

# CRITIC AND PUBLISHER

## *Another Chapter in E. K. Brown's Correspondence*

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"IT DIDN'T MATTER A DAMN." With those brusque words Professor James Cappon ended abruptly an impromptu quotation from *THE BALLAD OF BLASPHEMOUS BILL* by Robert Service as a sample of Canadian literature to date when he lectured to his senior class at Queen's University in the spring of 1912. A young man sitting before him had been greatly impressed by his earlier reading and interpretation of English, European and American poetry, and asked him in all eagerness if there was not a Canadian writer to put beside Whitman and Ibsen and the rest, someone "calculated to our own meridian." The professor grinned, and after a pause began to quote Service, stopping deliberately where he did as if to indicate that what there was of Canadian writing was of no serious consequence in an Honours Course in English. The young man later described the reply as "silly and inept," as indeed it was, but for him and for the succession of Canadian authors and poets since that time, it was an historic and creative word, for it sent Lorne Pierce out of that classroom with a fixed and somewhat angry resolve to learn all that there was to know about Canadian literature and to gather around him for the sake of the record every original piece that he could obtain.

*Lorne Pierce: A Profile*, by C. H. Dickinson

**T**HE QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY Archives holds over two hundred letters exchanged between E. K. Brown and Lorne Pierce in the years 1942 to 1951.<sup>1</sup> The letters are central cultural documents for a number of reasons, but they are particularly revealing about the state of publishing in Canada during a period of transition, as Canadian literature moved cautiously into the modern age. The letters also provide an unusually detailed portrait of how a book actually gets produced.

In the early years of the correspondence, Brown was putting the final touches on a collection of Archibald Lampman's new poems that he and Duncan Campbell Scott were editing (*At the Long Sault and Other New Poems*, 1943), and he was preparing the manuscript for a book of his own (*On Canadian Poetry*,

1943). *On Canadian Poetry* opens with an analysis of the history of the Canadian literary tradition. As Brown sees it, our literature has been beset by a series of problems, psychological and social, all of which indicate that the history of our literature is ultimately the economic story of the "perils of publishing": a small, scattered, colonial-minded, frontier-ridden audience that often will not read at all and that certainly will not read Canadian; publishers who will probably perish if they invest any capital in publishing Canadian books; writers who cannot get their work published, and, even if they could, would not be able to live off the paltry sums the books would garner.

These economic forces which militate against a flourishing literature are really only one part of the problem a Canadian writer faced. A far less tangible but equally powerful force confronted E. K. Brown, as his correspondence with Lorne Pierce makes clear, and that was the power of the conservative attitudes that had become the defensive part of the resistance to the material problems Brown had identified in *On Canadian Poetry*. Brown told Pierce that in *On Canadian Poetry* he was trying to do no less than redirect the Canadian poetical tradition. Pierce, it would appear, agreed with Brown's estimation of the role his book would play in the world of Canadian letters, but he did not wholeheartedly share Brown's enthusiasm for the expected outcome of its publication: "[T]o issue a book like this from our House and obviously with our editorial approval is bound to strain a number of my own personal friendships," worried the man who had generously introduced Elsie Pomeroy's adulatory biography of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, a book Brown could not even bring himself to read. Pierce also feared that Brown was too hasty to condemn, especially in the chapter in which he surveyed the reasons for the failure of the Canadian literary tradition to flourish and strongly criticized the role of the Canadian publisher. The publisher was not alone in his guilt, Pierce argued, presenting Brown with an impassioned plea for understanding:

But one must distinguish between publisher and jobber; we have only two or three publishers who make any attempt to explore the literary soil of Canada, who have any Canadian policy at all. These have been doing whatever work there was, in the face of the vast indifference of the universities, their unbelievable languor, and often intellectual sabotage. Could you have had a nation sufficiently integrated spiritually, if there had been no other voices except the smart new ones, to face the last two wars? The youngsters wanted to be cosmopolitan before they could spell their own name. These were the people who would show the world the way by disarming and embracing the milky way. They laughed at the empire and flirted with the States. The Commonwealth was morally bankrupt and confederation was about to collapse. Most of the writing done in Canada for a generation has been done in that atmosphere. (April 21, 1943)

