

# PRATT'S TREATMENT OF HISTORY IN "TOWARDS THE LAST SPIKE"

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**I**N A LECTURE DELIVERED IN 1969, "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre,"<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Livesay argued that it was the documentary poem, and not the lyric or historical epic, that formed the most enduring tradition in Canadian poetry. From Lampman on the path was clear. Poetic development was "not into straight narrative but into the use of facts as the basis for an interpretation of a theme."<sup>2</sup> Livesay's examples were drawn from the poetry of Crawford, Lampman, D. C. Scott, Pratt, and Birney, as well as from her own work. *The Roosevelt and the Antinoe* (1930) was the Pratt poem that she chose to discuss but the later work, *Towards the Last Spike* (1952), would have served her purposes equally well. It has all the features she requires of a documentary poem. Thematic interest takes precedence over a simple chronological narrative, there is no single protagonist, the natural landscape plays an important part, there is conflict between men and between men and nature, and there is a concern with the oral qualities of the work. Perhaps most important is the statement that a successful documentary poem needs to be based on solid factual knowledge. With this point E. J. Pratt would have agreed wholeheartedly.

Since his experience with "The Cachalot" in 1926, the composition of all Pratt's longer poems had been preceded by extensive research.<sup>3</sup> The facts, or at least all the important ones, had to be correct. The poet constantly sought advice from others and would revise on their recommendations. With *Brébeuf and His Brethren* (1940) Pratt immersed himself in the Jesuit *Rélations* and seems to have emerged convinced that the documents often spoke best for themselves. When he decided to write a poem about the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway he chose to tell another central story of Canadian history. The tale had already been chronicled by the historians and the biographers. Their books were readily available to Pratt and he made extensive use of them. His remarks about *Towards the Last Spike* in a speech given shortly before the publication of the poem in 1952 contain no surprising news about his methods of research:

I am fully aware that the historians know much more about that span of 15 years than I do, and that the geologists are more familiar with the Canadian strata than I am, and that the Railroad engineers know [more] about tunneling and curves

and gradients than I ever hope to learn, but in accordance with my usual methods of writing, I have gone to these specialists for needed information besides what I have learned in spending four summers in the Rockies and on the Coast.<sup>4</sup>

The pages of notes on history and geology that he took attest to the poet's effort in mastering the technical side of the subject. Pratt, however, was not a historian, but a poet. The desire to bring his material to life and to shape it in accordance with his own design made as many demands on him as the claims of factual accuracy.

When Pratt chose to write a poem about the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, he was choosing to retell a story from Canadian history that had already been extensively documented. For sixty-five years biographers and historians had produced a bulk of material, a good deal of it of mediocre quality, which was meted out annually to Canadian students. Most adults retained little more than a vague outline of the story and some of the names. Pratt seems to have known little about the subject before he began work on the poem. A marginal note in one of the earliest notebooks shows him in a familiar Canadian dilemma: "Look up the difference between CN & P" he scrawled.<sup>5</sup> In the early fifties when Pratt was writing *Towards the Last Spike* the story of the railroad was in Canadian books and not in Canadian minds. Over the next twenty-five years the situation would change somewhat. Donald Creighton produced the first volume of his biography of Sir John A. Macdonald in 1952 and the second in 1955. The interest in Confederation which the 1967 Centennial generated was bound, sooner or later, to focus on Confederation's inevitable partner — the railroad. By the 1970's the country would see Pierre Berton riding a steam engine and the phrases "The National Dream" and "The Last Spike" would stare from Canadian bookstalls and television screens. All this development, however, was yet to come when *Towards the Last Spike* was in the process of composition.

The careful documentary approach Pratt favoured is evident right from the beginning of the poem. The sub-title which appears in the original edition of 1952 sets out the historical framework of *Towards the Last Spike*. It announces boldly that the poem that follows is

A Verse-Panorama of the Struggle to Build the first Canadian Transcontinental from the Time of the Proposed Terms of Union with British Columbia (1870) to the Hammering of the Last Spike in the Eagle Pass (1885).

Such an approach may have helped many readers who, unfamiliar with the outline of the events, might have been puzzled by a freer or more revolutionary treatment of the material. But Pratt was not writing another textbook account and he refused to spoonfeed his readers. Some, but not all, of the chronological narrative is there. No time is lost in explaining who Onderdonk is. Pratt assumes that what the reader does not know he will look up. He had learned from *The*

*Titanic*, from *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, and from *Dunkirk* that the way to treat large-scale adventures was to concentrate upon the dramatic incidents and principal characters and to eliminate all that was not essential to his view of the events and people involved.<sup>6</sup> The eliminated material throws into relief the parts he chose to retain and both tell a good deal about his thematic concerns. *Towards the Last Spike* is a remarkable poem for the way it both casually assumes some of its story (much more casually than *Brébeuf and His Brethren* for instance) and meticulously records the rest.

**A**N EXAMINATION OF THE Pratt Papers, preserved in Victoria University Library, Toronto, is the natural starting place for an examination of Pratt's source material. There in Box 6 are two thick exercise books with manuscript drafts and extensive notes (Numbers 43 and 44); a file with loose pages torn from an exercise book and covered with more draft passages (45); a third notebook written, for the most part, in ink (46); a corrected typescript bearing a close relation to the published text (47); an incomplete typescript (carbon copy) which seems to have served as Pratt's copy for public readings (48); and, lastly, a file containing several talks or speeches he gave about the poem (49). Notebooks 43 and 44 and loose pages 45 are early drafts closely written with a dull pencil. They are extraordinarily difficult to read; in places, illegible.<sup>7</sup> Notebook 46, largely in ink, is much easier to make out. All the notebooks, however, contain tantalizing information. They are covered with marginal notes which reveal the poet's constant concern with accuracy. "Watch chronology" he put beside an early version of Macdonald's catalogue of Arctic explorers (44) and against the passage that has Sir John summarizing two centuries of Canadian history (*Towards the Last Spike* [hereafter *TLS*], *Collected Poems*, p. 362), he wrote: "look up the date of [Union] Jack" (46). The poet also sought to provide solid factual bases for his own imaginative passages. A preliminary draft of the section entitled "The Gathering," in which Pratt discussed the miraculous contribution of oatmeal to the building of the railway, did not satisfy him and he added the note, "put in a little more physiology" (44). He adopted his own advice and the published version had the liver, the duodenum, the amino acids. Often, but not always, in these early notebooks he wrote on the rectos and reserved the versos for notes and for reworking difficult passages. On one verso he can be found experimenting with the cards for the more elaborate poker game of the early drafts (43). The ideas and notes he jotted down were often not incorporated into the poem. "What names did Indians give the mountains" (43) and "George Brown was a Scot" (43) were matters he deliberately chose to neglect.

The notes in these scribblers also indicate many of Pratt's sources. "Sandford Fleming 113T" (43) is a typical entry, and notebooks 43 and 44 are full of references to T., to G. or M.G., to Bruce H., to McNaught., and to MacBeth. Checking the manuscript references has made it clear that Pratt read and took notes from the following books:

T. Thompson, Norman and J. H. Edgar. *Canadian Railway Development from the Earliest Times*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1933.

G. or M.G. Gibbon, John Murray. *Steel of Empire, the Romantic History of the Canadian Pacific, the North West Passage of Today*. Indianapolis & New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1935.

