

NEGLECTED PINE BLASTERS

Ramsay Cook

NEARLY TWENTY YEARS AGO F. R. Scott and A. J. M. Smith published the first edition of *The Blasted Pine*. In doing so they provided, in addition to amusement, convincing evidence of a vigorous Canadian tradition of social satire. They spread their net widely in their search for satire, invective and disrespectful verse, and hauled in a bountiful catch. Nevertheless two writers, now nearly forgotten, who surely deserve to be considered as an important part of that tradition, escaped the net. These two satirists, T. Phillips Thompson and John Wilson Bengough belong to the second of the two classes into which Scott and Smith separated satirists: "the romantic or revolutionary" (the first being "classical or conservative").

Much of the best work of Thompson and Bengough was produced during a period of profound social tension in Canadian society. During the late 1880's and early 1890's the country began to undergo the painful transformation from a pre-industrial to an industrial society. Some of those growing pains were reflected in testimony to the *Royal Commission on the Relations of Labor and Capital* which reported in 1889.¹ The period was one of economic depression, monopolistic growth, working class slums, agrarian discontent and labour strife. It was also a time during which there was a good deal more questioning of the established verities of religion and society in Canada than has yet been analysed by historians. Thompson and Bengough were only two of a fairly numerous group of social critics and reformers who made their dissenting voices heard during a decade when, as one of Sara Jeannette Duncan's characters remarked sardonically in *A Social Departure* (1893): "Life amounts to very little in this age if one cannot institute a reform of some sort, and we were glad of the opportunity to identify ourselves with the spirit of the times. We were thankful, too, that we had thought of a reform before they were all used up by more enterprising persons, which seems to be a contingency not very remote."

J. W. Bengough is the better known of these two writers, for his brilliant cartoons have often been reprinted to illustrate the events of Canadian political life

during the age of Sir John Macdonald. His *Caricature History of Canadian Politics* is a classic of Canadian political satire and cartooning and has recently been reissued in an abridged edition. Yet Bengough the reformer, the prohibitionist, proponent of woman's suffrage and single tax missionary remains in the shade. The pages of *Grip*, a weekly magazine of humour and satire published in Toronto between 1873 and 1894, are filled with puns, poems and short stories as well as with cartoons, all designed to deflate the pretentiousness of Canadians in every walk of life — politicians, businessmen, clerics and not least of all the *litterati*. In doing so Bengough hoped not merely to make his readers laugh but also to prod them into accepting some of the panaceas he believed would create a better Canada.

In these efforts Bengough was often assisted by another dissenting Toronto journalist, T. Phillips Thompson.² Thompson was British born but spent nearly all of his adult life in Canada, except for a brief period of residence in the United States in the 1870's. Like Bengough he had only a modest education, but his intelligence, wit, and capacity for work knew no limits. His journalism, which ranged from detailed investigations of industrial conditions to broad slapstick, appeared in a wide variety of publications in Canada, the United States and Great Britain. His natural radicalism evolved through several phases from Henry George's "single tax," Bellamyite socialism to an eventual resting place somewhat akin to Marxism, though no form of orthodoxy ever sat well with him. The high point of his career spanned the 1880's and 1890's during which time he was associated with the Knights of Labor. In those same years he published his only full-scale statement of his social philosophy, *The Politics of Labor* (1887). In the early nineties he briefly edited his own newspaper *The Labor Advocate* and later assisted Bengough at *Grip*. His prose was clear and sharp, his ear for rhyme good and, when dealing with social and political topics, he could express passionate anger and powerful rhetoric. Like Bengough he rarely took himself too seriously or lapsed into excessive moralism. Unlike Bengough, whose Christian reformism stopped short of any fundamental attack on Canada's developing capitalist system, Thompson believed that "justice and not charity is what is needed and that it is the process of getting and not that of giving money to which attention should be directed."³ Yet despite some political differences, Thompson and Bengough shared an ability to translate into satire their dissatisfaction with the established order. Together they were a raucous pair of voices poking fun, often hurling derision, at the political, economic, religious and cultural orthodoxies of late Victorian Canada.