Pierce liked to see his role as book editor for Ryerson as exciting and important on both a personal and a symbolic level. He constantly referred to Ryerson

as The Mother Publishing House of Canada (capital T, capital M, capital P, capital H), and saw himself as being "called" to his duty as shaper of Ryerson's influence. He told the story of working with Dr. Fallis, the man who, as General Manager, had changed the name of the trade section of the Methodist Publishing Company from William Briggs to Ryerson. Fallis, Pierce explained in *An Editor's Creed*, "would swing round in his chair, spread wide his arms, and ask, 'If you *owned* this place, what would you do?'" Well, Pierce, said, "What would I do? Obviously I had to do something." Pierce decided back then, in the 1920's, that he needed a "working creed," and, he said, "I would need to stick to it in all weathers, otherwise I should made a sad mess of the House as well as of my own life."<sup>2</sup> The description that Pierce then went on to develop of his working creed is filled with messianic fervour. An institution is "a reservoir that holds the accumulated wisdom and experience of the men of imagination and daring and dedication who founded it and through the long years directed it. This gives a Publishing House a sense of history, of tradition, of destiny, and it is this that shapes and colours and motivates everything that the House does." The publisher himself, Pierce said, "should be as imaginative and daring as he possibly can. Profits may not always show in the balance sheets, but in the long run they will show in the maturing culture of his country, in the creative forces that are shaping its destiny."

Pierce, however, was not always the idealist or he would not have remained Ryerson's book editor for forty years. Should Ryerson fail, of course, Pierce's dreams of a strong literary tradition would fail too, or, as Pierce put it in *On Publishers and Publishing* (1951), the ideal publisher must also be a business man "in order that he can make both ends meet — or meet his end."<sup>3</sup> What we have in Pierce is a man torn between his idealist calling and crass salesmanship. Duncan Campbell Scott's letters to E. K. Brown concentrate on Pierce the salesman. Scott was disconcerted to find Lorne Pierce selling *At the Long Sault* as "THE LITERARY DISCOVERY OF THE YEAR." He shuddered with embarrassment when Pierce selected favourable quotations from *On Canadian Poetry* about Scott's *verse* as endorsements for his *short stories*. Scott understood the problems Pierce faced when he decided to publish a book like *In the Village of Viger*, but his pride could not stand the kind of boosterism that Pierce had learned to employ. Even knowing Pierce was pushing a book that would not sell, and even knowing that Pierce had chosen to publish the book although it could only incur a loss, Scott still muttered in humiliation that it served Pierce right if he lost money on the book. When Scott spoke of Pierce to Brown, he tended to do so in capital letters and italics. "KEEP COPIES OF ALL YOUR LETTERS" to Pierce, he warned Brown.<sup>4</sup> Pierce got results; he published books that no-one else would touch, but he alienated many (including those who benefited) in the process.

Pierce's letters to Brown reveal a different kind of man than the one we find in

his own monographs or in Duncan Campbell Scott's letters. Pierce's letters to Brown suggest a man who was deeply committed to publishing and genuinely confused as to how he should handle publishing in a new era. More importantly, though, Pierce emerges as having reconciled his difficulties through a delightful sense of self-mocking irony, an irony that makes him seem far warmer and more reasonable than his somewhat disgruntled stable of writers would have had us believe. Having seen himself (quite rightly) as a hero of Canadian culture since 1920, Pierce found it difficult to accept the dismissal of his writers, his values, and his achievements that the modernists brought to the literary scene in Canada. A. J. M. Smith deplored the deification of the Poets of the Confederation; F. R. Scott satirized the long-time-supporters of the Canadian Authors' Association; Ralph Gustafson published an inexpensive anthology with Penguin that necessarily made use of the poetry that men like Pierce had published at a loss throughout long years of national neglect.<sup>5</sup> But, even as these men tried to sift through our literature in search of work that lived up to their modernist criteria, Lorne Pierce, threatened and disappointed by the challenge presented to his life's work, sought to incorporate the iconclasts onto Ryerson's list. Pierce may have been a conservative power at the head of Canada's publishing empire, but he knew an important movement when he saw one. Having accepted the inevitable conflict between the demands of a pure, idealistic calling and the commercial foundation necessary to its vitality, he now sought to reconcile his entrenched views on art with his conviction that he must always be a force of positive encouragement in Canadian literature.