Bruce H. Hutchison, Bruce. *The Fraser*. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1950.

McNaught. Macnaughton, John. *Lord Strathcona*. Makers of Canada Series, Anniversary Edition. London & Toronto: Oxford, 1926.

MacBeth MacBeth, R. G. *The Romance of the Canadian Pacific Railway*. Toronto: Ryerson, 1924.

There are other books that Pratt must have used though the references to them in the notebooks are less direct. His portrait of Van Horne (*TLS*, pp. 364-65) contains childhood biographical details reported only in Walter Vaughan's *Sir William Van Horne*. This book, originally published in 1920, was re-issued by the Oxford University Press in 1926 as part of the popular Makers of Canada Series and was bound together with Macnaughton's *Lord Strathcona*. Like most of these books, the Vaughan was in the Victoria College Library and perhaps even among Pratt's own books.

Howard Angus Kennedy's pamphlets for the Ryerson Canadian History Readers Series, *Origin of the Canadian Pacific Railway* and *Lord Strathcona* (both Toronto, 1909) are also likely sources. These slender pamphlets rely for their information on other books and fill out the facts with national pieties. They were miserable histories, but there was something in the first of them which appears to have interested Pratt. Praising the leaders of the C.P.R. enterprise, Kennedy writes:

Every one of them was a genius in his own way. Stephen and Smith, full of the faith that "removes mountains," had to raise the money when that was nearly as hard as squeezing blood out of a stone.<sup>8</sup>

Opposite the poetic description of Smith (*TLS*, pp. 362-63), Pratt wrote in an early notebook: "blood from stone why not? the myth?" (43). "Blood from stone" does not appear in the poem, but the image of "water from rock" (as a sign of Smith's miraculous powers) does, and the two phrases are sufficiently close to suggest a connection. "The faith that removes mountains" as well as the possibility for a pun may have acted obliquely on Pratt to produce the Atlas analogy for Stephen (*TLS*, p. 363).

It is also likely that Pratt read general histories like *Dominion of the North* (1944) by Donald Creighton, his colleague at the University of Toronto. The first volume of Creighton's biography of Sir John A. Macdonald, *The Young Politician* (1952), appeared too late to have influenced Pratt in his characterization of the Prime Minister though it is possible that he heard oral progress reports from the author. Sandra Djwa in her fine study, *E. J. Pratt — The Evolutionary Vision*, suggests that *Towards the Last Spike* reflects the influences of Harold Innis's writing.<sup>9</sup> She may be right in saying that Innis's communications theories — especially in *Empire and Communications* (1950) and *Bias of Communication* (1951) — shaped Pratt's thinking, but there is nothing in the manuscripts or in the finished poem to suggest that the poet regarded the arid, highly statistical *A History of The Canadian Pacific Railway* (1924) as a valuable source for the story he was telling. The books of Gibbon and MacBeth were more congenial to him than was the Innis history. They, as their very titles indicate, emphasized the romantic adventure of the undertaking and not the details of economic development.

If one examines Pratt's use of the material that he culled from these secondary sources some interesting points are revealed. Descriptions of the landscape are sometimes unexpectedly close to the history text. In the part of the poem about railway construction on the prairies these lines occur:

The grass that fed the buffalo was turned over,  
The black alluvial mould laid bare, the bed  
Levelled and scraped.

(TLS, p. 368)

In *Sir William Van Horne* Vaughan had written:

Following upon the heels of the locating parties came the ploughs and scrapers, tearing into the old buffalo land, moulding it and branding it to the new bondage of progress.<sup>10</sup>

Following Vaughan, as he so often did, R. G. MacBeth provided this description:

The ploughs and scrapers of this great constructive army were making their way through the buffalo wallows and casting up a high grade where the Red River cart had worn deep ruts in the rich dark mould.<sup>11</sup>

Quite deliberately, then, in this picture of the prairies Pratt is reporting what he read. Of course, his natural descriptions are not always like this: some of the finest passages in *Towards the Last Spike* are those which portray the Pre-Cambrian Shield as a great lizard, and for these the sources provide no parallels. Such writing is the result of Pratt's imaginative grasp of Canadian geological history. The image of the reptile is successful partly because it is flexible enough to survive extensive development. The poet devotes the whole of the section entitled "Number Two" to the lizard, returns to her in "Dynamite on the North

Shore,” and has her sound the closing notes of the poem. The initial description is sufficiently broad in its outlines (the lizard is ageless, sprawling, strong) that Pratt’s emphasis can fall on different aspects as it suits his needs and the personification is never forced. Thus, in one place, he can suggest that she is something of a curiosity, an anachronistic dinosaur “Top-heavy with accumulated power / And overgrown survival without function” (*TLS*, p. 370) and in another place insist on all her primeval terror — “She’d claim their bones as her possessive right / And wrap them cold in her pre-Cambrian folds” (*TLS*, p. 379). The description of the dynamiting of the North Shore of Lake Superior begins in an almost playful way as the poet adopts the point of view of the lizard. She is puzzled and irritated by the “horde of bipeds” crawling over her with their unfamiliar accessories:

They tickled her with shovels, dug pickaxes  
 Into her scales and got under her skin,  
 And potted holes in her with drills and filled  
 Them up with what looked like fine grains of sand,  
 Black sand.

(*TLS*, p. 370)

A prolonged passage like this runs the risk of diminishing the reptile’s stature and so the poet moved away from the actual events of the narrative to emphasize the creature’s noble past and her endurance of natural forces from the Ice Age on.

It wasn’t noise that bothered her,  
 For thunder she was used to from her cradle —  
 The head-push and nose-blowing of the ice,  
 The height and pressure of its body: these  
 Like winds native to clime and habitat  
 Had served only to lull her drowsing coils.

(*TLS*, p. 370)

It is the lizard’s strength and immense geological age that make her so formidable an enemy in the poem’s conflict between small man and intractable nature.

A second reason for the success of the image of the lizard is as important as the first and leads us back to the documentary qualities of the poem. It is just because the other natural descriptions of *Towards the Last Spike* are largely realistic and familiar that the reptilian landscape is able to command such a dominant position in the natural imagery of the poem. Every Canadian recognizes the prairies of *Towards the Last Spike*. The mountains of the section “Number Three” with their “terror and beauty” are equally familiar. True, the controlling metaphor for this passage is a powerful and resonant phrase of Sir Edward Blake’s (“That sea of mountains”), but even a Canadian whose experience of the Rocky Mountains is limited to a winter landscape on a kitchen calendar should find nothing strange in such a description. Nothing, not even the increased

personification of "Internecine Strife," rivals the scale of the lizard image. Pratt quite wisely saw that the importance of the latter would be lost if combined with an elaborate array of other monsters and so he always framed his fearsome reptile within a recognizable and well-documented Canadian landscape.

Pratt must have been delighted when he discovered historical facts that also rang true imaginatively. Both Vaughan and MacBeth reported that Van Horne arrived in Winnipeg on December 31, 1881 when the temperature was forty degrees below zero. Pratt records these circumstances of time and temperature in the stage instructions that head Van Horne's soliloquy in *Towards the Last Spike* (pp. 364-66) and then goes on to develop their imaginative possibilities. MacBeth had commented on the sense of exhilaration that such temperatures can produce and there is just such a feeling in the Pratt passage. When Van Horne scrapes the deep frost off the window and surveys the winter sky, he experiences the same challenge of the West as Macdonald did in a parallel section (*TLS*, pp. 349-50) but with none of the Prime Minister's premonitions of disaster. Van Horne sees nature at her most unbending but is confident in his ability to command the future passage of events. He is a man charged with energy, caught for one moment on the eve of a new year, on the eve of a great adventure.