Some of their verses deserve to be better remembered than they are since most are buried in the pages of *Grip* and some in even more obscure places. I have gathered a small selection of these verses, those which are among the best and which express the range of the social concerns of these two satirists. The first four poems, with one exception, are signed by Thompson. The unsigned verses, "The

Monopolist," came, I suspect, from his pen also. In any event it seemed worth including if only because it so nicely anticipates B. K. Sandwell's lines:

Toronto has no social classes —
Only the Masseys and the masses.

The other three poems all come from *Grip* and were probably written by Bengough. Though three are signed by other names, that should not be taken too seriously for Bengough constantly invented new pseudonyms for himself. (He even drew cartoons under two names — J. W. Bengough and L. Côté.)

On the whole the poems are self-explanatory for anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with Canadian history. Perhaps only the name of Colonel R. G. Ingersoll needs a comment. He was a leading U.S. exponent of atheism, and occasionally appeared on Canadian platforms. Thompson himself was a Theosophist, and was deeply interested in religious questions as well as in developments in the United States. It would be unnecessarily gilding the lily to remark upon the contemporary significance of the final two poems.

NOTES

- ¹ Greg Kealey, *Canada Investigates Industrialism* (Toronto, 1973).
² See Jay Atherton, "Introduction" to T. Phillips Thompson, *The Politics of Labor* (Toronto, 1975), pp. viii-xxiv; Russell Hahn, "Brainworkers and the Knights of Labor: E. E. Sheppard, Phillips Thompson and the *Toronto News*, 1883-1887," in Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 35-57; Ramsay Cook, "The Professor and the Prophet of Unrest," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Series 4, Vol. 13 (1975), pp. 227-50.
³ *Labor Advocate*, I, 1 (December 5, 1890).

MR. SHYLOCK IN HIS DEFENCE

Sell you out? why, of course,
 For the payment is due;
 No, I've no remorse
 For my treatment of you.
 Pack! Travel! Dig out! for the bailiff
 Is here, and the purchasers too.

"A hard bargain I made
 When I sold you the place,
 And the terms of the trade
 Would old Shylock disgrace!
 Cent per cent at the least on my outlay!"
 Well, how does that alter the case?

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“Kept you slaving for years
For mere clothing and bread,
See your children in tears
And your wife almost dead,”
The old story — I know it by heart —
Stop — I’ve got none — I know it by *head*.

Now listen: — You’ve had
The full swing of your jaw,
Called me everything bad.
You feel better? haw! haw!
First and last, let me tell you I claim
Nothing more than my rights by the law.

When I throw you outdoors
And sell off your last cow,
'Tis the writ that empowers
And the courts that allow;
What? “Law isn’t justice.” Indeed, and
Why ain’t it, and wherefore and how?

Why, you block-head, you fool,
You ineffable ass —
'Tis the people who rule —
Not a privileged class —
'Tis you and your neighbors who vote
For the laws which our law-makers pass.

You’ve a vote and a voice
When election comes round,
'Tis the men of your choice
Who with power are crowned;
They are just as you want them and make them,
And suit you right down to the ground.

“They don’t?” Then the blame
Rests with you every bit;
You’ve the power all the same
To choose whom you see fit.
Did you stand for good laws — equal rights?
No you just voted “Tory” or “Grit”.

You’re a fool for your pains,
Like the rest of your class,

While the toiler remains
 Still a party-led ass;
 He must carry the burden for idlers
 And feed on more thistles than grass.

So clear out with you — go!
 Naught care I for your grief,
 What to do you don't know?
 Why, turn beggar or thief,
 Or go to your Grits or your Tories
 And ask them to give you relief.

Phillips Thompson

Grip, 32, no. 815 (January 19, 1889), p. 37.