IT WAS AT THIS MOMENT of transitional crisis in the life of Ryerson Press that E. K. Brown appeared on the scene. Brown, a former graduate of the University of Toronto and the Sorbonne, was teaching English in the United States. Brown called himself "a middle-stander" (July 5, 1943), and so he was. If Pierce was a conservative preserver of tradition, and if the modernists were forgers of a brave new world, Brown was a bridge between the two worlds, a conservative who had absorbed the modernist strain, a critic who, while he did not trumpet the innovations of Eliot and Pound, nonetheless did speak comfortably of an Arnold-Eliot tradition. While retaining many of Pierce's values, Brown also shared the modernist distress at the state of our literary tradition. He wrote *On Canadian Poetry* to redirect the tradition, but, in actively wanting Ryerson as his publisher, Brown was acknowledging Pierce's crucial role in seeing to it that a tradition existed to be redirected. Brown's position was somewhat anomalous. At a time when many Canadian writers were still not being taken seriously by Canadian publishers, Brown had found in Pierce one of the few publishers

dedicated to Canadian letters. It was precisely because of Pierce's long interest in Canadian literature that Brown wanted him to publish *On Canadian Poetry*. At the same time, however, *On Canadian Poetry* would necessarily be critical of many of the writers whose careers Pierce had encouraged.

*On Canadian Poetry*, however, is no radical rejection of the nineteenth century. Rather, the book shores up the values of Pierce's generation in a way that makes them more acceptable to the modernists. Clearly, the letters reveal, Pierce knew that he had found in Brown a solid and dependable literary critic who would not be too quick to destroy what Pierce still celebrated. The Pomeroy biography of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts is a case in point. Pierce introduced the book, saying Roberts "sounded the Canadian note so consistently, in so many important ways, and for so long a time, that he became by universal consent the leading voice of the new Dominion." Roberts, he said, "occupies by right the highest place among all those who have served Canada by their pen."<sup>6</sup> When Brown omitted the biography from the bibliography of *On Canadian Poetry*, Pierce tentatively suggested that it should be added. Brown pointed out that he had not read the book, so Pierce arranged for him to be sent a copy and wrote: "In reading the Introduction you will understand my plea for a more extensive treatment of Roberts in your book. At the same time it may convince you finally and for all time that I went off the deep end years ago" (June 18, 1943). Two days later, Brown responded graciously that he had made room for the Pomeroy biography. In an exchange of letters with D. C. Scott, however, Brown was less polite. Four months earlier he had already dismissed the book, telling Scott: "I doubt that I shall order the book on Sir Charles. It sounds like our national criticism at its worst."<sup>7</sup> Scott agreed with Brown, although, typically, he focused his reservations on Pierce who, he said, "has been one of the chief offenders and I dread to read his contribution to this biography."<sup>8</sup> Brown's immediate decision to include the biography, no matter what it was like, is indicative of a reaction the opposite of Scott's. The bibliographical entry was not important to Brown; what was important was Pierce's high regard for tradition. Throughout the early part of the correspondence, Brown had expressed worry and guilt about his inability to discuss Roberts as a major poet. He shared Pierce's belief in the importance of Roberts as a symbol. By including the biography (of which Roberts was apparently extraordinarily proud), he was salving his own conscience and simultaneously pleasing Pierce. The problem for both Brown and Pierce is clear. Roberts founded Canadian literature. He is the enabling vantage point from which we look back to the nineteenth century and forwards into the twentieth. Pierce's tribute to Roberts, which hardly merited Scott's dread anyhow, was the work of a man who had laboured to cultivate what Roberts had planted. Now Brown wanted to weed the garden, and he and Pierce could not agree on who the weeds were.

