that to and fro
Athrough the fields of Acadie
Goes wandering, as if to know
Why one beloved face should be
So long from home and Acadie!

And all the land makes glad her coming,
 If only once in a year of time,
 The Underking's strong hands o'ercoming,
 She move one night through a dream sublime,
 In beauty still untouched of time.

Was it a year or lives ago
 We took the grasses in our hands,
 And caught the summer flying low
 Over the waving meadow lands
 And held it there between our hands?

The while the river at our feet,
 A drowsy inland meadow stream,
 At slip of son the afterheat
 Made running gold, and in the gleam
 We freed our birch upon the stream.

And down along the elms at dusk
 We lifted dripping blade to drift
 Through twilight scented fine like musk,
 Where night and gloam awhile uplift
 Nor sunder soul and soul adrift.

And that we took into our hands,
 Spirit of life or subtler thing,
 Breathed on us there and loosed the bands
 Of death, and taught us whispering
 The secret of some wonder thing.

And all your face grew light and seemed
 To hold the shadow of the sun;
 The evening wavered, and I deemed
 That time was ripe and years had done
 Their wheeling underneath the sun.

And all desire and all regret,
 And fear and memory were nought;
 One, to remember or forget
 The keen delight our hands had caught;
 Morrow and yesterday were nought!

* * * * *

The night has fallen, and the tide —
 Now and again comes drifting home,
 Across these arching barrens wide,
 A sigh like driven wind or foam:
 In grief the flood is bursting home!

Windsor, June, 1886

Was it a year or lives ago
 We took the grasses in our hands,
 And caught the summer flying low
 Over the waving meadow lands,
 And held it there between our hands?

The while the river at our feet —
 A drowsy inland meadow stream —
 At set of sun the after-heat
 Made running gold, and in the gleam
 We freed our birch upon the stream.

There down along the elms at dusk
 We lifted dripping blade to drift,
 Through twilight scented fine like musk,
 Where night and gloom a while uplift,
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 Spirit of life or subtler thing —
 Breathed on us there, and loosed the bands
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Then all your face grew light, and seemed
 To hold the shadow of the sun;
 The evening faltered, and I deemed
 That time was ripe, and years had done
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So all desire and all regret,
 And fear and memory, were naught;
 One to remember or forget
 The keen delight our hands had caught:
 Morrow and yesterday were naught!

The night has fallen, and the tide . . .
 Now and again comes drifting home,
 Across these aching barrens wide,
 A sigh like driven wind or foam:
 In grief the flood is bursting home!