SWASHBUCKLER DENISON

Piff! Paff! Pouff! Tara para poum!
 I am ze general Boum! Boum!
 — Grand Duchess

Swashbuckler Denison rose at the board;
 He laid his hand on the hilt of his sword,
 (Poetical licence), and loud he swore
 That his fighting men would shed seas of gore
 In many a battle and many a raid,
 Ere Canada should with the Yankees trade!"

With many a pompous pot-valiant brag
 Of "loyalty" to the "good old flag",
 He curled his moustache and pawed the air,
 As he execrated the Yankees there.
 Had the U.S. army been anywhere near,
 The bravest had trembled with abject fear.

Oh, he is a terrible, terrible man!
 This martial chief of the Denison clan;
 "He was nursed in a buckler and fed with a blade,"
 And war since his boyhood has been his trade!
 He reckons his victories up by the score,
 And quenches his thirst with his enemies' gore!

Rings the world with this hero's fame?
Do the Yankee children dread his name,
And cower and quake if perchance is said
By nurse or mother that word of dread?
Is his prowess written in history's page,
With the mighty deeds of the present age?

Pshaw! Swashbuckler Denison ne'er has stood
Where the field was reddened with hostile blood!
He conquers foes whom he never saw,
With the big "prave 'orts" of his mighty jaw!
No spurs were ever obtained in fight
By this swaggering, blustering carpet-knight.

Swashbuckler Denison — soak your head!
Though ancient Pistol is long since dead,
In your braggart speeches we seem to hear
The voice of that revenue-patriot near.
"Fighting men" — Bah! Put your brains to soak!
Such rant's too stale to be even a joke.

Phillips Thompson

Grip, 30, no. 2 (January 14, 1888), p. 6.

ALWAYS WITH YOU

"The poor ye have always with you."
What a true and consoling verse!
It is so ordained from the outset
It is part of the primal curse.
God wills that some should be wealthy,
And others their lot endure,
And learn to suffer in patience,
For they were meant to be poor!

The preacher put it so plainly
In his sermon last Sunday night,
His talent for exegesis
Never showed him in a better light.
These Socialist agitators
Who are kicking against the rod,
Are trying to war with Nature
And combat the will of God.

“The poor ye have always with you.”
 It is part of God’s gracious plan
 To show forth his wisdom and justice,
 And humble the pride of man.
 We must banish all vain delusions,
 And meekly accept what’s given.
 What’s earthly dross? If we bear the cross
 We shall get our reward in Heaven.

Now that’s what I call sound preaching,
 Such talk goes right to the point.
 When infidel Socialist doctrines
 Are putting things out of joint.
 But I fear that Dr. Sleeker
 Has another church in view:
 “A wider sphere of influence,”
 And a larger salary, too.

I reckon we’ll have to see him,
 And go one better to keep
 This faithful shepherd from leaving
 To the wolves his straying sheep.
 He’ll stay if we put up a grand new church
 And give him more “earthly dross”.
 Well, the hands at the mill shall foot the bill,
 I cannot afford the loss.

They can stand a cut in wages,
 Say another ten percent.
 And those tenants of mine in the corner block
 Must pay me an increased rent.
 “The poor ye always have with you.”
 Makes my duty as plain as day,
 What God ordains is not for us
 Rebelliously to gainsay.

I should be an unfaithful steward
 Of riches which God has given,
 Did I fail to garner the golden store
 And hold it in trust for Heaven,
 I give to the Church and mission schemes
 Fully ten percent or more,
 And by charity organization strive
 To succor the starving poor.

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The girls in the mill they tell me
Will frequently go astray.
I can only afford to pay them
About forty cents a day.
There are plenty to work for that figure.
And were I to give them more,
We never could pay the dividend
We always paid before.

But a Magdalen Asylum
Has been founded by my aid
And soon to the topmost storey
’Twill be crowded I’m afraid,
For the poor we have always with us
Ah! sad that such things must be,
But I’m no infidel scoffer to scout
The justice of God’s decree.

Phillips Thompson

The Labor Advocate, 1, no. 1 (December 5, 1890), p. 5.