The letters devoted to *On Canadian Poetry* operate on several levels, all of them determined by this context. Pierce was to some extent a legitimate power-figure in Brown's life; not just his publisher, but also his busy editor and self-appointed conscience. He would speak in one line, for example, of there being more to Pickthall than Brown would admit and in another he would urge Brown to leave the United States and come home to Canada where he obviously belonged (no date given; between August 9 and August 15, 1944). The letters establish that Pierce played as active a role as he could in shaping the final copy of the manuscript. We see Brown carefully sifting through the suggestions, salvaging here, discarding there, as he attempted to find a balance between his own desire to destroy the second rate and his natural inclination to treat Pierce with tact and respect. Essentially (and not surprisingly), Brown elected to follow Pierce's suggestions on minor points and to retain his own primary ideas on major points. But, if Pierce's eventual effect on *On Canadian Poetry* was comparatively insignificant given his periodic attempts at wholesale revision, his suggestions and responses were always stimulating.

Most importantly, Pierce disagreed with the emphasis Brown accorded the powers of colonialism and Puritanism to stunt the growth of a national literature. As book editor of the Methodist publishing house, the publishing house most directly responsible for encouraging new Canadian talent, Pierce was prepared to argue at some length against the so-called negative influence of our Puritan heritage. "I have read your manuscript two or three times," he told Brown. "Before coming down this morning I went over a few notes I made and decided to type them out on my own machine" (April 21, 1943). This pleasant enough greeting about a few notes turns out to be Pierce's introduction to a three-page, single-spaced peroration on what is wrong with *On Canadian Poetry*. Responding to Brown's analysis of the economic and cultural hardships that our writers had to endure, Pierce asserted that "it has never been colonialism that has beaten us; it has been the mental and spiritual habits of a kept woman." He went on to explain:

We have looked to London for our protection, to Washington for the arm of Uncle Sam to guard us in the Western Hemisphere and subsidize us, but otherwise hands off. We expected both without commensurate sacrifices. The result is that our statesmen are the cheapest on earth, and the business of organizing for war almost too much to expect from a nation so stupid and callous. I think we have unloaded too much upon the colonial bogey and upon Puritanism; the real defect has been elsewhere, an invalidism, a toryism fortified by Liberal, Conservative and French elements, that makes for a parochialism too narrow to measure.

It is difficult to see Pierce's invalidism as differing substantially from Brown's colonialism. Pierce was, in some ways, harder on the country than Brown ever was. He refused to accept that our cultural problems can all be blamed on the

historical moment, preferring to locate the threat in the individual, rather than the social system that conditions the individual. Similarly, when he turned his attention to Puritanism, Pierce deflected attention away from the system — Puritanism — towards the individual artist who could overcome the system:

[Puritanism] never tried to produce a work that shocked perhaps, but we have had excellent examples of art that has shocked no end of people; the paintings of John Russell who packs the galleries with country yokels; Grove's "Settlers of the Marsh" that cost him his job, the verse of Tom MacInnes, and so on. I doubt whether it is correct to say that the battle must be joined against Puritanism, unless we state what part of P'm. . . . Puritanism does not disbelieve in the importance of art. It may be a dwindling force, and that may be so much the worse. What art will need will be some other centre, some synthesizing core of values. Our critics suggest nothing except a hunger for experience and candour. In the States you have had the New Englanders, the South, Middle West and Hollywood; here something similar will develop. Each will have its own ethos. You can't have a cosmic art, and both Canada and the States are empires. There is no British Empire novelist; it is all too vast. We will have to be content with a Prairie dramatist or a Quebec wood-carver etc. (April 21, 1943)

