

anguish of the Aran Islands. I reflect that I too live on an island off an island. And I remember that Synge was not raised on the islands that called forth his greatness.

The blend of what he brought and what he found gave the world *Riders to the Sea*, and that same sea washes at my doorstep.

## THE CANADIAN GOLDSMITH

*Doug Fetherling*

OLIVER GOLDSMITH, the Canadian Oliver Goldsmith who wrote "The Rising Village" in emulation of his great-uncle's "The Deserted Village", occupies a place in Canadian writing unusual for being a compound of several small claims to fame. He was, as Lorne Pierce pointed out, "our first native-born, English-speaking poet". He was also the first Canadian poet to be published abroad (and the first to have his work panned overseas). Similarly, his brief *Autobiography* was one of the first literary memoirs by a Canadian. It can also be said without much exaggeration that Goldsmith was the father of a Maritimes poetic tradition, although this accomplishment, like the others, was rather involuntary and taken note of only in retrospect.

But if all these firsts were put aside, there would remain about Goldsmith's career one fact sufficient to immortalize him in the footnotes, if not actually in the anthologies he now occupies so curiously. This is the fact that he was our first, and one of our worst, great-bad poets, in the sense that William Arthur Deacon's four Jameses<sup>1</sup> are great-bad. He was the first to publish verse of such unabashed unsatisfactoriness as to make him stand out even among the poetasters, dabblers and crackpots who routinely inhabit the slums of verse. It is in this way that we should think of him and that he should appeal. It is also in this light that

he has been insufficiently recognized, just as in the others he has been, if anything, overpraised. Poor Oliver Goldsmith (1795-1861) was not very important as a literary figure. He was and is important only as a curiosity of literature — in the pathologist's or carnival barker's use of the phrase rather than Disraeli's.

"The Rising Village" has several characteristics in common with other great-bad poems, just as Goldsmith's personality resembles those of other writers who followed in his eccentric footsteps. Generally speaking, the truly, monumental great-bad poems can be divided into two types. First there are the occasional poems, in which the poet acknowledges or celebrates with lopsided rhetoric, topics of excruciating insignificance. An example is James McIntyre's ode to the mammoth Ontario cheese, made famous by Deacon. The second type is the kind intended as an epic, in which the poet brings to bear what he believes are the big guns of High Style on a poem-idea completely unsuited to such treatment. "The Rising Village" falls within this classification. It is probably one of the finest examples.

Goldsmith's aim was to depict the tribulations of the early Nova Scotia Loyalists, a group from which he considered himself to have descended, even though his father was an Irishman directly employed by the Crown and not what is ordinarily thought of as a Loyalist. Still,

Goldsmith claimed sympathy with the Loyalists. He set about in his poem to describe their life in the wilds so different from the southern colonies they had left behind a generation earlier.

This was his intent. As to his motive, it seems that Goldsmith like most other first-generation Canadians was not so concerned with the family roots as perhaps his children would have been had he married. Nor does Goldsmith seem to have been concerned with the politics of the Loyalist era. Indeed he appears remarkably apolitical despite (or possibly because of) the fact that he was a civil servant for most of his days. It seems rather that he took to verse in order to show others the ties to his famous ancestor, in the shadow of whose renown the family lived.

Goldsmith was less interested in what the Loyalists did in Canada than in what they had been in the American colonies and, by extension, in the mother country. As Fred Cogswell noted astutely in the *Literary History of Canada*, Goldsmith "describes the pioneer homes of Nova Scotia as if they really were the neat English cottages which the author would have liked them to be." Goldsmith was a Tory by nature as well as by choice. He envied the prosperity and respect his people had known before the Revolution, which he might well have blamed for what he himself became: a minor Crown servant who kept hoping to be sent abroad but who most often was shuffled around the Maritimes. He was a man of no great ambition. Once "The Rising Village" was poorly received, he stopped writing verse, except for a few occasional poems. He was partly descended (and partly liked to believe that he was descended) from the Establishment, who lived among others of their kind. (The first wave of Nova Scotia Loyalists included 200 graduates of Harvard and an equal number from other colleges. These included four of the five judges of the Massachusetts superior

court, including the chief justice.) His aim in life was to be comfortable and secure.

He was also a man proud of his education. This pride shows itself in his penchant for quotation. In his autobiography (which wasn't published until 1943) he is given to promiscuously extracting from the works of his relative, "The Traveler" in particular. But he was conversant with everything from the classics to James Fenimore Cooper, and one at least suspects that he was at ease with Scott's novels. The influence of the older writers over the newer is central to "The Rising Village". The poem is written in heroic couplets, one fancies, because, first, this was the form of "The Deserted Village" and, second, because (as Cogswell states) this form was "already out of date even in England" and thus pleasing to Goldsmith's sensibilities.

Such couplets, of course, reached their peak of usefulness as vehicles for the burnished wit of Pope. Goldsmith's success with them was commensurate with his own lack of wit and sophistication. He should have been better off with the freer forms used by, say, Thomson, whom he rivalled in emotional equipment. As it is, Goldsmith's poem resembles "The Seasons" only to the extent that it concludes with an embarrassing panegyric to Britannia, ending with the lines

And bliss and peace encircle all thy shore  
Till empires rise and sink, on earth, no more

which, for the second (1834) edition, Goldsmith changed to:

And bliss and peace encircle all thy shore  
Till sun, and moon, and stars shall be no  
more.

This change, which can be noted in Michael Gnarowski's excellent comparative text, published in 1968, points up the way in which Goldsmith revised the text to suit the climate of a later day. For instance, he struck from the second edition

the dedication to Dalhousie. Apparently it had been included originally in the hope of securing patronage. Once Dalhousie was dead, it bore no value or truth for the author.