THE MONOPOLIST

I came to a works at a railway side,
A half a mile long and nearly as wide,
With millions of lumber and an army of men,
Toiling at furnace, hammer and pen.
“What a most magnificent plant,” I cried;
And a man with a hump on his back replied:
“It’s Massey’s”

I entered a hall so grand and gay,
To witness a concert, the best of the day
Presented to people, the rich of the land,
In a palace supposed for the laboring hands.
“A monstrous edifice this,” I sighed;
And a man with a diamond ring replied,
“It’s Massey’s”

As I passed by a dairy farm,
With cattle stocked, sleek as a charm,
And equipment the best, it’s hard to beat,

Yes, even the King's could scarce compare,
 "What an unconceivable place," I cried
 And a man with a pail replied,
 "It's Massey's"

I stopped at the door of the city church
 Where sinner and saint the truth go to search,
 And wisdom from above is imparted
 To the meek and humble hearted;
 I asked for a seat unoccupied
 And a man with a plug in his hand replied,
 "It's Massey's"

I went to the only place left, I'll take
 A chance in the boat on the brimstone lake;
 Or perhaps I may be allowed to sit
 On the griddled floor of the fathomless pit.
 But a leering lout with horns on his face
 Cried out as he forked me off the place,
 "It's Massey's"

The Toiler, 4, no. 8 (January 29, 1904), p. 1.

THE POLITICIAN (*After Hudibras*)

Once wishing to improve the State,
 I stood forth as a candidate,
 To profit all was my intent,
 When first returned to Parliament,
 And being filled with thoughts sublime,
 I chose the Independent line.

In Ottawa when I arrived,
 I watched how hard each party strived,
 Into the public to instill,
 They were the men to fill the bill,
 And would the opposing side decry,
 Charging them with hypocrisy.

Blake would arise with pompous song,
 And impute evil to Sir John,
 Sir John would answer, "Never snake,

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Hid in the grass," came up to Blake,
In turn their followers smile and frown,
As a see-saw goes up and down.

Blake anything he has to say,
Can put in such a pungent way,
If you believed one half he said,
You'd think before you went to bed,
"From rosy morn, to dewy eve,"
Sir John's idea was to deceive.

Sir John with sword of keenest wit,
"Sans merci", scarifies the Grit —
Will *almost* make it plain to you,
They're wrong in everything they do,
Such wily talent could I borrow,
I'd start in life as *young* "To-morrow!"

Young politicians on each side,
Men wiser than themselves deride,
And waste the hours for debate,
Their small ideas to propagate,
Then thinking they have saved the Nation,
Pleased, they adjourn for irrigation.

When I commenced my maiden speech,
Tory, and Grit, I tried to teach,
That sneers at what each other meant,
Would ne'er improve the Government,
But if they hand in hand would go,
The country'd get a better show.

But being to each side too bold
I soon was left out in the cold,
For party spirit put on shelf
Nobody would get any pelf,
And when there are no signs of booty,
How can a Statesman do his duty?

He knows that each constituent wishes,
To have his share of loaves and fishes,
If he gives neither fish nor bread,
They'll choose another in his stead,

So tries to secure for each a crumb,
Never forgetting number *One*.

A.K.T.

Grip, 25, no. 4 (July 25, 1885).

PREPARING FOR THE ROYAL SOCIETY

The Royal Society shortly will hold
Its annual meeting, as we have been told;
And as I'm a member, it's time to prepare
Of the honor and glory to claim a due share.

I'm down for a paper — a paper on what?
Two ideas on the subject are more than I've got.
But who much attention on such things bestows?
At the Royal Society everything goes.

I've surely got something around lying loose
That on such an occasion may come into use.
Some juvenile essay, some truck filed away,
For which no live journal or monthly would pay.

I'll rummage my pigeonholes, hunt high and low,
To find some kind of paper — I've plenty, I know —
On some loyal and splurgy and broad sort of theme,
Rhetorical, vapid and vague as a dream.