Brown's reply carefully steered Pierce's attention away from the major issues raised in the letter. Choosing not to point out that Pierce's reservations do more to confirm than to challenge Chapter One of *On Canadian Poetry*, Brown talked about his goals for the book. He asserted the necessity of universal over national standards of excellence. He reminded Pierce that Roberts and Carman had won and had failed to hold the attention of an international audience. And he expressed a belief that lay at the foundation of all his criticism: "Perhaps my men aren't as good as I think them," he told Pierce, "but it will take time to find that out, and we may as well start the new discussion going" (July 5, 1943). There must be critical debate, as far as Brown was concerned, and critical debate had not existed in Canada for a long time. "Incidentally," Brown added near the end of the letter in a mildly humorous attempt to contain Pierce's dissatisfaction, "the book is likely to sell better because of the challenge it gives, isn't it?" When, a year later, the second edition of *On Canadian Poetry* provoked an almost identical, three and a half paged, single-spaced response from Pierce, Brown reaffirmed his position in a more serious tone:

I know you have always liked [Chapter Three] best and I note that you have no suggestions for change. I assume you like the additions to the Lampman selection, and am very glad of this. May I say that whatever the defects of Ch. 1, it is this chapter which has done most to attract comment and I assume readers for the work. I had this in mind in writing it. If because of it, we win readers, and in the long run readers for Scott and Lampman, then I hope you will like the first chapter as much as I do! (August 15, 1944)

The first chapter, which is Brown's analysis of the conditions that have restricted

the growth of our literature, is the chapter that provoked Pierce's discussion (as Brown said he hoped it would provoke discussion everywhere). Chapter Three, which concentrates on the individual artists Lampman, D. C. Scott, and Pratt, and does so through a sensitive exploration of what Brown terms "the poetic personality," is the chapter that, in spite of the fact that it elevates Scott and Lampman above Carman and Roberts, Pierce liked.

THERE IS AN ADEPT mingling of critical debate and personal concerns throughout the letters which reveals how Pierce managed to be a successful publisher of *Canadiana* for forty years and how Brown became a department chairman when he was only thirty years old. Neither man was short on political acumen. One of Pierce's main worries was, as I have said, understandably over the short shrift he felt Brown had given Sir Charles G. D. Roberts. Brown, who had several times urged Pierce to get *On Canadian Poetry* out before the appearance of A. J. M. Smith's *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, took the opportunity to call Pierce's attention to the fact that "Smith is, as you know, a great deal less sympathetic to all three [poets of the Confederation] than I am, and not more sympathetic to Roberts and Carman. I think that I can perhaps serve as a sort of middle 'stander' between Smith and the usual Canadian critical attitudes" (July 5, 1943).

Pierce's concern over what Brown was doing to Roberts' reputation derived as much from fear of personal repercussions as it did from critical disagreement. Brown repeatedly asked for suggestions as to how he might expand his section on Roberts, apologizing because, although he had "gone over" his Roberts section, he had emerged "without a sense of something to be added" (June 23, 1943). At this point, perhaps suspecting Pierce's dilemma, he wrote, "Criticism is a dangerous trade. I am glad that I am strictly a non-joiner, and have fewer friendships and associates to lose than most who ply the trade in Canada." In his next letter, Brown proposed to add "a short passage" on Roberts and added, "I am waiting to know if these is any concrete suggestion you can send on, so that I could consider a longer addition to the pages on Roberts" (June 26, 1943). Brown's repeated requests for advice finally elicited the following response from his divided editor: "I don't agree with some of your judgments but like Voltaire I would defend your right to speak your mind" (July 2, 1943). Pierce went on to label Brown's attitude "begrudging," to criticize the "tone" of his expressions of disapproval, and to caution that Brown "borders on the ironical." "In cold print," he told Brown, "it lacks your disarming pleasantness." One rereads with some surprise in light of Pierce's opinion the mild and polite language which characterizes *On Canadian Poetry*, and one might recall how Brown, in a letter



to D. C. Scott,<sup>9</sup> was angrily determined to challenge W. Collin's unfavourable review of both *On Canadian Poetry* and *At the Long Sault*. The passage in response to Collin appears in the second edition of Brown's book and does not even mention Collin by name.<sup>10</sup>

Pierce's criticism of Brown's book might suggest the revolutionary nature of the criticism in *On Canadian Poetry*, but, like his references to "shocking art," they really tell one more about how easy it was to disturb the Canadian literary status quo. Brown wrote back to Pierce, "I am sorry that you cannot give me any 'leads' which would complete my account of [Roberts]."

