

THE NATURAL WORLD IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY CANADIAN LITERATURE

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I N THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY the idea that early Canadian writers — and, by extension, early Canadians — perceived themselves as surrounded by a hostile natural world, has become part of the English-Canadian sense of identity.¹ This triumph of an idea over contrary evidence is generally buttressed with references to *Wacousta* and *Roughing it in the Bush*. However, before accepting the evidence of these works as conclusive, readers should consider two things. First, that while Susanna Moodie and John Richardson were compelling writers, they were only two of hundreds who wrote about life in the Canadas; second, that Moodie was a very reluctant emigrant, that Richardson was attempting to appeal to the tastes of thrill-seeking British novel readers in order to supplement his scanty half-pay income, and that both wrote very positively of the natural world of the Canadas in other works.² In this latter mood they are in accord with the majority of their contemporaries. The question of why negative myth-making appeals so strongly to the modern Canadian psyche must be left for others to resolve. It is a present-day problem, the answer to which must come from present-day Canadians. As far as the literature written and read by our ancestors is concerned, the fact is that before 1850, with few exceptions, all the evidence points to an essentially positive literary view of the Canadian landscape.³

In the final analysis, beauty has always resided in the eye of the beholder. However, throughout history, most beholders' eyes and minds have been trained or conditioned to perceive beauty in those things which their own culture generally values as beautiful. For early Canadian writers it happened that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries both theology and aesthetic theory came together in their society to reinforce the perception of the natural world as beautiful. The theological imperative stemmed from the prevalent Christian belief that all creation must be pleasing to man because the Creator could not possibly have produced anything unpleasant. Thus, the last stanza of almost every "nature poem" of the period routinely thanked the Creator for the gift of natural

beauty. The aesthetic imperative was rooted in the idea of the sublime as the pinnacle of all types of beauty. Sublimity was inherent in the thing viewed, but it could also refer to the emotion evoked in the viewer. It was more than mere beauty. Religious awe at the wonders of creation was a part of it. So was a shiver of awed fear. The grandeur of mountains, waterfalls, uninhabited wild spots, oceans, skylscapes, and vast panoramas were all considered to be sublime. In the middle ages and the early modern period these same elements had been perceived to have negative connotations, but in the late eighteenth century scientific enlightenment combined with dawning romanticism to transform them into the positive concept of the sublime. In Europe, travellers looked on evidences of the sublime in untamed nature and then returned to the city to write of their experiences. Painters set up their easels on remote, rugged terrain, and the results of their meeting with the sublime decorated the walls of city drawing-rooms. Poets and novelists used the generally accepted ideas of the sublime as a sort of shorthand convention through which they could convey the idea of beauty to their readers. In the Canadas these aesthetic and theological principles were further reinforced by the fact that most of the area was, as it still is, scenically very attractive.⁴

In early Canadian literature we are not dealing with the mystery of the creative process as found in singular works of genius. Our authors were not original thinkers, but rather men and women who accepted and worked within the dominant expressive modes of their day. Thus, whether they were French or English, whether they were born in Canada or elsewhere, most Canadian writers before 1850 both found the Canadas to be beautiful and accepted the convention of the sublime as the basis for much of their description of the natural world. It is not a question of "realism" as opposed to "romanticism" in descriptive writing. A craggy summit, a tumbling cascade, the view from a vantage point, could each be described either "realistically" or "romantically" according to variations in individual writer's responses, without affecting in any way the designation of the object as sublimely beautiful. "Sublime" as an adjective, noun, or adverb was the most frequently used word in the descriptive vocabulary of the period.

Scenic description, and the author's emotional response to the natural world are more often encountered in poetry than in prose. Except in the senses that the sun shone on the happy and righteous, or that storms were stirred up by a *deus ex machina*, the environment played little part in early Canadian fiction, particularly that written by the native-born. The first two novels in English, *St. Ursula's Convent* and *Matilda*, are concerned more with people and events than they are with the physical setting. Abraham Holmes tells us that *Belinda* takes place in the Chatham area of Upper Canada, but the novel is so lacking in environmental detail that the protagonists could just as well have sailed on the English Thames as the Canadian one, or journey between Russian country houses. *The Canadian*

Brothers begins with a panoramic view from the fort at Amherstburg and contains detailed descriptions of some battle sites—principally required for a critique of General Proctor's strategy—but the wild, romantic scenery of *Wacousta* is nowhere to be found in Richardson's other "Canadian" novel.

Similarly in French, Pierre Chauveau, having set the social-political-economic stage for Charles and Pierre Guérin, places his two heroes on a hill overlooking the St. Lawrence, "panorama le plus varié qui soit au monde,"⁵ and proceeds to describe the view in four lengthy paragraphs. There is only one other extended description in *Charles Guérin*, and that one is of Quebec City, not of the natural world. Chauveau makes his early obeisance to convention, then concerns himself with action rather than contemplation.

Other novelists, notably Aubert de Gaspé *filz* and Patrice Lacombe, do not bother even with the perfunctory bow to convention. Critics have commented extensively on the absence of specific settings in *L'Influence d'un livre*, which begins:

Sur la rive sud du fleuve Saint-Laurent, dans une plaine qui s'étend jusqu'à une chaîne de montagnes, dont nous ignorons le nom. . . .⁶

and continues in a manner equally vague where all physical settings are concerned. Lacombe does devote two paragraphs in Chapter One of *La Terre paternelle* to the beauties of "Gros Sault," but his intention is more to evoke the idyllic nature of rural life, which will be contrasted later with the misery of the city, than it is to describe a particular place.