Many of the stories of *Towards the Last Spike* are recounted by every historian of the C.P.R. All of them explain the origin of the name "Craigellachie" which Pratt footnotes on p. 348; all produce the famous Opposition phrase that the railway would not pay for its own axle grease (*TLS*, p. 356); and all describe the scene of the hammering of the last spike (*TLS*, pp. 386-87). Pratt could have got from almost any of them Van Horne's order that the last spike be iron and his one sentence speech at the ceremony in the mountains in which he is supposed to have said, "All I can say is that the work has been well done in every way." Pratt's version of this appears in the finished poem as

It ended when Van Horne spat out some phlegm  
To ratify the tumult with "Well Done"  
Tied in a knot of monosyllables.

(*TLS*, p. 388)

**I**N ALL THESE CASES the poem adheres closely to documented events, but sometimes the treatment of history could be a good deal freer. The section entitled "Suspense in the Montreal Board Room" is a good example of this. In a talk about the poem, Pratt explained that the passage had originated in a passing reference of Van Horne's "to their school boy antics in flinging chairs around," a reference which he had elaborated in the poem.<sup>12</sup> Besides a draft of this section in notebook 46 Pratt wrote "ecstasy" and "Taken from MacBeth, Change a little." MacBeth does record the episode and so do Vaughan and

Gibbon. All speak of the relief experienced by Angus and Van Horne on the receipt of Stephen's London cable and of their subsequent high spirits but two of their descriptions do not extend beyond a picture of flying books and chairs. Gibbon is the only one to mention the clerks who waited outside the board room to collect the sketches Van Horne doodled during meetings. It is Thompson and Edgar's account on page 160 of *Canadian Railway Development from the Earliest Times* that provides the closest parallel to Pratt's passage though they place the event in a different context. According to them, the railway sponsors were in Ottawa awaiting a government decision and when the guarantee of money came through their exuberance overflowed:

At last the message came! "I think we waited until the Minister left the room," said Van Horne, "I believe we had that much sanity left us and then we began. We tossed up chairs to the ceiling; we trampled on desks; I believe we danced on tables. I do not fancy any of us knows now what occurred, and no one who was there can ever remember anything except loud yells of joy and the sound of things breaking."

Van Horne's comments found their way into the poem in

Two chairs flew to the ceiling — one retired,  
The other roosted on the chandelier.

and in

He leaped and turned a cartwheel on the table,  
Driving heel sparables into the oak,  
Came down to teach his partner a Dutch dance;

(*TLS*, p. 385)

It is obvious that Pratt's picture of the scene in the Montreal board room is a composite one. He cites MacBeth in a draft, he adapts Gibbon's amazed and waiting clerks into an "immobilized messenger," and he draws on all of the suggestions of the account in Thompson and Edgar's book. As he said, he did elaborate the story and there is a good deal that is pure high-spirited Pratt — the vivid descriptions of the waiting Van Horne and Angus, the maps, blotting paper and inkstand thrown through the window, and then Van Horne turning cartwheels and stuffing a Grand Trunk folder down his colleague's trousers. The facts of the record are there in Pratt's passage but his exaggeration of them makes the story loom larger in the poem than it does in the histories. "Suspense in the Montreal Board Room" becomes another way of characterizing Van Horne — of demonstrating his tremendous natural vitality — and it provides a dramatic climax for one important side of the Railway story, the achievement of financial security.

Pratt relied more heavily on some of his sources than on others. Gibbon's *Steel of Empire* seems to have been one of his favourites probably because it contains a good deal of information that does not appear elsewhere and because it incor-



porates many first-hand accounts. Many of the details of the Western surveys could have come from Gibbon. The picture of Rogers certainly did.<sup>13</sup> *Steel of Empire* is the only source which tells that Smith bent the first spike of the ceremony which marked the completion of the railroad — a fact which Pratt considers important enough to include in his own poem. Where statistics differ he often adopts Gibbon's estimate, as with the number of tracks and locomotives sunk in the muskeg.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the most interesting evidence for his use of Gibbon is the vivid description of the mule which is closely based on a detailed first-hand account of the construction. *Steel of Empire* quotes from a man called Stephen Pardoe:

The horses knew as well as the foreman when 'unhook' should be called, while each mule was a foreman unto itself in that respect. A minute or two before the expiration of each five-hour of work one wise old mule would bray, and from that time until 'unhook' the air was hideous with fearful sounds. Stolidly patient, incredibly strong, endued with infinite and devilish vice, no mule would move one second before 'hook up' sounded or one second after the correct time for 'unhook' to be called had passed.<sup>15</sup>

In *Towards the Last Spike* the idea of mule unionization is Pratt's, as is the happy thought of the animals unhinging their joints and unhitching their tendons, but all else is documented history which the poet is content to retell.

Pratt's research for *Towards the Last Spike* also led him into the study of some primary documents. The *Debates of the House of Commons* were available at the library and his scribblers reveal that he consulted them. In exercise book 43 he made some notes on Blake's April 15th, 16th, 1880 speech and in 44 there are several pages of notes on Blake's Pacific Scandal speech in the House of Commons, November 3rd and 4th, 1873. The latter he may have known through a small pamphlet entitled *Three Speeches by the Hon. Edward Blake, Q.C., M.P. on the Pacific Scandal*.<sup>16</sup> It contains the speeches in Bowmanville (August 26, 1873) and London (August 28, 1873) to which Pratt's notes also make reference. Although he read the historical record carefully, Pratt chose to handle the texts of the speeches freely in his poem. In *Towards the Last Spike* he is more concerned with the problems of rhetoric that the speeches raise than he is with their actual statements. His typical approach is to describe the effect of the speech on its audience, as in the lines describing the members of the House of Commons listening to Sir Edward Blake:

The minds went first; the bodies sagged; the necks  
Curved on the benches and the legs sprawled out.

(*TLS*, p. 361)

as well as to insist on the power of some of the most well-known phrases. Out of the parliamentary record he picks words like Sir John's "I throw myself on this

House; I throw myself on this country; I throw myself on posterity . . .” (November 3, 1873), and his “from sea to sea” or Blake’s “to build a road over that sea of mountains” and “lost in the gorges of the Fraser” (April 15-16, 1880), and has them carry the force of the whole speech. There is nothing about stripping the Knights of Malta (*TLS*, p. 354) in Blake’s 1873 address to the House. This phrase enters the poem because Pratt read the politician’s speech, grasped the progression of the thought, and then imagined its movement again in different terms. The “Knights” are also a remnant of an extended passage in an early draft which will be examined later.