Although Brown's passages on Roberts stand, Pierce somehow managed to have the last word. His final reply to Brown put him in a morally superior position, the power of which would not have escaped Brown. Pierce wrote:

I think that perhaps I come much closer to you in your judgment of Roberts and Carman than you suspect. I do not wish to give you any leads in the matter at all. Perhaps this might be said. It is difficult at this time to realize the importance of successful writers in Canada back in the 80s and 90s. It is difficult to value the impetus these men gave to a self-conscious movement in the arts and letters in Canada. This was the intention of Roberts and Carman, the Toronto Art League and others, and I believe they succeeded. That is the main purpose in my Introduction to Pomeroy's *Life of Roberts*. He stood first in a good many things and if we have arts and letters at all it is due to a great many named and nameless craftsmen. Cameron, Crawford and a host of others are unknown in Canada, let alone abroad, and yet they did fertilize the soil. They were consciously and continually Canadian when it cost a lot to exist at all. I think that in any appraisal of these people we could make that generous gesture first, acknowledging that they succeeded in one major thing they attempted to do, that is to be Canadian above all and before all else. From that we can go on and cover the fair-ground fence with their hides. (July 9, 1943)<sup>11</sup>

This was Pierce at his best: sympathetic to the historical context of even his most treasured writers, but equally determined to allow no personal reservations to stand in the way of what he considered to be an important new step about to be taken in our literary history.

Pierce was a critic whose personality had been forged in a climate which was quite hostile to culture, and, consequently, in spite of the way he wrote about Ryerson in his own monographs, he was really far less idealistic and more acerbic than Brown. Always master of the pithy statement, Pierce wrote to Brown concerning their plan to bring out an anthology of the one hundred best Canadian poets:

I am glad to know that you are making some progress with the hundred best. Our business office will tell you, perhaps, that I have been responsible for the publication of the hundred worst. They are not amused, much less impressed with Canadian poetry. Governor-General's Awards mean nothing to them. (May 26, 1948)

In another letter, Pierce wrote, "You tell me there is a chance of certain kinds of printing being done with scented ink. That will be interesting, but the Canadian bookseller, I think, requires choloroform [*sic*]" (January 29, 1948). Responding to Lampman's theory about the "Byronic touch in Cameron's genius," Pierce suggested that the origin of this so-called Byronic touch was entirely fanciful. "No Canadian writer," he stated, "has ever bled for anything. We may have starved a few, but there is a difference" (October 16, 1944). When Brown took a plan to the CBC to honour the fiftieth anniversary of Lampman's death and emerged from the experience "disgusted, nauseated" (January 29, 1949), Pierce wrote back:

There is little I can add to your comment on the C.B.C. I have given hours to them, entertained them at luncheon, and tried to make them see the light, but up to the moment I have made no progress. They are hopeless. By the time you have worked up through various levels of the Civil Service and approached the throne, you are confronted with a ghost. Moreover the assent [*sic*] has been so long, that by the time you arrive, you too, are a phantom. It is all unreal. (February 3, 1949)

The letters range freely as the critic and the publisher discuss the first and second editions of *On Canadian Poetry*, the possibility of Ryerson's bringing out a Canadian imprint of Brown's *Matthew Arnold: A Study in Conflict*, and the physical problems of publishing during the war. Pierce asked for and received copies of articles that Brown was writing. He was particularly delighted when Brown sent him a copy of "Mackenzie King of Canada."<sup>12</sup> Brown warned, "Please remember that it was written in wartime, and it is intended to make the case for WLMK. Of course I believe fully everything that I have stated or implied, but there are other things less favorable that I also believe and that I did not think this was the time to say" (June 12, 1944). Duncan Campbell Scott, for one, had marvelled at how Brown's portrait of Mackenzie King had apparently pleased everyone — everyone except King that is.<sup>13</sup> Apparently the Liberals were strutting and the Conservatives were crowing. Pierce was no exception. He loved the article, going so far as to say, "I am very grateful to you for your kindness in sending me a copy of your article on W. L. M. K., the great humanist, my favourite author" (June 22, 1944). Finally, Pierce and Brown began work on an edition of the selected poems of Duncan Campbell Scott.