Short fiction in French follows the same pattern. In this form there is one type of sketch in which the city-dwelling author contemplates pastoral charm. Most of the genre is touched more than somewhat by the romanticism of early Lamartine. "[M]on âme suivit celle d'Alphonse de Lamartine dans la solitude. . . ." wrote "Amela" in *L'Aurore* on 12 November 1839, in "Une promenade champêtre." In "La campagne" as described by "Pietro," a Lamartinian melancholy prevails.

Quand je laisse la ville, j'aime à gagner ces vastes solitudes où l'homme est seul avec lui-même, où la pensée règne sans obstacle et dans toute sa sublimité. J'aime que les vents fassent craquer sourdement les forêts; que les flots en furie viennent se briser à mes pieds, que la tempête gronde sur ma tête; et puis après l'orage vient le calme; j'aime alors le soleil qui perce les brouillards; j'aime le zéphyr qui détache des feuilles la rosée en milles petits globules étincelants. . . .⁷

While the idea of man in nature is absent from early Canadian novels in both languages, unlike the French experience, it does play a part in some of the short fiction written by the native-born English. In three numbers of the *Canadian Garland*, in November and December 1832, the twenty-one-year-old Charles Durand⁸ described "An Adventure in the Woods of Canada." Durand was certainly not lacking in highly-coloured imagination, as his *Canadian Casket* and

Canadian Garland short stories indicate. However, being lost in the woods, while not a pleasure, was an experience more interesting than frightening:

As much of my road lay thro' uncultivated tracts of country and wild and dense forest, I anticipated a feast of scenery similar to the above described. I love to view nature in her native wilderness; to gaze upon the silent workings of her mighty bosom; search into the sublime majesty of her actions, — and listen to the chorus of her groves.

Caught in a storm and lost in the woods, he spends an anxious night. Though he mentions his “anxiety,” “despair,” and “melancholy gloom,” what he actually writes about is a calm use of survival techniques, and he describes the look and sound of a forest at night more in terms of beauty than menace. With the return of daylight he feeds on cranberries in a swamp, and drinks water from a “limpid stream.” Climbing a hill, he can see nothing but “a waving ocean of foliage.” Directing himself towards what he hoped was smoke, rising in the distance, he went forward all day, often leading his horse in the thick undergrowth. Just at sunset he heard a woman singing and followed the sound to a “cottage” where he spent the night, starting off in the morning on the right path to his destination. Durand’s protagonist was well aware of the dangers of being lost in the woods. Nonetheless, he kept his head and emerged safely, while at the same time never losing his appreciation of the environment.

W. B. Wells was another Canadian who regarded the forest as a normal place to spend his time. In *Barker’s Magazine* in 1846 and 1847 he published two first-person-narrated stories, “A Bear Hunt” and “Deer Stalking on the South Branch,” which illustrate the pleasure he found in being in the woods.¹⁰ There is also an element of ironic humour in both works which contributes to the impression of a man in control of his environment. In the opening paragraphs of the first, Wells makes fun of the accounts of Canadian hunting trips published by British officers and travellers in English periodicals. In a mock-heroic tone he describes the dangers of the bear hunt, then calmly explains the technique which ensures man’s victory. As comic relief, while waiting for the bear to appear, the hunters amuse themselves by scaring two men and a woman looking for cows. Finally the bear emerges and, after much effort and excitement, it is killed. The author, ironic to the end, concludes;

This is a most blood-thirsty adventure for the readers of Miss Maggy, and it is doubtful if I do right in forcing it upon them: but they have been *plomosed* with such nice things all along, that it is well for them to know some of the realities of a life in the woods. Think of the many women (I beg pardon! — *ladies*) and little children who may have been frightened by this monster, or by the very mention of his name. Perhaps he may have devoured some of them (in imagination) while they were out picking raspberries in the fallows. “Oh! dear! that horrid bear! I thought I saw him, or at least heard him! I am sure something stirred behind the gooseberry bush!” No doubt — and therefore, did we not do

right to make his tough, grisly hide into a sleigh-robe, and to dispose of his hams in a way so satisfactory to all parties concerned?¹¹

At the beginning of "Deer Stalking on the South Branch" Wells describes the attitudes of a Canadian backwoodsman to the natural world in which he lives:

Now the backwoodsman has *his* home feelings. Nurtured roughly and healthfully in the sublimity of the pathless and melancholy forest, he acquires from his infancy that strange, awe-struck, undefinable feeling which gradually grows to be the luxury of his existence, and which can never leave him, let him be transplanted to what other part of the world he may. He has imbibed the spirit of solitude, and indulged in that placid, equable self-communion, which has been the charm of his existence while his character was being formed, and his spirit bears the impress unfaded and uppermost to the longest day he lives. This is universally true of the men of mind among the backwoodsmen.¹²

Admitting that he, too, has "imbibed the spirit of solitude" the narrator goes on to describe the annual deer hunt. Positive views of the wintry landscape abound:

The sun came up gloriously through the sparkling vapor. Gorgeous and glittering and joyous shone out the morning. The air was balm and frankincense and myrrh, and the odor of many spices commingled. The trees with their drooping branches and feathery tufts, robed in vestments of silver and emeralds, and topaz, recalled to mind stories of eastern enchantment, and the land of the fairy. . . . yes, this unapproachable scenic effect of our forests in winter, will amply repay the beholder for the absence of those mountain prospects regretted by many accustomed to countries more broken and wildly sublime than our river-countries can pretend to be.¹³

Hunting, for "Cinna," is a companionable masculine occupation. "Then came laughing and storytelling until we lay down for the night."¹⁴ Friendly rivalry exists in the hunt as each tries to bag more deer, with more accurate shots, than the other. Yet it is still, in part, a solitary activity:

To commence the fifth day, I started before the first streaks of morning to take a lonely hunt by myself, and enjoy the luxury of a sun-rise in winter from the tops of some distant hills. That was a place for a man to ponder in. The air was cold and crackling, yet intensely exhilarating. The fibres of the brain were strung up to their highest tension — the muscles of the body were hard and wire-like, causing one to feel the tiger's strength and activity at every move. "Hi!" I shouted, as the sun came up — "Hi — hurra! hurra!" in ten thousand voices. "Glory!" I cried — "Glory!" responded the snowy savanagh. . . .¹⁵

Having spent a happy week in the woods, despite cold and discomfort, the hunters return home with their deer, convinced that the fresh air of the forest and the exercise of the hunt are "necessary to man's health."¹⁶ Wells' "Legends of the Early Settlements" in the same periodical¹⁷ are third-person narratives set in the past, which lack the immediacy of the two hunting stories, but the protagonists in all three display the same command of their environment as the hunters of deer and bear. Even in the prose works of writers like J. H. Willis and

Levi Adams, which tend to focus on haunted houses and languishing lovers, nature is treated as sympathetic to and reflecting the mood of the protagonists, not as a frightening, disinterested external force.

THE CANADIAN-BORN POETS were equally positive in their response to Canadian scenery. Of the poets who wrote in this period, Adam Hood Burwell is probably the best-known today. Burwell, born in 1790, became a clergyman, initially, in 1827, of the Church of England, and subsequently, about 1836, of the Catholic Apostolic Church (Irvingite). In many of his poems he portrayed nature as part of a divinely-ordained plan, associating the seasonal cycles with resurrection, life, aging, and death in the human cycle. In Burwell's view it is impossible for even the depths of winter to be hostile, since that season was planned by a benevolent deity. Of Burwell's early poems, "Talbot Road," dated 1818, has been the most widely reprinted. Praising the Talbot settlement, the poem celebrates nature for its potential use to man:

Productive nature smiles o'er all this land,
And strews her bounties with a lavish hand,
In wild profusion — soft meand'ring rills,
Deep woods, rich dales, smooth plains, and sunny hills,
Sylvan recesses, dark o'erhanging groves,
Where vocal songsters tune their throats to loves;
Where lurks the fox in crafty, sly career,
And in light gambols bounds the wary deer.
A land like this, created for delight,
Industry's hardy sons might well invite,
And quickly call the energetic worth,
The powers of enterprising freemen forth,
Whose hands would soon transform the rugged wilds
To fruitful fields, and bid tam'd nature smile.¹⁸

"Journal of a Day's Journey in Upper Canada in October, 1816"¹⁹ describes Niagara Falls at length and concludes with precisely-recalled details from his childhood — scaring birds with slingshots, being frightened by an owl when driving cows home after sunset and then becoming brave and nonchalant in sight of his home, being chased by a neighbour for treading down a field of grain. Nature is essentially controlled and pastoral. In later years, Burwell's love of nature became part of his religion. The long poem "Summer Evening Contemplations" (1849), builds on an early short one, "A Summer's Evening" (1821), using some of the same phrases, but now to describe the feelings raised by a natural setting which lead to a general contemplation of the divine and to a specific resurrection and judgment day.

George Longmore's *The Charivari* describes urban *mores*, but his "Tecumthé" contains extended passages of description portraying the forest world of his protagonist. Since the noble Tecumseh is at home in this environment, it could not possibly be described as hostile.

Far in those wilds, — where Wabash pours
 Its tributary tide, along, —
 Now gently skirting the green shores
 Now darkly lashing, swift and strong.
 O'er rocks, whose varied scenes, display'd
 The roaring rapid, or cascade,
 And the thick woods, threw shadowing down
 Upon the floods, — their hues of brown; —
 For many a year, untam'd, — unknown
 The Shawnee, call'd this his own
 Unconquer'd land. . . .²⁰

Even in the personal Introductory Stanzas, Longmore writes with affection of the Quebec City environs — Cape Diamond, Montmorency Falls — and of his own childhood in "Fair Canada."

J. H. Willis, in a series of mixed poetry and prose works which appeared in the *Montreal Gazette* in January 1833 under the title of "The Romance of Canadian History — Scenery — Manners," invoked the sublime to describe the beauty of Canada.