Pratt found his source material all around him. He was fond of consulting people he knew when he ran up against a technical problem. He tells of asking nutritionists and physiologists about the exact effect of oatmeal on the digestive system (for the lines in the poem on pages 347-48) and asking Scots and doctors about the effect of alcohol on a melancholy man (for the treatment of Sir John A. Macdonald, pages 383-84). A “physical instructor and coach” provided him with the proper terms for the tug-of-war in Sir John’s nightmare (*TLS*, p. 349). George Douglas, Professor of Geology at Dalhousie University, furnished him with some of the geological information he needed, as did an engineer who worked on the Connaught Tunnel in the 1920’s.<sup>17</sup> In general, his geological sources are harder to trace than his historical ones. He may have read full-length first-hand accounts of the early surveying parties, such as George Monro Grant’s *Ocean to Ocean* (1872), though the scribblers provide no direct evidence for this. Notebook 44 includes the only full geological notes which sort out some names and classification of rocks and record the heights of mountain ranges. The muskeg is treated in some detail and a quotation from the *Winnipeg Tribune* appears to be the source for the treacherously inviting grass of the muskeg and especially for the lines

And herds of cariboo had left their hoof-marks,  
Betraying visual solidity.

(*TLS*, p. 379)<sup>18</sup>

SINCE PRATT SAW MUCH OF THE STORY of the building of the railroad in terms of five individuals, the reading of biographies was an important area of his research. Once this was accomplished, as a poet, he had to take documented historical figures and make them into living men. This was partly accomplished by using “soliloquies” for Van Horne and Macdonald and by dramatically recreating the parliamentary speeches of the Hon. Edward Blake. Since the poem is a narrative and not a dramatic one, however, Pratt was always in and out of the minds of his principal human subjects rather than simply pro-

jecting their voices. Neither story nor personality was the end of his tale: he needed to present both in terms of the shaping themes of his poem. To do this, he apparently decided to treat his biographical research on William Van Horne, Donald Smith, George Stephen, Edward Blake, and John A. Macdonald in quite different ways.

Some of the portraits of *Towards the Last Spike*, like that of Van Horne, and, to a lesser extent, that of Smith, are careful reconstructions. The lives of the two men were well-documented and Pratt had read the full-length biographies which appeared in 1926 in the *Makers of Canada* series (Macnaughton, *Lord Strathcona*; Vaughan, *Sir William Van Horne*) as well as the character sketches in the general histories. In the treatment of both men Pratt adhered closely to his sources. Not only did he incorporate many of the facts that the biographies reported, he also followed them in their interpretation of the character. In the case of Van Horne, all the early material on childhood (*TLS*, pp. 364-65) came from Vaughan. So too did the facts that the railway manager flourished on only a few hours of sleep (Vaughan, pp. 83-84; *TLS*, p. 364) and was fearless of physical danger. Vaughan reported that he would cross unsteady trestles from which men had fallen to their deaths a few days before (Vaughan, p. 111; *TLS*, p. 372). MacBeth wrote that Van Horne hated incompetence and that he was a practical joker (MacBeth, p. 78). All the sources agreed that the manager was a dynamo (MacBeth, p. 78), a whirlwind of activity (Vaughan, pp. 83-84), an adventurous pioneer, and something of a visionary (MacBeth, p. 77). He even had a reputation among railway workers and in government circles as a kind of superman (Vaughan, p. 115). Pratt's Van Horne incorporates all these qualities though the poet, of course, could work with broader strokes than the biographer. He could condense a long anecdote into two lines — the boss who fired Van Horne when he received a shock from the boy's buried ground wire (Vaughan, pp. 16-17; *TLS*, p. 364) — rearrange the chronology of youth, embroider the schoolboy caricatures (*TLS*, pp. 364-65), and dramatize his subject's thoughts. He could also insist on doing something that good biographers do only cautiously: juxtapose past and future for the purpose of interpretation:

He would come home, his pockets stuffed with fossils —  
 Crinoids and fish-teeth — and his tongue jabbering  
 Of the earth's crust before the birth of life,  
 Prophetic of the days when he would dig  
 Into Laurentian rock.

(*TLS*, p. 364)

Pratt was able to portray Van Horne very much as his sources had because the outstanding aspects of the man which they had noted (the miraculous quality of his achievements, his almost supernatural powers in confounding time and space) were the very qualities that appealed to the poet. Van Horne's place in a poem

about the superiority of vision and dream to logic and argument was an obvious one.

Like Van Horne, Donald Smith is introduced into the poem in a detailed biographical passage. The facts, from the Highland ancestry to the melon-growing in Labrador, come from Macnaughton. Howard Angus Kennedy's *Lord Strathcona* added a few more touches.<sup>19</sup> In the Smith portrait, however, Pratt's selectivity is more obvious. His Smith has the heroic character of a man who "fought the climate like a weathered yak / And conquered it" (*TLS*, p. 363). There are no weaknesses in him, and Pratt says nothing about the early suffering from snowblindness which caused Smith trouble with Hudson's Bay officials and almost led to his resignation (Kennedy, p. 6). Moreover, the poet makes no mention of the well-documented coolness between Smith and Macdonald, a result of Smith's action during the Pacific Scandal when he spoke against the government (Macnaughton, pp. 185-86). Macdonald's grudge was long-held and it even prevented Smith's direct participation in the early meetings between the Canadian government and the businessman sponsors of the railway scheme. Pratt's poem conveys rather the opposite — Smith is the first man to whom Macdonald turns when the Londoners desert him (*TLS*, p. 362). *Towards the Last Spike*, then, rounds off the edges of Smith and simplifies his character. The poet does give two vivid pictures of the man — one in his early days in Labrador and the other on the famous occasion of the hammering of the last spike — but he is as much interested in Smith's mythic qualities as he is in the facts of life. Smith as "a miracle on legs" is a line of thought that may have been suggested by Pratt's sources. We have already noted the connection between Kennedy's "blood from stone" and Pratt's "water from rock," and Gibbon too referred to Smith as Moses.<sup>20</sup> The development of this idea, though, along with the extraordinary alchemical powers given to Smith, are all Pratt's own creation.

The treatment of George Stephen is even freer than that of Smith. This was perhaps because there was not such a wealth of biographical material available on Stephen (Volume I of Heather Gilbert's *Awakening Continent — The Life of Lord Mount Stephen*, published by the Aberdeen University Press, did not appear until 1965) and perhaps because the life of the stalwart banker did not lend itself to such vivid treatment as that of his quicksilver cousin. At any rate, Pratt's portrait is a sketchy one which reveals the biographical facts incidentally as they relate to the theme and story of the poem. Stephen's Banffshire origins and his early days as a draper's apprentice emerge in Macdonald's fear of a man "Tongue-trained on Aberdonian bargain-counters." The "Banffshire-cradled r," which distinguishes Stephen's speech, is as irritating to the Prime Minister as the businessman's skill in close, logical argument (*TLS*, p. 377). Like Pratt's Smith, his Stephen is a heroic figure, a "banking metallurgist" with mythic dimensions. His wizardry with stocks and bonds turns them into minerals and mountains and,

with a neat reference to the peak in the Rockies named after Mount Stephen, Pratt claims of the man:

He grew so Atlas-strong that he could carry  
A mountain like a namesake on his shoulders.

(*TLS*, p. 363)

Pratt does not disturb the simple outlines of his figure by incorporating Stephen's initial reluctance to become involved, his constant caution, and his frequent depressions when business troubles would cause him to dissolve into tears.<sup>21</sup> For the same reason he eliminated from the railway story the tangle of rival syndicates and the financial details of the various contracts. He had to tell a coherent tale and one that concentrated on the most dramatic points. All his efforts in psychological understanding went into Macdonald and Van Horne and the supporting characters had to be crisp and clear in their outlines.