**T**HE STORY OF RYERSON'S publication of the *Selected Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott* is a strong tribute to the loyalty Brown felt towards The Mother Publishing House of Canada. From the time of Scott's death, Pierce had been urging Brown to undertake a biography of the poet. Brown, who

was dying from a brain cancer (although Pierce did not appear to have known that) and who was already committed to a biography of Willa Cather (who, like Scott, had recently died), suggested as an alternate project a selection of Scott's poems to which he would append a long, partially-biographical introduction. Pierce was delighted with the project, in spite of the fact that Scott was dead, Mrs. Scott (Elyse Ayles) had moved to India, and McClelland & Stewart held copyright to the poems.

Although Brown could just as easily have prepared the *Selected Scott* for McClelland & Stewart, he was determined that the book would appear under Ryerson's imprint. "I have put the case for Ryerson very strongly and at length [to Mrs. Scott], and have covered the matter of permissions from Mc and S," Brown assured Frank Flemington, Pierce's editor (October 12, 1949). Brown did not explain his preference for Ryerson, but the course of the correspondence suggests that in some ways Pierce had passed the torch to Brown and that Brown was prepared to receive it. When the two men had begun work on *On Canadian Poetry* seven years earlier, they had shared a somewhat uneasy relationship — how uneasy is made particularly clear by the D. C. Scott-E. K. Brown letters. Brown, however, had been delighted with the final results of both *On Canadian Poetry* and *At the Long Sault*, and, in the years between their initial encounter and 1949, Pierce had turned to Brown more than once for editorial advice. In fact, in 1944 D. C. Scott had told Brown that Pierce "is aware that he has a strong man in you on the Editorial and Critical side and is anxious to get full advantage of it."<sup>14</sup>

Brown had read Souster's poetry for Pierce and had suggested that it be restricted to a chapbook because, he explained, "Souster is not quite formed enough either as a sensibility or a craftsman for publication in a *book*" (October 24, 1943). He had read and endorsed for Pierce Dorothy Livesay's *Night and Day*. He had vetoed the proposed anthology of Preview writers, the disappearance of which is discussed in the Gustafson-Ross letters.<sup>15</sup> He did not, he told Pierce,

have much confidence in the critical intelligence (or intelligences) behind the selection. Some of the poems are very good, others very bad, and all that is common in them in general is a certain slant in technique. A good anthologist would be able to discriminate between the happy and the unhappy uses of this technique. (January 20, 1945)

And, of course, as a poetry judge for the Governor General's Awards, he was in some ways constantly evaluating Ryerson's poets simply because so many of the new poets were being published by Ryerson. Now, Pierce's confidence that he had found a modernist critic sympathetic to his own world view culminated in the *Selected Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott*. "Once upon a time we had all these men [from the group of the 1860's]," he lamented to Brown, "and then we

threw them away. I have spent almost thirty years getting them back. Scott would fill the last gap" (May 26, 1949).