My country! thou art indeed to me
 ——— a land,
 Where Nature's fashionment betrays no lack
 Of bounteous design: displaying all
 We love to worship in her mighty skill —
 Of beauty's soften'd glow, and grandeur's pride,
 And wild sublimity of mien:
 ——— a clime,
 Whose fervid summer sun and winter sky,
 In their own strange contrasting seasons, still
 Beam forth, rich splendour over scenes which know
 Small parallel elsewhere: — Oh!, I am proud
 Of thy blue lakes, and deeping forests' gloom,
 And rushing cataracts, and blooming vales,
 And pine-clad mountains vast. — All, all which makes
 The raptur'd spirit seem a part of thee,
 Mine own lov'd native land.²¹

Those native poets who wrote in a more formal, less emotional manner, were even more likely to equate nature, beauty and the sublime. Holmes Mair's poem "Beauty" depicts a traveller standing on a "mountain brow" gazing at a panorama which seems to include every element of nature generally considered to be

sublime — a word which the poet uses as adjective, adverb, and noun in the course of his forty-five lines. Throughout Mair's poems "beautiful" and "sublime" are ideas which are almost interchangeable.²²

In their prose works French-Canadian writers were precisely observant of human nature, but not of the physical world in which their protagonists moved. In their poetry, nature is most often used to support human emotion.

Chante petit oiseau! Déjà sur la colline
 Le printemps qui renaît reverdit l'aubépine,
 Dans nos prés le muguet épanche sa saveur,
 Le ruisseau qui murmure arrose chaque fleur
 Qui parfume ses bords.²³

The nightingale is being called upon to cheer the writer in his sadness. Similarly,

L'air parfumé des bois, le tapis de verdure,
 Le ciel mélancolique et l'onde qui murmure,
 L'écho compatissant qui gémit avec moi.²⁴

are all meant to sympathize with the poet whose beloved is absent.

"X," author of "Points de vue de la descente de la montagne de Montréal" begins:

Qui n'a point contemplé, dans ses vastes regards,
 Ce coup-d'oeil enchanteur qui vient de toutes parts,
 S'offrir au voyageur dans la pente facile
 Du Mont Majestueux qui domine la ville?

 Ce qui d'abord le fixe et l'attire toujours,
 C'est le fier Saint-Laurent qui, dans son noble cours,
 Entre des bords rians, pompeusement promène
 Les flots toujours coulant de son urne lointaine.²⁵

The viewer sees the city itself and the new church, before his eye is caught by villages on the far shore and he begins to remember the idyllic adolescence he spent in one of them. Present scenery touches off pleasant memories of childhood, just as it did for Burwell. Pierre Chauveau, in "Joies naïves," gives us a delightful child's-eye view of winter:

Oh que j'aime la neige! Oh que j'aime à la voir
 Descendre par flocons sur le sol encore noir!
 Ou bien quand elle tombe en poussière si fine,
 Que l'on croirait qu'un ange épanche de la farine
 Pour donner des gâteaux à nous, petits enfants.
 Et puis, maman, j'en fais des bonhommes tout blancs,
 Et j'élève des forts que mon grand frère assiège;
 Oh que j'aime le neige.²⁶

Specific descriptions are very rare in French-Canadian poetry. One of the rare exceptions, "Les Sucrieries Canadiennes" of Gérin-Lajoie, is a fairly detailed

account of a forest fête at the time of sugaring-off. It was sufficiently detailed, in fact, that Joseph Doutre complained in *L'Avenir* that Lajoie's description was incorrect.²⁷

If women writers appear to be missing from this survey of descriptions of the natural world written by the native-born, it is because the ones we know of, Julia Beckwith Hart, Mary Graddon Gosselin, Rosanna Mullins, and Odile Cherrier, did not, at least in this period, either describe Canadian scenery or situate any of their characters in a distinctive natural setting.

THE FEW IMMIGRANTS WHO WROTE in French, Napoléon Aubin, Hyacinth-Poirier Leblanc de Marconnay, and Regis de Trobriand, give no evidence in their works that they had noticed the Canadian landscape. This is in contrast to immigrant writers in English, all of whom seem to have been impelled to describe, in one way or another, what they saw and how they felt about it. With a few exceptions, their response was as positive as that of the native-born.

Most modern Canadians would find it quite understandable if early nineteenth-century immigrant workers had found the Canadian winter disheartening. The immigrant literary response, however, was generally one of pleasure. Winter was no more depressing for them than it was for native-born writers like Wells, Willis or Chauveau. Winter was part of the North American mystique. J. H. Hagarty, writing as "Zadig" in *The Church*, sounds in his "A Canadian Winter Sketch"²⁸ like a "booster" trying to attract tourists. He dwells at length on the bright sun, "more dazzlingly, wondrously brilliant" than July. He walks out on the ice of Toronto Bay and is sure that he can see the spray of Niagara, forty miles away. The forest is silent, lakes are frozen blue, and sleigh bells ring out. Tandem clubs, skating clubs, and curling clubs are all in operation. Cheerful fires burn indoors, and outdoors the aurora appears "shifting and changing in the kindling ether." Another prose writer, "Atticus," describes "The First Fall of Snow"²⁹ in terms of the joys of sleigh-riding, and "A" compares "Early Winter"³⁰ to ladies' eyes. "Crossing the Portage"³¹ by "W.R.B." describes the delights of winter travel from New Brunswick to Quebec.

Rhoda Ann Page, perhaps the most-quoted "nature poet" of the late 1840's, also saw winter as more beautiful than harsh. Her "Rice Lake by Moonlight — A Winter Scene" begins:

Moonlight upon the frozen lake! how radiantly smiles
The Queen of solemn midnight upon all its fairy Isles,
And the starry sparkling frost-work, that like a chain of gems
Hangs upon each fair islet's brow in glittering diadems.³²

Yet winter is “like the sweet smile that mocks us yet upon the face of death” and she calls on the lake to wake in “summer joyousness.” Page ends her poem, as always, with a reference to the Creator. Her “Frost on the Window”³³ follows a similar pattern, moving from wintry natural beauty to praise for nature’s creator. In both cases, winter is related to death, but, as in Burwell’s poems, it is also beautiful in itself because it is part of Creation.