With Edward Blake and John A. Macdonald, only a few of the recorded biographical facts were of interest to the poet. Blake, in any case, had been largely neglected by the historians and there was little material available apart from thumbnail sketches in general texts and biographical dictionaries. Some of the few notes Pratt took on Blake ("prodigious memory," notebook 44) suggest that he may have looked at J. C. Dent's *The Canadian Portrait Gallery* (Toronto: John B. Magurn, 1880). Other notes he jotted down were facts widely known about Blake. "Put in Blake's respect for sequence" (notebook 43) probably originates in the frequent observation that the politician dealt with matters in exhaustive detail. This also seems to have put the idea of Euclid into Pratt's mind, for an early draft describing Blake's rhetoric reads:

A fact annointed with Euclidean unction,  
He could deliver as a gospel truth.

(notebook 43)

Beside another early draft of the section which became in the finished poem "Blake in Mood," Pratt wrote "Euclidean mind" (notebook 44).

The sources available on Macdonald's life were much more extensive. By 1950 a good deal had been written about Canada's first Prime Minister. Many, but not all, of the early books and pamphlets were essentially appreciations, and this laudatory tone was generally carried over into productions of the next century.<sup>22</sup> The treatment was almost uniformly formal with the occasional chapter that reported, with varying degrees of frankness, the details of Macdonald's private life.<sup>23</sup> Pratt's portrait was quite different. He seems to have been under no illusions about Macdonald's pragmatism. In one of his notebooks he wrote down the quotation, "He recognized the truth that there was a time to oppose and a time to accept" (44), and, in the poem, dwells on the nickname "Old Tomorrow." His Macdonald, however, emerges as an intensely sympathetic figure. The situa-

tions in which the Prime Minister is viewed are almost always intimate (tormented by insomnia, snuggled into the sheets, sunk in depression) but the picture that is produced is that of a hero whose only rival in the railway story is Van Horne.

Even Macdonald's most notorious weakness, his fondness for alcohol was somehow connected with his genius. In his treatment of the two politicians Pratt was not interested in an objective presentation of the facts. His Blake is a caricature and much more of a villain than the man of the history books. His Macdonald is the supreme politician — long-sighted and nimble on his feet. This free handling of the two leaders allowed Pratt's themes to be developed in terms of opposites.

Against an early draft of the Blake-Macdonald debate in notebook 43, Pratt wrote in the margin "logic versus vision," and this is the most important of his oppositions. It is bolstered, however, by a whole series of related contrasts — close argument *vs.* magic phrases or metaphors; slow or dragging time *vs.* quickened tempo and musical command; the ascetic, the plain, the home-grown *vs.* the luxurious, the romantic, the foreign.

This last contrast is perhaps even more evident in the drafts of the poem than it is in the final version. In a long passage that survives all the way to typescript 48, there is a portrait of Blake at the time of the Pacific Scandal which seems to have come entirely from Pratt's imagination.<sup>24</sup> The politician is introduced as he sits in an Ottawa restaurant. The poet tells us that Blake dislikes eating out because the meals served are not plain enough for his taste. Hors d'oeuvres, he feels, are no food for an honest man, and he suspects seasonings and spices are only used to disguise poorly-prepared meals. Alcohol holds no temptations for him:

For him, as well the port had no seductions.  
His appetite was in his moral sense.

When his dinner arrives he discovers that it is bad and, after chastising the chef, he hastens back to the House of Commons with his exhibits to confront "the Management." The dirty-green sardines in their rusty can (Exhibit A) and the greasy herrings (Exhibit B and perhaps there because of a marginal phrase in notebook 44 — "Put in somewhere how Blake detested oil . . .") are revolting specimens.

But these were not the things concerned him most  
Malodorous with the whiff of barnacles  
Staled by the Firth of Clyde they were but *entrées*  
Brought over in the busy Allan holds  
And being fish they could have suffered sea-change.

It is Exhibit C, an omelette smothered in parsley and mushroom sauce, that really arouses his ire. Its greenish tinge proclaims it could not be an honest egg and when Blake lets it drop, it bounces upon the floor.

This hardness had a cause: it was its age.  
 The orator raised his voice: "Some months have passed  
 Since it was cooked. Why this delay? It was  
 The trick of Prorogation of the House  
 Designed to calcify the egg, depress  
 The fumes, desensitize the public nose;  
 Had long been prearranged and failed its purpose  
 For no deodorant in art or nature  
 Could offset this.' He passed the dish around:  
 The smell was hybrid, with a foreign air  
 As from Chicago, a domestic air  
 As from the stuffy steamship offices  
 Of Montreal, and something that defied  
~~Analysis.--What hen had laid the egg?~~ The membranes find the hen  
 Who owned the hen? Where did it roost or nest? that laid this egg  
 Who brought the egg in from the barn? Who cooked it?  
 Whatever corn it had mixed with oats  
 The hen had picked up from a Yankee stable.

The connections between the rotten egg and the Pacific Scandal are clear though most readers would probably admit that the conceits are strained and that Pratt did well to leave the passage out. Nevertheless, the early version is interesting. Its broad humour and the high spirits suggest affinities with the extravaganza "The Witches' Brew" and remind us that, right from the beginning, Pratt conceived the railway story with strong comic elements. Furthermore, though he scrapped his early description of Blake, he incorporated some of its suggestions into the revisions and when he talked about the poem at public readings, he continued to think about it in terms of his original conception.<sup>25</sup> "The Ministry of Smells" and the lines —

He told the sniffing Commons that a sense  
 Keener than smell or taste must be invoked  
 To get the odour

(*TLS*, p. 354)

— that we find in the finished version are obvious remnants of the "bad omelette" passage. Knowing the drafts also restores to the final lines of this section some of their intended force. The picture of Sir John holding his nose (*TLS*, p. 355) is a more comprehensible one in its original context of the reeking parliamentary chamber

someone opened a window  
 The air was fetid for the omelette  
 Itself, feeling its stir of molecules  
 Had changed to sulphurated hydrogen

(Box 6, no. 46)

than it is when it follows the description of dragging time and sleeping members.

FINALLY, THE DRAFT PASSAGE provides a detailed picture of Blake of which only the outlines are retained in the final version. In both, Blake's eating preferences are taken as signs of his personality and political-moral stance. His longing for plain food at the restaurant (which is evident in notebook 46) or his opinion that "A meal was meant by nature for nutrition —" (*TLS*, p. 354) explains not just his censure of luxurious luncheons but the solid factual content of his substantial speeches and his contempt for the expansive free-ranging mind. Macdonald is obviously the man who lets his thoughts

Roam, like a goblet up before the light  
To bask in natural colour, or by whim  
Of its own choice to sway luxuriously  
In tantalizing arcs before the nostrils.

(*TLS*, p. 354)

And Blake has no use for such dreamers.<sup>26</sup> Their moving eloquence is equally foreign to him, for his speeches are "massive in design" (*TLS*, p. 360) and lose their listeners in excessive detail. Sometimes, however, Blake stumbles on a magic phrase and then Macdonald fears the consequences. In *Towards the Last Spike* the power of the right words is real. Words can make mountains into seas and they can threaten to decide the question of railway subsidies by transporting the Commons to a dangerous mountain ledge and leaving them shivering below an avalanche (*TLS*, p. 360).