"The future of Canada" — college oration.
Well, that's rather stale. "The Canadian Nation" —
That's a trifle more modern — perhaps it will do,
With a little retouching from fresh points of view.

It went all the rounds of the magazine press,
And one after another refused the MS.
I put it away, for one never can tell
When such things may come handy — 'twill do very well.

But stay — here's another — that's better for sure;
"The Growth of Canadian Literature."
It's a little bit fresher, and so I won't need
To change it at all — it's already to read.

That too was rejected by each magazine,
I'd really forgotten it ever had been.
But now will be printed at last when I've read it,
Though it brings in no money, 'twill add to my credit.

In she goes — so that's settled, my mind is now free,
My task is accomplished, and shortly you'll see
That I'll loom fairly large at the meeting below,
While in the "Transactions" my paper will go.

Grip, 36, no. 22 (May 30, 1891), p. 348.

MANUFACTURING NATIVE LITERATURE

Jiggins

I am a literary man,
I'm anxious all should know it.
Can I write verse? I think I can —
Why, then, I'll be a poet.
I'll get me out a book of rhymes
Like this — or even neater,
On subjects suited to the times,
In easy flowing metre.
I rather think I know the trick,
The patriotic racket,
I'll plaster "loyalty" on thick,
There's no one dare attack it.
I'll work Canadian spirit in,
'Twill be appreciated,
And though the thing's a trifle thin,
My fame will be created.

Biggins

I want to write an article
Over my well-known name.

Not that I care a particle
 For literary fame;
 But literature must be sustained
 In this our native land;
 Even though no reward be gained,
 My task is truly grand.
 Whatever shall I write about?
 I really do not know.
 Oh, yes! There's Jiggins' book just out,
 It's got to have a show.
 It's overpowering rot, that's sure,
 As every critic knows,
 But then it's native literature,
 And what's Canadian goes.

Higgins

A paper I have got to do
 For *Scribbler's Magazine*.
 Such opportunities are few,
 And also far between.
 "Canadian Literature" 's my theme
 I've done the poets all,
 And Goldwin Smith, whose self esteem
 Is very far from small.
 There's Biggins, who has asked me to
 Work in his grand critique
 Of Jiggins and his volume new,
 'Twas published in the *Week*.
 "Exhaustive" — yes, to put it plain,
 It makes me very tired.
 I'll say that "Biggin's easy vein
 Is very much admired."

Stiggins

My lecture on "Canadian Thought"
 Is hardly yet complete.
 I'll mention Higgins — yes, I ought,
 He'll never fail to treat.
 We had a beer last afternoon,
 And then he lent me two.
 Said he, "You're going to lecture soon;
 Be sure that when you do,
 You say a word or two for me,

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For if you scratch my back,
I'll do the same for you, d'ye see?"
He knows the ropes, does Jack.
He lent me Scribbler's Magazine,
It's awfully stupid stuff,
But lest he think I'm acting mean,
I'll give the usual guff.

And thus a literary name
Is very often made,
By working the log-rolling game
Among the aspirants for fame.
"There's tricks in every trade."

Grip, 33, no. 9 (August 31, 1889), p. 134.

Deep-Tap Tree

Alexander Hutchison

"Sheer delight in the just right word... beautifully found and perfectly placed"—George Starbuck.
"Expressing his commitment to an 'austerity simple as water,' Hutchison utilizes the rich texture of his Anglo-Scotch vocabulary to evoke the stark setting of his native land. He exhorts his reader to intuit 'tongues/precedent/original,' while also providing notes to clear up the obscurities"—Library Journal.
Poems and notes, cloth, \$7.00; paper, \$3.50

TO FREYJA

I
Lady of ~~green~~ ~~blue~~ ~~flax~~ ~~flowers~~
gives me the girdle of a languid beast

II
Bone-fitted sinew-fitted
tongue to tongue-tip

III
Fire-shit rider of the golden pool
and bristled field
here is my chastity sold to dwarfs
for a necklace of garnet

IV
Straddled-in-blood
keep me from the wounds of distance



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