Immigrant writers treated other seasons in an equally positive manner. Some welcomed spring:

The foals and lambs around their dams
 Their graceful antic play:
 Alive and brisk, with joy they frisk,
 To meet the Queen of May.³⁴

and others found a fertile summer land:

Niagara is a heartsome spot,
 Its teeming orchards fair, I wot
 Are pleasing to the view;
 The landscape yields baith hill and dale,
 And prospects too, the pick and wale,
 In mony a charming hue;
 While daintily the peaches hang
 Frae many a bending bough. . . .³⁵

Strangely enough, autumn is not much mentioned, except in a general way when writers are making a formal tour of all seasons, or when they use it as part of the death and resurrection metaphor which relates human life to plant life. In a country whose economy was so bound up with agriculture, the absence of poems celebrating the harvest season is most striking. The only poet who seems to have noticed autumnal detail was J. W. D. Moodie:

To the woods! to the woods! the sun shines bright,
 The smoke rises high in the clear frosty air;

 Hark! how the trees crack in the keen morning blast,
 And see how the rapids are covered with steam. . . .³⁶

North American lakes and rivers were considered to be particularly sublime. One poetic genre traced the whole Great Lakes chain from Lake Superior to the Gulf of St. Lawrence.³⁷ However, many writers contented themselves with celebrating the nearest stream. Among the better-known immigrants, Susanna Moodie wrote a poem to the Otonabee River and James Haskins one to the Trent. Lesser poets produced doggerel like:

Come, let us take a squint, eh!
 At the far famed Bay of Quinte;³⁸

but others were obviously moved by the spectacle of great rivers like the St. Lawrence:

Beautiful Stream! in all thy pride of strength
 Thou art enrobed in loveliness, and thou
 Doth whiles lay down thy angry might and come
 In calm serenity of majesty,
 Heaving thy crystaline wave most gently,
 As if within its undulations to
 Embrace a wider scope of beauty.³⁹

Thomas Macqueen's praise of Lake Huron in "Our Own Broad Lake" appeared in many newspapers and periodicals,⁴⁰ and subsequently in Dewart's 1864 *Selections From Canadian Poets*.

One of the objectives of immigrant writers was to describe Canada to those "at home." As most people do in such circumstances, they tended to focus on the things which were different from those shared in the past by writer and reader. The *Maple Leaf* annuals for 1848 and 1849 were very much in this vein.⁴¹ The intention was certainly not to frighten readers with the harshness of the Canadian landscape.

Our forest-land borrows but slender charms from the treasury of the Past — she has but little food for the sort of stirring contemplations of Memory, but is rich in the ideal treasures of Hope — she lives in the rough strength of a fresh and lusty Present, and flushed with cheerful anticipations is the eager glance she bends on the Future. No retrospective repinings — no soft dallying with memorial glories — her step and voice are alike "Onward!" and the spirit of that watchword pervades alike the physical and moral features of her broad land.⁴²

"Rough Sketches by a Backwoodsman" in the 1849 number begins its final paragraph:

We have said that the scenes of CANADA resemble those of HOME. So indeed they do, and in many instances excel them. . . .

The "rough sketch" is of a backwoods settlement. The author makes no attempt to call it beautiful — it is "no picturesque tour" — but he discounts the difficulties of forest life and points to the advantages of prosperity produced by hard work. "A Chapter on Chopping" and "A First Day in the Bush"⁴³ describe things which are strange to the newcomer, but if the writers were frustrated or frightened by their experience, they do not say so.

DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS OF PLACES and events like those which appeared in the *Maple Leaf* annuals were less common than descriptions of a more general nature, most often in verse, which were couched in the con-

ventional terms which would be understood by European readers. Perhaps the most common framework for these poems is best summarized in the phrase “it’s beautiful, but it isn’t home.” Mary Ann Madden, for example, wrote in the *Literary Garland* of “Evening in the Woods”:

For a scene of quiet loveliness
Spreads fair before mine eye;
A forest dark, and pleasant fields,
And a cloudless evening sky.⁴⁴

But “How many things remind me / That ’tis a foreign land.” The first six stanzas describe present beauty, the last four, her longing for the scenes of her childhood. The poem is typical of dozens. Although the Canadian scene could not be loved in the way that the remembered places of childhood were loved, it was certainly not described by nostalgic writers as hostile, repellent, or ugly.

The use of nineteenth-century conventional language, sentiment, and aesthetics has blunted for modern Canadians any sense of immediacy in most of the descriptive writing which has come down to us. Bishop G. J. Mountain recorded in *Songs of the Wilderness* his poetic impressions of a canoe trip from Montreal to the Hudson’s Bay Company lands in the Northwest. The descriptions were intended for an English audience, since the book was published in England in 1846, with the proceeds going to Bishop’s College, Lennoxville. The journey was an exciting one for both the Bishop and his readers, but to us his wilderness is a classical, Biblical, place. References to Greek and Latin classics are almost as frequent as the Biblical references. Nature is awful, in the old sense of inspiring awe in the beholder, but it holds no terrors for the Bishop.