Successful communication was, of course, an old Pratt theme. The power of the female ape in "The Great Feud" sprang from her ability to command a response in her audience:

She spoke: and every throat and every lung  
Of herbivore and carnivore  
In volleying symphonic roar  
Rang with persuasion of her tongue.

(*Collected Poems*, p. 162)

In *Towards the Last Spike* Pratt portrays the building of the railway as a struggle "Against two fortresses: the mind, the rock" (*TLS*, p. 372), and of these two jobs

The moulding of men's minds was harder far  
Than moulding of the steel and prior to it.

(*TLS*, p. 358)

The tools for moulding men's minds are words, and so the heroes of Pratt's poem are not only visionaries but also individuals who can convince others that their dreams can be transformed into reality. Van Horne is a man of practical affairs



whose job is to fight the rock and direct the laying of the steel, but he is also a dreamer and a man who “loved to work on shadows” (*TLS*, p. 364). When he surveys the sky in Winnipeg, he *knows* that the task ahead of him can be accomplished; it is the sceptics, not the dreamers, who are insane, he thinks. In Montreal he presents his plans with such energy and daring that the financiers forget their doubts, throw in their lot with him, and approve his grand scheme. Like Van Horne, Macdonald is also a dreamer; and he has an even bigger audience to persuade — not just a board, but a country.

The Pratt Papers suggest that it was this idea of two visionaries that was the starting point of *Towards the Last Spike*. The exact order of the poem’s composition is difficult to determine, but it appears from notebook 43 that Pratt began writing with a passage about two men sweeping the sky with telescopes. This symmetry is preserved in the published version with the two “soliloquies” — Sir John surveying the sky with a telescope and Van Horne looking at the stars — though there, since the passages are separated, Pratt seems to feel that the connections between the two men have to be expressed through a direct comparison (*TLS*, p. 365). An interesting direction the poem could have taken is illustrated by a page in notebook 43 headed:

[one illegible line]  
 Two people looking at the stars  
 Two farmers looking at the market train.

Draft titles for the first section of the poem continue this idea. In scribblers 43, 44 and 46 Pratt headed the beginning of the poem “Star Gazers and Land Surveyors” and 44 also has the suggestive alternative title “Land and Mind Surveyors.” So, right from the start, Pratt had made the connection between visions of the future and telescopes and between the comparable activities of land and mind surveying. He had decided on his shaping theme and it was in terms of that theme that he would see the principal characters and events of the railway story. Sometimes, as in the case of Van Horne, Pratt’s biographical and historical sources would suggest the same interpretation of the facts, and the poet carried on where they left off. On other occasions, as in the descriptions of Blake and Macdonald, the documented material had to be more freely treated. In these sections and in the parts of the poem about public opinion on the railway issue, Pratt developed his picture with broad imaginative strokes. It is clear that the strongest influence on these “logic *vs.* vision” passages was not carefully researched material but the religious parallels and the Biblical echoes that sprang naturally to Pratt’s mind. The struggle between those who believe in the railway and those who do not is like the opposition between St. Paul and Doubting Thomas (*TLS*, p. 346); laying the line across the barren prairie is an act of faith in a different future (*TLS*, p. 368); and Sir John’s “From sea to sea” is a Biblical phrase

confronting Blake's pagan one (*TLS*, p. 360). The Bible is full of visionaries or dreamers as a line in an early draft of the beginning of the poem reminds us. Joel 11: 28 is rewritten as Pratt describes the expanding country straining into the future — "How what the young men saw in vision what / The old had dreamed" (notebook 43).

The idea of the visionary, or what Sandra Djwa, who explains *Towards the Last Spike* in terms of T. C. Smut's concept of holism, calls the idea of Personality, is obviously at the centre of the poem, but there are also other imaginative organizing principles at work. Perhaps the most important of these is the musical theme which Professor Djwa traces from the note hard to catch to the swelling symphony.<sup>27</sup> She may well be right that Pratt is picking up a line of imagery already evident in Smut's writing but it is interesting to note that Sir John as a maestro on a podium may have been derived from so simple a source as a nineteenth-century cartoon entitled "The Grand Ministerial Overture" published in the *Canadian Illustrated News* of February 13, 1879, and that the development of the musical theme went on from there. Moreover, the musical command is not just the successful orchestration of various instruments — it is the forcing of a faster tempo. Edward Blake and Alexander Mackenzie are associated with dragging time and "five years delay" on the railway. The slow progress of the minutes during Blake's speeches in the Commons is unbearably tedious and the reader's restlessness is increased by the description of the cautious pace of the stolid Mackenzie. He is content to move the railway

Across the prairies in God's own good time,  
His plodding, patient, planetary time.

(*TLS*, p. 357)

When Macdonald returns to office in 1878, he has to begin delicately but he manages to drown Blake's warnings, his "beautiful but ruinous piece of music," with the stirring martial tune of fife and drum. By the end of the poem this music has become a "continental chorus," but the drumming rhythm is still insistent and it drives the country forward into the era of faster times and broken records met in the lines which introduce and set the mood for *Towards the Last Spike* — "It was the same world then as now — / Except for little differences of speed / And power" (*TLS*, p. 346).

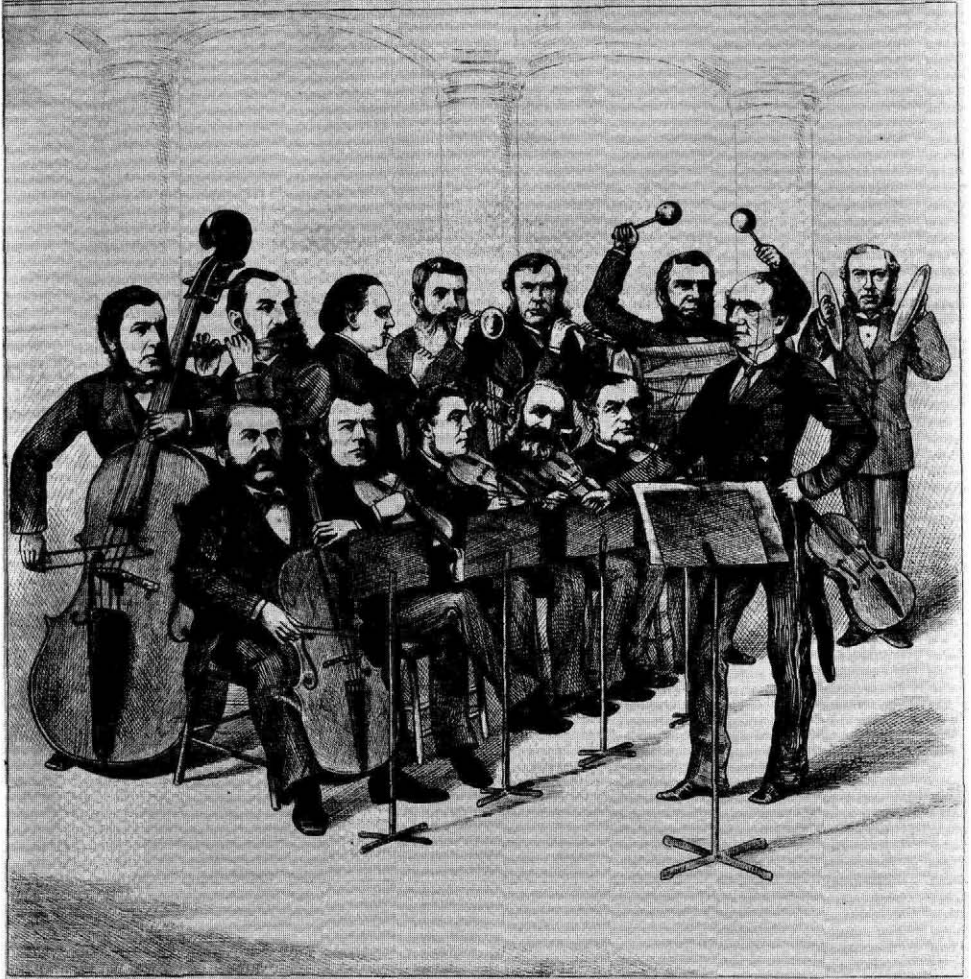
In Pratt's railway poem there are two other elements that are closer to fantasy than to record though one is advanced a good deal more seriously than the other. The personification of British Columbia as a reluctant fiancée seems to have been an attempt to render vivid a necessary part of political history and to provide another sympathetic picture of Macdonald, this time as the desperate suitor. The general idea was not a new one and it could easily have been suggested to Pratt by another cartoon. This one by Henri Julien was originally published in the

