

# CANADIAN POETS AND THE GREAT TRADITION

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**I**N THE BEGINNING, as Francis Bacon observes, "God Almighty first Planted a Garden . . . the Greatest Refreshment to the Spirits of Man."<sup>1</sup> It is this lost garden of Eden metamorphosed into the Promised Land, the Hesperides, the El Dorado and the Golden Fleece which dominates some of the sixteenth and seventeenth century accounts of the New World reported in Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1598-1600) and the subsequent *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625). References to what is now Canada are considerably more restrained than are the eulogies to Nova Spania and Virginia; nonetheless there is a faint Edenic strain in the early reports of the first British settlement in the New World.

John Guy implemented the first Royal Patent for settlement at Cupar's Cove, Newfoundland in 1610, a settlement inspired by Bacon and supported by King James, who observed that the plantation of this colony was "a matter and action well beseeeming a Christian King, to make true use of that which God from the beginning created for mankind" (*Purchas*, XIX). Sir Richard Whitbourne's "A Relation of the New-found-land" (1618) continues in the same Edenic vein as he describes Newfoundland as "the fruitful wombe of the earth":

Then have you there faire Strawberries red and white, and as faire Raspasse berrie, and Gooseberries, as there be in England; as also multitudes of Bilberries, which are called by some Whortes, and many other delicate Berries (which I cannot name) in great abundance. (*Purchas*, XIV.)

Many of the first Planters in Canada saw themselves, at least initially, as new Adams beginning again in the garden of the New World reserved by "God . . . for us Britaines,"<sup>2</sup> which, if not Eden itself, was at least a Golden Fleece sufficient to show the "wayes to get wealth, and to restore Trading."<sup>3</sup> Yet, as the first poetry and the journals of exploration assert, the upper half of North America was not

a garden but a wilderness. Newfoundland was a rocky and unprofitable fishing station, no Eden even for the soaring flights of the seventeenth century imagination. Hayman in 1628 writes that the island is "wild, salvage . . . rude, untowardly". As a remedy, he proposes "neat husbandry", that combination of physical and moral endeavour which will transform a "plain, swarth, sluttish Ione" into a virtuous matron, "pretty pert, and neat with good cloathes on."<sup>4</sup> Lacy, writing a century later in 1729, turns the satirical eye of Restoration comedy on the bleak land and inhabitants.

Most that inhabit are a fearful Tribe,  
Whose Characters I cannot well describe;  
Who, like *Siberians*, lonely here reside,  
And, in a willing Banishment, abide.  
It is this sottish People's common use  
To warm their Veins with an Infernal Juice,  
Both Men and Women do this Liquor choose,  
And rarely keep the Bottle from their Nose.<sup>5</sup>

As Lacy's unpromising reports might indicate, the Adamic impulse which had led England to foster the plantation of settlers in Newfoundland was quickly diverted after the first quarter of the seventeenth century into settlement of the more promising colonies of Virginia and New England. The consequence for the Canadian section of British North America was a cultural silence which settled down for almost two hundred years.

AS A FRAMEWORK TO the literature which was slowly to emerge from these colonial beginnings, I would like to suggest the following points: first, English Canadian literature has been characterized by a literary dependence upon British models and by a distinctively moral tone; secondly the English great tradition, as reflected by Canadian poets, has been essentially Royalist rather than Puritan; and thirdly, the introduction of Darwinism into Canada coincided with the emergence of Romanticism. As a result of all these factors, that vision of nature and of society reflected in English Canadian poetry differs sharply from that written in the United States or Great Britain.

Historically, Canadian poetry has been both imitative and didactic. The first original poetry written in English in the new world, R[obert] H[ayman]'s *Quodlibets, Lately Come Over From New Britaniola, Old Newfoundland* (1628), consisted of "Epigrams and other small parcels, both Morall and Divine." The

first four books of this volume were Hayman's, the others were translated from the Latin of the English epigrammatist, John Owen, and others, concluding with "two Epistles of that excellently wittie Doctor Francis Rablais." *Quodlibets* is, of course, written from within the seventeenth century literary tradition which sanctions both imitation and the moral function of literature. Consequently, it is questionable whether we can accept Hayman as the progenitor of a distinctively Canadian poetry rather than a minor figure in the British tradition, versifying abroad.