The most idealized of all the views of wilderness scenery published in Canada appears in the long title poem of Adam Kidd’s *The Huron Chief*, printed in Montreal in 1830. The poet is on a journey through the Great Lakes by canoe.

Now o’er a clear — a placid stream —
Half burnished by the sun’s last beam,
Which through the lofty pines was thrown —
Our little bark went proudly gliding,
As mistress of the wave alone,
Where we in safety now were riding,
’Midst scenes majestic, and as grand
As e’er were shaped by Nature’s hand.⁴⁵

Like Adam Kidd and Bishop Mountain, those who viewed and wrote about that internationally-known natural phenomenon, Niagara Falls, had travelled away from home. The number of people who made the journey, even in the early nineteenth century, was considerable. On 25 August 1836, the *St. Catharines Journal* reported that there had been over a thousand visitors to the Falls in the previous two weeks. Of the many thousands of visitors, a great number were

moved to poetry, as a cursory glance at North American newspapers and periodicals of the time reveals. The most common response to Niagara Falls, from immigrant and native-born alike, was to describe them as sublime. The Falls were almost the perfect example of the sublime. They were grand, awesome and vast; they thundered; they threw up a rainbow; they produced strong emotion in the viewer.

Une secrète et indéfinissable craint, mêlée de courage, une jouissance mêlée d'appréhension; une admiration mêlée de terreur; tout cela fond à la fois sur l'âme, l'accable, l'enchanté.⁴⁶

Without exception, all were reminded that man had not tamed God's creation. In addition, a few were reminded of the battles which had been fought nearby, and a few others enjoyed the conceit of imagining themselves as the first human ever to see the spectacle.

A small book containing the most quotable items written by visitors in the *Album of the Table Rock* was published under that title at Niagara in 1846. In it all the themes mentioned above can be found. They appear as well in J. K. Liston's three-canto, hundred-page, poem, *Niagara Falls*, published in Toronto three years earlier. Liston's unique contribution to the literature about Niagara comes in presciently relating the Falls to ideas of human progress.

Nor are we sure but in some future age
The vast descending sheet itself may not
Lend power immense to some vast engine formed
By human skill, and useful to the race
Of then existing men, whose views enlarged
By Science, with its still progressive march
Of vast improvements, shall demand more power
From Nature in propulsion of machines
Of bulk and power exceeding far the bounds
Which limit now the extent of man's designs.⁴⁷

Whether the reference point is Niagara Falls or a small local stream, a thick forest or an isolated tree, positive descriptions were the rule among the immigrants as they were among the native-born. The examples above have been selected from hundreds of possible quotations. The exceptions, in contrast, are so few that they can all be mentioned. Other than *Wacousta* and *Roughing it in the Bush*, there is Joseph Abbott's snobbish, bad-tempered *Philip Musgrave*, a thinly-disguised autobiographical work by a Church of England missionary which elicited vigorous replies in letters-to-the-editor columns, and in at least one pamphlet, from Methodists and Presbyterians who resented his portrayal of them. Standish O'Grady's *The Emigrant* is a long poem, again by an Established Church clergyman, in which the author's intense dislike of the Canadas, and particularly French Canadians, as well as his resentment of the poverty which led to his emigration shine forth.

Niagara Falls had one disappointed visitor — Dr. Robert Hamilton of Scarborough, writing as “Guy Pollock” in the *Canadian Literary Magazine* of April 1833. He objected that the Falls had been overly praised, so that his expectation was too great; that they were “not surrounded by hills or precipices as other water falls usually are,” but instead emerge from a flat plain; and finally, that they were of too grand a scale for the mind to assimilate.

The fascination with lakes and rivers which we have remarked on the positive side of the ledger extended, in two instances, to the negative as well. In both cases it is a sluggish stream:

As the Chippawa Creek crept along by its banks,
Or as poets would say was a flowing:
Though a fish that had spent his whole life in its stream,
Could scarce tell you which way it was going.⁴⁸

The author of the other poem, Daniel Haydn Mayne, was a Scottish immigrant. It would appear from several of his poems that emigration had brought him neither success nor happiness. “To the River Don” certainly expresses disenchantment.

O Don, Great Don! thy river may seem fine
To those who never saw a nobler stream;
Thy swampy banks may look like beauty’s line
To those who never saw a livelier green,
To those who still delight in lowly mien:
To me you bring the image of the snail
That crawls in passive meekness o’er the scene;
Thy face seems void of spirit, fierce and pale,
And glorious when it dashes, as a queen
Who pleases while she storms, like rain thro’ sunny sheen.
The ghostly vapour rising from thy bed,
Like evil spirit shunning blue eyed morn;
Takes deep revenge before the sun hath led
Her column thro’ the air like fiend forsworn:
And thou art left to draw thy serpent form,
Around thy sluggish heart Celestial Don,
Till ev’ning falls, and then the vapour lorn
Embraceth thee again, and lies upon,
Thy yellow looking breast, which agues many a one.⁴⁹

He goes on to write about swamps, snakes, carrion birds and malaria, before concluding in Stanza VI, that when the mud flats are eventually drained “thy flood / Will sweeter grow. . . .”