# Illustrated News

VOL. XIX.—No. 7.

MONTREAL, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1879.

SINGLE COPIES, TEN CENTS.  
\$4 PER YEAR IN ADVANCE.



THE GRAND MINISTERIAL OVERTURE  
AT THE PARLIAMENTARY OPERA HOUSE, OTTAWA, 13th FEBRUARY.

# Illustrated News

Vol. XIV.—No. 9.

MONTREAL, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 1876.

SINGLE COPIES, TEN CENTS.  
\$4 PER YEAR IN ADVANCE.



BRITISH COLUMBIA IN A PET.

UNCLE ALEX :—Don't frown so, my dear, you'll have your railway by-and-bye.  
MISS B. COLUMBIA :—I want it now. You promised I should have it, and if I don't, I'll complain to Ma.

*Canadian Illustrated News* of September 9, 1876. It depicted the Prime Minister of the day, Alexander Mackenzie, in the guise of Uncle Aleck attempting to conciliate a sulky niece, Miss B. Columbia, who threatened to complain to her mother (Great Britain) unless she got her railway immediately. When Gibbon reproduced the cartoon in his book (about half its original size), he retained only the large caption "British Columbia in a Pet" and eliminated the short dialogue between uncle and niece.<sup>28</sup> It seems entirely possible that Pratt's eye was attracted by the illustration in Gibbon's book and that both the shortened caption and the drawing suggested a romantic rather than a familial relationship to him — hence the transformation of the avuncular Mackenzie to the anxious lover Macdonald who appears in the poem (*TLS*, pp. 351-52).<sup>29</sup> As usual all the embroidery connected with these personifications (California as the sailor-lover and rival, the Lady soaping off the engagement ring) is Pratt's own. In fact, the original drafts of the passage on p. 352 were much longer than the final version, and contained an elaborate poker game along the lines of that in *The Titanic*. It survived as late as typescript 48 where the section was entitled "Across a Telepathic Table." Pratt also continued to refer to the poker game in later parts of the poem. After the line "It was the following burning corollary" (*TLS*, p. 360), draft 47 had the line "Springing from that erotic poker game," and original versions of "Threats of Secession" continued to speak of "the poker debt so many years unhonoured" (notebooks 44, 46). Eventually these later poker references were expunged and "The Long-Distance Proposal" was substituted for "Across a Telepathic Table." In the final version the game only lurks in the background in phrases like "A game it was and the Pacific lass / Had poker wisdom on her face," and "She watched for bluff" (*TLS*, p. 352). The poker passage is like the omelette one. Both seem to have no origin in documented events,<sup>30</sup> both show a high-spirited Pratt enjoying himself immensely, and both were largely eliminated before the poem was finished.

The "oatmeal" passage in the section of the poem entitled "The Gathering" is quite different. In one sense it seems as if a move inside a Scotsman's stomach is a move away from the railway story but, in fact, the passage is closely connected with two of Pratt's themes. He remarked afterwards that he knew many nationalities were involved in the construction of the railroad, but that he had decided (as two of his sources, Gibbon and MacBeth, had) that the key men were the Scots.<sup>31</sup> In *Dunkirk* the poet had already had some fun with Scottish names but here the common racial origin most evident in "the everlasting tread of Macs" is taken seriously. Stephen's Highland burr speaks to Macdonald more powerfully than the speech of other men and he cannot ignore its demands (*TLS*, pp. 366-67). The Prime Minister is portrayed not only as a nimble politician but also as a clan chieftain and the "general of the patronymic march" (*TLS*, p. 348), as courageous as he is canny. The other important Scottish touches in the poem are the

insistence on the ancestry of Smith and Stephen and the view of the hammering of the last spike as a victory accomplished by a people who had suffered bitter defeat at Flodden almost four hundred years earlier.

The second theme with which the "oatmeal" passage is connected is the complex question of the relation between man and the natural world in the poem. This was a matter of limited interest to the historians and the geologists, but it was of great interest to Pratt. When he suggested that the men who built the railway grew into rock themselves (*TLS*, p. 347), when he explored the resemblances between the human struggle against the land and the great battles among the elements ("Internecine Strife"), and when he envisioned the Canadian landscape as a great lizard, then he brought some of his most revolutionary innovations to the railway story.

When Pratt praised Stephen Vincent Benét's poem on the American Civil War, *John Brown's Body* (1928), it was not just for its careful historical treatment, but because he saw in it passion fused with the facts.<sup>32</sup> He brought his own passion, perhaps even his own brand of nationalism, to the story of the railroad. The political oratory, the character of the builders, the land itself, are all there but expressed in terms of enduring Pratt themes — heroism, vision, communication, and evolutionary struggle. The perspective is intimate as often as it is panoramic and, while the finished poem is considerably more restrained than the early drafts, it still contains strong comic elements. *Towards the Last Spike*, in fact, presents the same combination that Sir John A. Macdonald hoped that his speech on the Selkirk pioneers would deliver: "Romance and realism, double dose." The poet himself put it more modestly when he explained that "It is half a record and half a fantasy."<sup>33</sup> Since both aspects of the poem are so vividly conceived and so carefully executed, Pratt's last narrative work is an entirely successful documentary poem.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The lecture was published in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 267-81.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>3</sup> Carl F. Klinck and Henry W. Wells, *Edwin J. Pratt — The Man and His Poetry* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1947), p. 51. Since this paper was originally written, Susan Beckmann has explored the subject more fully in "Java to Geneva: the Making of a Pratt Poem," *Canadian Literature*, No. 87 (Winter 1980), pp. 6-23. There is discussion in this valuable article of the sources of many of the narrative poems, but not of *Towards the Last Spike*.

<sup>4</sup> Pratt Papers, Typescript, Box 6, no. 49, Victoria University Library (Toronto); quotations from Pratt Papers are used by permission.

<sup>5</sup> Pratt Papers, Notebook, Box 6, no. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Klinck and Wells, p. 46.