The poem begins by describing the original Loyalists and their hardships and thanksgiving. There is a catalogue of the local professional class, such as the teacher and the physician. The growth of the community from settlement to village is indicated by "The wandering Pedlar . . . / Established here, his settled home maintains, / And soon a merchant's higher title gains." There follows an inventory of the merchant's goods, which Cogswell cites as one of the lyrical high spots of the poem but which could also be looked upon as one of the more absurd passages.

Around his store, on spacious shelves  
arrayed,  
Behold his great and various stock in trade.  
Here, nails and blankets, side by side, are  
seen,  
There, horses' collars, and a large tureen;  
Buttons and tumblers, fish-hooks, spoons  
and knives,  
Shawls for young damsels, flannel for old  
wives;  
Woolcards and stockings, hats for men and  
boys,  
Mill-saw and fenders, silks, and children's  
toys;  
All useful things, and joined with many  
more,  
Compose the well-assorted country store.

It is the rhythm of the two final lines, contrasted with the rest of this chamber of commerce puff, that makes one realize that no, this is no ordinary early poet, but a pretender of such sure hamfistedness as to stand apart on other than historical and literary grounds.

Following this section is the story of Flora, a local maiden left standing at the altar by her beau, Albert. This bit of soap opera was apparently meant to animate the local oral history that went before it. Coming as it does more than 300 lines into the poem, or a little more than half-

way, it makes one think that at last the real point of the exercise has been arrived at. But it quickly passes into the penultimate section, which is an idyllic description of the countryside. Goldsmith's hymn to Mother England forms the conclusion. It is a poem remarkable not only for its incoherence of structure but for its club-footed metre and use of rhyme, at once both vapid and original. For example, Goldsmith describes thus a proxy who bears a note to Flora informing her of her betrothed's decision to break the engagement:

But hark! a hurried step advances near,  
'Tis Albert's breaks upon her listening ear;  
Albert's, ah, no! a ruder footstep, bore  
With eager haste, a letter to the door;  
Flora receives it, and could dare conceal  
Her rapture, as she kissed her lover's seal.  
Yet, anxious tears were gathered in her eye,  
As on the note it rested wistfully.

The last word — "wistfully" — for which there is little rhyme, rings on through a further 550 lines like the sound of a horse-shoe coming to rest around an iron pole.

In comparison with other poets whom he resembles, Goldsmith comes off badly indeed, or well, depending upon how one chooses to see him. His autobiography reveals a man of some compassion, of a highly selective sort. He recalls that, as a boy apprenticed to a naval surgeon, he felt no emotion at seeing men having their limbs amputated. But he was reduced to tears by the sight of a flogging. Whatever the precise emotional state this implies, it is practically non-existent in his long poem, which seems predicated on no true feeling or attachment to its subject but rather on a desire to write a poem, period. Compared with his great-uncle whose form he copied (one could almost say parodied) he lacked a great deal in motivation and talent. Compared with lesser poets of his own time, he lacked simple powers of description, although he certainly strove to create the illusion of

such gifts. If he had been very much better at simple verse-craft, he would come closest to resembling a latter-day Pryor to the extent that he shared what Dr. Johnson described as Pryor's narrow "compass of comprehension or activity of fancy."

Yet bad as he was, Goldsmith was instrumental in the founding of a conservative tradition in Canada. The link between him and, for instance, Howe, is quite clear; and by risking a bit, one could even use him to point the way to Pratt. It was a tradition that wished itself epic but instead was merely historical.

Cogswell, the best commentator on Goldsmith and his descendents, maintains that "The Rising Village" is at times worthwhile in the usual sense but that it suffers mainly from inconsistency. However, to lovers of great-bad verse, the poem's unevenness only contributes to the mediocrity, and thus to its claim of inspired status among the dreadful.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> William Arthur Deacon, *The Four Jameses*. Ottawa: Graphic Publishers. 1927.

## ALLINE AND BAILEY

*Thomas B. Vincent*

IN CURRENT ANTHOLOGIES surveying the development of Canadian literature, the two most commonly recognized poets from the 18th-century period of Maritime verse are Joseph Stansbury and Jonathan Odell. Ironically, only a single short lyric from the Stansbury canon is known to have been written in the Maritimes during Stansbury's rather brief stay in Nova Scotia; the rest of his work was produced in New York and Philadelphia. Similarly, the bulk of Odell's poetry was written and published in New York several years before his arrival in New Brunswick and is quite different in tone and spirit from the verses he wrote after settling in Fredericton. One might argue, of course, that the "loyal verses" of Stansbury and Odell essentially reflect the nature of 18th-century Maritime poetry in spite of having been written elsewhere. But surely it would be preferable to anchor our understanding of early Maritime verse first in the works of poets who were in more immediate contact during their most productive periods

with the cultural milieu of the Maritimes. To this end, I wish to focus attention on the poetry of Henry Alline (1748-1784) and Jacob Bailey (1731-1808); to describe something of the literary achievements of these poets; and to indicate through their work something of the complexity and diversity of poetic activity in late 18th-century Maritime Canada.

Henry Alline was born in 1748 at Newport, Rhode Island, of an old Massachusetts family.<sup>1</sup> He started school in Newport, but his formal education ended early when his family moved to Nova Scotia in 1760 to settle at Falmouth at the head of the Annapolis Valley. They were part of the wave of New England settlers who came to Nova Scotia to take up the lands vacated by the expulsion of the Acadian French. Though portions of the land had been worked previously, life was extremely difficult for the new settlers. For some years, they were faced constantly with the problems of basic physical survival as they struggled to establish themselves on their farms. All