It should not come as a surprise that it was that bane of Canadian summers, the mosquito, which called forth the greatest number of disapproving literary comments, since mosquitoes were, and are, a natural menace, although not in the Frygian sense. Even Bishop Mountain devoted his fifteenth sonnet to them, com-

paring them, although of “lighter torment” to the plague visited on Egypt.⁵⁰ “To an Aged Moschetto,” “The Moschetto’s War Song,” and “Sonnet to the First Mosquito”⁵¹ are less elegant conceits, written by ordinary citizens. Most of the complaints about the natural world in the Canadas focused on things like swamps and mosquitoes which it would be difficult to praise. The difference is that those writers whose feelings about Canada were positive ignored such irritations, while those whose feelings were negative highlighted them.

Fortunately, most authors were content with their life in the Canadas. Thus, regardless of language or place of birth, they did not describe nature as cold and indifferent or “red in tooth and claw” as Frye has theorized, nor did they reject the North American wilderness as others have suggested.⁵² The immigrant English, while as positive overall as the native-born, display the most complex response to the natural world. Their eyes, and their aesthetic conditioning, told them that their new homes were in a beautiful land. For most there was no conflict between expectation and reality. However, living close to the sublimity of wild nature was not, for some, as comfortable as reading about it, and in their writing a certain tension may be discerned between, for example, the idea of a tree as a thing of beauty and the idea of a tree as a thing which must be removed by physical labour in order to ensure survival. In addition, some immigrants were homesick for the family, friends, and places they had left behind. For them, the nostalgia which presented a different sort of natural world as an ideal was spatial as well as temporal. Nonetheless, almost all immigrants described the Canadas in very positive terms. Those who did not were the unhappy souls, wishing they had never left home, for whom Eden itself would have been flawed.

The native-born of both language groups accepted the Canadian landscape — the only one they knew — as their standard of beauty, applying European aesthetic ideas to the reality of their surroundings. In French-Canadian writing the natural world is generally perceived as an abstract convention mirroring the moods of the poet. Events had reduced the space perceived to be *Canadien* from that of the entire interior of North America to that of a narrowly-defined Lower Canada. It is possible that this change in political geography produced a literary reluctance to describe and possess the land, and a movement from exterior to interior space, both of which resulted in a concentration on human beings and their actions.

The absence of the natural world from the works of the four native-born women is probably explained by their social class and education. They were all city-bred daughters of prosperous merchants who had been given a convent, or convent-style, education which trained them to be “ladies” in the European manner. They would have been expected, as one of their “accomplishments,” to be able to produce elegant verse on the contemplation of some natural object, but they would not have been trained to observe the natural world.

A number of the native-born English males did exhibit what A. J. M. Smith has called "the local realism of the pioneer."⁵³ For them, forests were not things to be contemplated, but comfortable, familiar places in which they hunted and through which they travelled. Their emotion was one of pleasure. Where nostalgia influenced their writing it was only in the sense of a temporal removal, not a spatial one, from the well-loved places of childhood. Even those who were inclined to the use of formal descriptive terminology seem to have been looking directly and delightedly at the natural world, although the resulting description is couched in conventional terms.

Thus, regardless of their place of birth or the language in which they wrote, and regardless of whether their works appeared in local newspapers or were printed in book form, it can be seen that the mass of Canadian writers in the first half of the nineteenth century perceived the natural world which surrounded them in positive terms derived from the internationally-understood concept of the sublime. *Roughing it in the Bush* and *Wacousta* to the contrary, the environment was not regarded as hostile.

NOTES

- ¹ The thesis has been most clearly stated by Northrop Frye in his "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada*. It was amplified in the 1970's in such thematic works as Margaret Atwood's *Survival* and John Moss's *Patterns of Isolation*. The phrases "terrifyingly cold, empty and vast" and "nature red in tooth and claw" against which I have argued in this essay are taken from Frye. The latter appeared originally in Tennyson's "In Memoriam."
- ² See Richardson's other "Canadian" novel, *The Canadian Brothers*, and such Moodie poems as "The Maple Tree" (*Literary Garland*, April 1849, p. 214), and "Canada" (*Victoria Magazine*, September 1847, p. 3).
- ³ The word "Canada" as used in this essay refers to the pre-Confederation colonies of Upper and Lower Canada (or, after 1841, Canada West and Canada East). As literary evidence I have read all the books, periodicals, and newspaper literature published in both French and English in the period between 1817 and 1850.
- ⁴ Although Carl Berger's *Science, God and Nature in Victorian Canada* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1983) deals with a slightly later period, the background he gives is useful to an understanding of the perception of nature in early nineteenth-century Canada. A number of American works also provide helpful background. See, for example, Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967). Where the United Kingdom is concerned, Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Books, 1983) should be consulted. The idea of the sublime in the period under study seems to have developed from the writings of the Rev. William Gilpin about landscape painting. There is a useful introduction to the concept of the sublime in art in Andrew Wilton, *Turner and the Sublime* (London: British Museum, 1980). Turner painted in the period 1790-1850.
- ⁵ *Album Littéraire*, February 1846, p. 27.