The case for Ryerson, however, seemed futile, for McClelland & Stewart refused to abandon their copyright to Scott's most recent poems and Mrs. Scott refused to allow the publication of a selection which included only poetry published before *The Circle of Affection*. Thus, Mrs. Scott was busy preparing a selection of the poems and Brown was busy writing an introduction, all for a rival publishing house, when a most unexpected turn of events occurred. Brown wrote to Pierce in amazement:

You will be interested to know that I had a letter last week from the junior McClelland which was very surprising. He says that the firm has surrendered all its rights since it was unwilling that Mrs. Scott should have any control over the choice of selections if that were entrusted to me. He says further that he had not felt it necessary to consult me because he was sure that I would not care to proceed if she had that power. The strange thing is that I never implied to him that this was so. (October 31, 1949)

The way was cleared for Ryerson and the collection was underway, with Brown collaborating quite happily with Mrs. Scott. After several delays as Pierce and Brown attempted to check with Mrs. Scott at each stage of production — "Mrs. Scott is about to enter for a trial period the Shri Aurobindo Ashram, which I take to be an institution of piety and meditation in the eastern manner," Brown wrote at one point (December 24, 1950) — the book was essentially completed, just days before Brown's death. "The book is just off press and into the bindery," Pierce wrote on April 13, 1951. His next letter, ten days later, was a horrified telegram to Mrs. Brown, "I AM SHOCKED AND GRIEVED AT THE NEWS. IS THERE ANYTHING THAT I CAN DO?" (April 23, 1951).

*On Canadian Poetry*, as we all know, is a crucial book in our literary history. At a time when traditionalists were quite rightly weary of the general indifference of most of the country to a national literature and when modernists were quite rightly sick of the uncritical attempt of the rest of the country to proclaim all our literature excellent, Brown took the time to survey our poetry from a perspective at once judgemental and unafraid to praise. There is, however, a subtext to *On Canadian Poetry* that the contemporary reader is unlikely to pick up — a dialogue between traditional literary values and innovative modernist values. What the Pierce-Brown letters provide is a way of amplifying that subtext so that the dialogue can be heard. These letters are characteristic of a general atmosphere of conflict in Canada at the time of publication of *On Canadian Poetry*. When we read Brown's little book now, the tone sounds very mild and we take most of the pronouncements for granted. But in 1943, traditionalists did not relegate Roberts to the position of minor poet with primarily symbolic importance and modernists

did not consider Pratt one of the three best poets in Canadian literary history (not to mention Lampman and Scott, Brown's other "masters").

Today we are finally seeing the publication of documents crucial to the history of modernism in Canada—the Gustafson-Ross letters, the Ross letters to A. J. M. Smith. If the recollections of the modernists about the nature of the establishment against which they rebelled are important, so also is the other side of the story. Part of that story lies buried in the Queen's University Archives and it is ripe for resurrection.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Public Archives of Canada (Ottawa) hold an additional eighteen letters in the E. K. Brown Papers. All quotations in this paper are, unless otherwise indicated, from the Lorne Pierce Papers at Queen's.
- <sup>2</sup> *An Editor's Creed* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1960), p. 1.
- <sup>3</sup> *On Publishers and Publishing* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1951), p. 9.
- <sup>4</sup> *The Poet and the Critic*, ed. and intro. Robert L. McDougall (Ottawa: Carleton Univ. Press, 1983), p. 61.
- <sup>5</sup> Letter from Lorne Pierce to Ralph Gustafson, quoted by Bruce Whiteman, Introduction, *A Literary Friendship: The Correspondence of Ralph Gustafson and W. W. E. Ross* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1984), n.p.
- <sup>6</sup> *Sir Charles G. D. Roberts: A Biography* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1943), p. xxiv.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Poet and the Critic*, p. 53.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Poet and the Critic*, p. 54.
- <sup>9</sup> *The Poet and the Critic*, p. 96.
- <sup>10</sup> *On Canadian Poetry* (1944; rpt. Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1973), p. 108.
- <sup>11</sup> This letter is in the E. K. Brown Papers at the Public Archives of Canada.
- <sup>12</sup> "Mackenzie King of Canada," *Harper's Magazine*, 186 (1943), 192-200.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Poet and the Critic*, p. 49.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Poet and the Critic*, p. 121.
- <sup>15</sup> *A Literary Friendship*.

## IN TRANSLATION

*Frank Watt*

My words were never  
exactly the same  
as your words  
even though we meant to agree.

Your words were  
never the same as mine  
even when the tune was the same.