However, this distinction cannot be applied two hundred years later when the Canadian Oliver Goldsmith (grandnephew of the celebrated Oliver Goldsmith) writes a lengthy narrative poem, *The Rising Village*, to show the fate of those suffering English countrymen who left the "sweet Auburn" of his uncle's *The Deserted Village* for North America where "Wild Oswego spreads her swamps around,/And Niagara stuns with thundering sound."<sup>6</sup> This poem focuses upon the conquering of the wilderness and the rising of the Canadian village but has an apparently disjointed middle section, a tale of sweet Flora and her faithless lover Albert. Goldsmith's reasons for including this moral tale of "Vice as a warning to Virtue" are not at all clear until we recognize that "sweet Flora" is analogous to Wordsworth's "Ruth" and her faithless lover to the impetuous, but amoral, young man from Georgia's shore. It then becomes apparent that the purpose of the interlude is to express Goldsmith's Deistic belief that there is a necessary connection between the ordered laws of nature and the laws which must control human passion; without such moral dictates the rising village of Acadia cannot hope to progress in emulation of Britain's "laws and liberty". As this summary might suggest, the political, moral and literary aspirations of the young settlement are described by Goldsmith as immediately directed towards a following of the colonial vision of the British tradition.

*Quodlibets* and *The Rising Village* may be taken as representative specimens of early Canadian verse until approximately 1890. The emphasis on moral teaching in relation to the development of community and the ascriptions of these values to Great Britain is characteristic of later epics such as Thomas Cary's *Abram's Plains* (1789) and of William Kirby's *The U.E.: A Tale of Upper Canada* (1859), while the whole question of the social compact of people, King and God is particularly explored in the heroic dramas of Charles Heavyside, especially in *Saul* (1857) and *Jephthah's Daughter* (1865). In addition, much verse written in Canada in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century can be characterized as a response to the picturesque landscape of Canada filtered through the prevailing

British model. Hayman borrowed from Owen, Goldsmith from his English grand-uncle, Heavyssege from Shakespeare and, on the basis of internal evidence, from Charles Lloyd's 1815 translations of the Italian dramatist, Alfieri. Isabella Valancy Crawford and Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, often hailed as Canadian originals, were actually highly indebted to their contemporaries and predecessors. Crawford borrowed from Tennyson, Longfellow and Dante; Roberts' *Orion* (1880) is modelled on the *Orion* (1843) of Richard Henry (later Hengist) Horne, an English Victorian. It is not until E. J. Pratt's parody, *The Witches' Brew* (1925), a farcical inversion of *Paradise Lost*, which manages, incredibly, to combine an Adamic sea-cat, an alcoholic apple and a satire on Temperance, that Canadian poetry begins to move away from the English stream; significantly, this movement is initiated by parody. Ironically, the book was first published in Great Britain as Pratt's Canadian publisher, Lorne Pierce of Ryerson Press, regretfully refused the manuscript, explaining that this "sparkling" brew was a little too strong for an United Church publishing house.<sup>7</sup>

The most attractive rationale for the general practice of literary imitation is given by Thomas Cary in the preface to his *Abram's Plains*:

Before I began this Poem I read Pope's Windsor-Forrest and Dr. Goldsmith's Deserted Village, with the view of endeavouring, in some degree, to catch their manner of writing; as singers in country-churches in England, to use a simple musical comparison, modulate their tones by the prelusive sound of a pitch-pipe.

The most dogmatic assertion of the Canadian allegiance to the English tradition is given nearly one hundred years later in 1883 by Charles G. D. Roberts, then a rising young poet, in an Alumni Oration at Fredericton entitled "The Beginnings of a Canadian Literature":

Now it must be remembered that the whole heritage of English Song is ours and that it is *not* ours to found *new* literature. The Americans have not done so nor will they. They have simply joined in raising the splendid structure, English literature, to the building of which may come workmen from every region of earth where speaks the British tongue.

Implicit here is the assumption that the Canadian poet is addressing himself to an English audience, a pervasive view of the poet's function which would not encourage the development of an indigenous Canadian tradition.