- ⁶ P. 3 of the Réédition Québec 1968 reprint, under the later nineteenth century title *Le Chercheur de trésors*.
- ⁷ *La Revue Canadienne*, 13 September 1845. "Pietro" was subsequently identified as François-Pascal-Eugène L'Écuyer.
- ⁸ The work is signed "C.M.D." Durand also used the pseudonym "Briton." In his *Reminiscences of Charles Durand of Toronto, Barrister* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose, 1897) he acknowledged his youthful works. He also annotated the sets of the *Canadian Casket* and *Canadian Garland* which he donated to the Toronto Public Library.
- ⁹ P. 46.
- ¹⁰ They were published under the pseudonym "Cinna." The connection of Wells with "Cinna" of *Barker's Magazine* and the *British Whig* was made by Rev. Henry Scadding in 1877 — well within Wells' lifetime and not denied. Family papers in the Queen's University Archives refer to him as writing from his youth. The papers contain some poems. Wells also published a book on Canadian politics, *Canadiana*, in England in 1837. Despite its political intent, much of the book is given over to descriptions of Canada. The two stories appeared in July 1846, and February and March 1847, respectively.
- ¹¹ P. 160.
- ¹² P. 502.
- ¹³ P. 508.
- ¹⁴ P. 588.
- ¹⁵ Pp. 590-91.
- ¹⁶ P. 598.
- ¹⁷ "Tula, or the Ojibwa's Leap," May 1846; "Maroon Hensey," August 1846; and "De Soulis, Runner of the Woods," October 1846 and January and April 1847. *Barker's Magazine* contains a number of other works by "Cinna."
- ¹⁸ C. F. Klinck (ed.), *The Poems of Adam Hood Burwell, Pioneer Poet of Upper Canada* (London, Ontario: Univ. of Western Ontario, 1963), [published as No. 30 in the series "Western Ontario History Nuggets"], p. 6.
- ¹⁹ *The Scribbler*, 18 July 1822.
- ²⁰ *Canadian Review and Literary and Historical Journal*, December 1824, p. 393. Different copies of the *Canadian Review* have different pagination. This extract is from the second stanza of Canto One.
- ²¹ *Montreal Gazette*, 19 January 1833.
- ²² Holmes Mair was an older brother of Charles Mair. He was born in Scotland and brought to Canada in the first year of his life. All his known poems appeared in the *Bathurst Courier* (Perth, C.W.). "Beauty" was printed on 14 January 1848.
- ²³ Charles Lévesque, "Le Rossignol," *Album Littéraire*, April 1850, p. 122.
- ²⁴ J. G. Barthe, "Le Bois Solitaire," *Le Populaire*, 30 July 1838.
- ²⁵ *L'Ami du Peuple*, 28 September 1833.
- ²⁶ *Le Coin du Feu* (1840); and *La Revue Canadienne*, 8 March 1845.
- ²⁷ Lajoie, *Album Littéraire*, February 1850; Doutre, 13 April 1850.
- ²⁸ 30 May 1840. The same piece appeared in the *Montreal Gazette*, 16 June 1840. The source given in the *Gazette* was the London (England) *Morning Herald*.

- ²⁹ Cobourg *Star*, 6 December 1831.
- ³⁰ Quebec *Gazette*, 15 November 1843.
- ³¹ Quebec *Transcript*, 6 March 1839.
- ³² Cobourg *Star*, 17 January 1849, and many other locations. This was the most widely reprinted Canadian poem of its day.
- ³³ *Star*, 25 October 1848.
- ³⁴ "J.E., York Township," "Spring," *Agriculturist*, 1 May 1848.
- ³⁵ G. W. Gillespie, *Miscellaneous Poems* (Toronto: 1843), p. 13. The Scots dialect is as originally printed.
- ³⁶ "To the woods! To the woods," *Victoria Magazine*, January 1849, p. 117.
- ³⁷ The earliest examples can be found in M. Gnarowski (ed.), *Three Early Poems from Lower Canada* (Montreal: 1969). They are dated 1789, 1797, and 1806. Kidd's "The Huron Chief" (1830), W. A. Stephens' "Hamilton" (1840), J. K. Liston's *Niagara Falls* (1843), and John Breakenridge's *Canada*, first published in 1837, are all in this vein.
- ³⁸ "Bay of Quinte Lyrics," *Kingston Chronicle*, 12 September 1835.
- ³⁹ Rustic Bard, "To the St. Lawrence," *Canadian Courant*, 20 October 1833.
- ⁴⁰ *Canadian Gem and Family Visitor*, July 1849, p. 157, for example.
- ⁴¹ The first *Maple Leaf*, the annual for 1847, was written in Canada, but the subject matter was all non-Canadian. In response to requests from readers who wished to send the books as gifts to friends in the United Kingdom, the annuals for 1848 and 1849 contained many descriptive accounts of life in the Canadas for the benefit of those "at home."
- ⁴² "A Chapter on Canadian Scenery," 1848. There is no pagination.
- ⁴³ "Chopping," 1849; "First Day," 1848.
- ⁴⁴ December 1846, p. 550.
- ⁴⁵ Pp. 68-69.
- ⁴⁶ C.A.N.L., "Description de la chute de Niagara," *La Revue Canadienne*, 9 January 1846.
- ⁴⁷ P. 55.
- ⁴⁸ Anonymous, "The Chippawa Creek," *St. Catharines Journal*, 3 December 1846.
- ⁴⁹ *Poems and Fragments*, p. 98.
- ⁵⁰ *Songs of the Wilderness*, p. 99.
- ⁵¹ Theodore C. Wheeler, *Cobourg Star*, 20 October 1847; Gavin Russell, *Bathurst Courier*, 29 June 1847; Anonymous, *Kingston Chronicle*, 6 June 1840.
- ⁵² M. Kline, *Beyond the Land Itself* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970).
- ⁵³ In "Colonialism and Nationalism in Canadian Poetry Before Confederation," *Canadian Historical Association Report*, 1944, p. 75.