- <sup>7</sup> Jay Macpherson makes the same observation about her experience with the manuscripts of "The Witches' Brew" and notes that the dull pencil was caused by "the childhood economy of cutting all new pencils into three before using them." See *Pratt's Romantic Mythology: The Witches' Brew* (Pratt Lectures, 1972), pp. 4, 18.
- <sup>8</sup> Howard Angus Kennedy, *Origin of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1928), p. 21.
- <sup>9</sup> Sandra Djwa, *E. J. Pratt — the Evolutionary Vision* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1974), pp. 134-35.
- <sup>10</sup> Walter Vaughan, *Sir William Van Horne* (Toronto: Oxford, 1926).
- <sup>11</sup> R. G. MacBeth, *The Romance of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1924).
- <sup>12</sup> Pratt Papers, Typescript, Box 6, no. 49.
- <sup>13</sup> Compare J. H. E. Secretan's description of Rogers (from *Canada's Great Highway* which appeared in Gibbon, p. 215) with Pratt's description.
- Secretan: He was a master of picturesque profanity, who continually chewed tobacco and was an artist in expectoration. He wore overalls with pockets behind, and had a plug of tobacco in one pocket and a sea-biscuit in the other, which was his idea of a season's provisions for an engineer. His scientific equipment consisted of a compass and an aneroid slung around his neck.
- Pratt: Now Rogers was traversing it on foot,  
Reading an aneroid and compass, chewing  
Sea-biscuit and tobacco.
- Moberly's remark to Macdonald which Pratt quotes (*TLS*, p. 353) also comes from Gibbon (p. 159).
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239. Gibbon is quoting from an article in *Engineering Wonders of the World* by J. M. Gibbon and Stephen Pardoe.
- <sup>16</sup> It was in the collection of the Victoria University Library (Toronto) and is now kept in its Canadiana section.
- <sup>17</sup> These debts are acknowledged in the typescript of the York Club speech, Pratt Papers, Box 6, no. 49.
- <sup>18</sup> As recopied by Pratt in typescript, Box 6, no. 49, the quotation from Pallon (?) in the *Winnipeg Tribune* reads:  
apparently the tussocks are important as a warning to keep well back, as the tussocks may present a friendly uniform grassy surface around the edge, so hard to tell where the meadow ends and the (concealed) lake begins. Some of the tussocky muskegs look as if they had been methodically pockmarked by moose hooves.
- <sup>19</sup> For example, the description of Smith as a young Hudson's Bay Company trader (*TLS*, p. 363) ultimately originates in Macnaughton (p. 76) but Kennedy's version is so much more detailed and vivid (pp. 5-6) that it may well have been Pratt's main source.
- <sup>20</sup> The context is different. Gibbon (p. 347) is referring to Lord Strathcona the imperialist not Donald Smith the railway builder, but the image may still have suggested something to Pratt.
- <sup>21</sup> The point is made in Walter Vaughan's *Sir William Van Horne*, p. 120.
- <sup>22</sup> The pamphlet on the Prime Minister in Louis J. C. Taché's *Men of the Day: A*

*Canadian Portrait Gallery* is an example of a pro-Macdonald view. Sir Richard Cartwright's *Reminiscences* (Toronto, 1912) is, by contrast, highly critical.

<sup>23</sup> The exceptional book is Biggar's *Anecdotal Life of Sir John A. Macdonald* (Montreal, 1891).

<sup>24</sup> There is certainly nothing in Blake's speeches to suggest it, and even a remark like Gibbon's "The odour so far acquired by the Canadian Pacific Railway was not that of Araby" (p. 199) is nothing in comparison with Pratt's soaring vision of the rotten egg in the House of Commons.

<sup>25</sup> See the notes on his reading copy in which he summarized parts of the poem:

I had to put the charges in the form of a menu which is offered to the House of Commons by the Hon. Edward Blake, leader of the Opposition. He presents the dishes which are not very savoury, the main dish is an egg now an omelette which through age has become very high.

(Typescript, Box 6, no. 48)

The same point can be found in other speeches.

<sup>26</sup> The passage about wine illustrates my point that in *Towards the Last Spike* it is the far-sighted dreamer who has a taste for alcohol. "Hollow Echoes from the Treasury Vault" also demonstrates the efficacy of whiskey. Sir John's drink is his medicine; when he has drained the glass he can see clearly the task that lies ahead of him. The whiskey also has the magic Scottish touch responsible for so many of the poem's miracles.

<sup>27</sup> Djwa, pp. 132-33.

<sup>28</sup> Gibbon, p. 179.

<sup>29</sup> It is even possible that Pratt looked quickly at the cartoon in Gibbon's book and assumed he was seeing Macdonald and not Mackenzie.

<sup>30</sup> Nothing in the material consulted suggested that Macdonald was a poker player. In one of the Parliamentary debates he uses an image drawn from gambling and then apologizes to the House for doing so. The Poker Game passage that was eliminated from the final poem reads as follows:

The Lady dealt the cards. It was agreed  
That one-eyed Jacks were wild. With easy grace  
She floated Sir John's five across the baize.  
He asked for but one card upon the draw.  
Quite unconcerned, she looked at her three queens —  
The three were on the deal — and on the draw  
A one-eyed Jack, an ace. Could he beat that?  
Where was the other queen? the other aces?  
Where was the other Jack — a tricky knave  
That might have smuggled up MacDonald's sleeve?  
She took a casual look at Sir John's face,  
A mask as imperturbable as hers  
Except for arrowy flashes in his eyes,  
Searching for filly quivers on her lips.  
The bidding started, slow and meditative,  
As lacking confidence. Sir John studied  
A "flush." He wanted a "full-house," but this  
Was good. He "anted" and the Lady raised it.  
To speed it up, she took her handkerchief  
And tapped her nose. The orange-blossom fragrance  
Acted like overproof upon the Knight.

(Box 6, no. 47)



He doubled, so did she; again the Knight.  
 Was his a straight? A flush? or a full-house?  
 A straight flush? Hardly on a bet of chances.  
 There must be bluff behind those chipmunk eyes  
 Engaged in forthcoming a contract-time.  
 There was a lull before his next advance;  
 So she must keep him in the game. She pursed  
 Her lips ever so slightly to betray.  
 A doubt to match the flicker of a shadow  
 Which caught unguarded those Disraeli features.  
 It worked! The bidding leaped to a fresh pace.  
 She looked at the wild chap beside the queens.  
 Four of a kind was good enough to risk  
 The skyline of the Rockies as her limit —  
 “Begin the Road in two years, end in ten”  
 Sir John, dropping his mask, threw in the chips.

(Box 6, no. 46)

<sup>31</sup> MacBeth, p. 58; Gibbon, p. 296.

<sup>32</sup> Klinck and Wells, pp. 50-51.

<sup>33</sup> Pratt Papers, Typescript, Box 6, no. 49.

## THE COAST OF CHILDHOOD

*R. A. D. Ford*

The coast of childhood looms close,  
 And there is a sudden pinching  
 Of the muscles below the heart —  
 Either a premonition of the end,  
 Or a spilling-over of regret.

And suddenly I have a desperate need  
 To know the books which define us,  
 To pursue the contours of the past,  
 To seize the inevitability  
 Of decay in our precarious age.

I want to walk back into time  
 With the clear eye of understanding,  
 And to search on those distant shores  
 For the word lost long ago, knowing  
 It is not there and never was.