Not only was eighteenth and nineteenth century Canadian verse a colonial reflection of the English tradition but it was directed towards one aspect of this tradition which we might provisionally describe as the Royalist strain. Unlike

the first poetry of the United States in which the Puritan insistence upon the supremacy of the individual spirit culminated in political and cultural independence, Canadian poetry, which originated in a brief Royalist period and then began again under eighteenth century Deism, is essentially hierarchical, positing a social compact of subject, King and God, reflecting the monarchical vision of the moral and social order. The first Planters of Newfoundland were prominent Royalists — Lord Baltimore, Lord Calvert, the learned Lord Falkland — and as there was no leavening influx of Puritan immigration, there is no seventeenth century English Canadian literary heritage of Puritan verse. French Acadia did not become British Nova Scotia until the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) and Quebec did not fall to the English until 1759. Consequently, those English poems produced in the newly conquered Quebec after 1770 are primarily an exposition of eighteenth century Deism with handy political encomiums to the surpassing virtues of the British monarch, the British moral order and the British God. Furthermore, after 1776 this view of society was substantially re-inforced by the wholesale emigration to Nova Scotia and Quebec of some 40,000 United Empire Loyalists who shared the same belief in the essential interdependence of subject, king and state as did their seventeenth century Royalist forebears. The Loyalist code was, in turn, interpreted by their nineteenth century descendants (in particular, by William Kirby in *The U.E.: A Tale of Upper Canada*, 1859) as a legacy of moral and social behaviour:

Religion was with them more deed than word;  
To love their neighbour and to fear the Lord;  
Honour their King and yield his high degree.

As Kirby's epic demonstrates, the Loyalist emigration was to provide the intellectual matrix for the nineteenth century flurry of Confederation verse which developed between 1860 and 1890 around the political vision of Canada as the "New Nationality" within the "Vaster Britain" or so-called "Imperialist" movement. Because the dominant literary vision of Canadian nature developed during the same period which saw the emergence of the new nationalism, several of the literary nationalists, in particular Charles Mair, Charles Sangster and Charles G. D. Roberts, tended to view Canada's struggle to maintain her political sovereignty against the United States from the perspective of the Darwinian struggle for survival. The encompassing political myth, as Carl Berger has pointed out, proclaimed that Canadians were the "Northmen of the New World," associating freedom, law and moral rectitude with Northern nations (as distinguished from

the effete, degenerate South), and maintaining that Canadian freedom and moral order lay in the continued connection with Great Britain.<sup>8</sup> In verse, Mair's drama *Tecumseh* (1886), the Canadian national anthem "O Canada" with its lines "the true north, strong and free", Roberts' meretricious poem "Canada" ("O Child of Nations, giant-limbed") and W. D. Lighthall's anthology, *Songs of the Great Dominion* (1889) are all reflections of this prevailing Darwinist myth.

THE FRAMEWORK, then, for the evolution of an English Canadian tradition has been political and cultural; it may be described as "Royalist" in the seventeenth century, "Loyalist" in the late eighteenth century and "Imperialist" in the latter part of the nineteenth century. After 1870, the dominant thematic concern of the poetry, that vision of moral and social progress which transforms the rude wilderness into the cultivated garden, is to be contained within a modification of Romanticism as dictated by Darwin.

Darwinism had a profound effect on English Canadian Romanticism because *The Origin of Species* (1859) appeared just as the first "native" poetic group, that of the Confederation of 1860 poets, was emerging. Because the Canadian mythos was the product of a hard, sparsely populated country and because the literary vision of Canadian nature developed after Darwin and after the loss of Sir John Franklin at the North Pole, it was already too late in time to gloss successfully the struggle for survival with the Edenic vision of an Emersonian transcendentalism as had been done in the United States some thirty years earlier. As a result, Canadian Romanticism was infused from its inception with overtones of Darwin's nature, an accident of literary history which strongly distinguishes the Canadian view of nature from those of the United States and Great Britain.

Consequently, although the poets of the Confederation do attempt to write in the old Romantic mode — in fact, the transcendental dream is the dominant metaphor of the period — such poetry often breaks from within because it is attempting to hold in reconciliation two opposing views of nature. As we read through the poetry of the 1880's and 1890's we can see the Roberts' uneasy reconciliation between the Romantic world spirit and the Darwinian germ of life must ultimately break down, as it later does, into glimpses of a fearful and amoral nature in the poetry of Archibald Lampman and Duncan Scott. By the mid-1890's, especially in the poetry of Lampman and Scott, the dream as metaphor has become an indicator of a schism in Romantic sensibility because it functions

in a failed attempt to transcend a Darwinian world. Still later, in Duncan Campbell Scott's poem "The Height of Land" (1916), the transcendent vision becomes a "Something [that] comes by flashes" and the poet's eye is directed out towards the Northern landscape:

Upon one hand  
The lonely north enlaced with lakes and streams,  
And the enormous targe of Hudson Bay,  
Glimmering all night  
In the cold arctic light . . .

The earlier, Darwinist-inspired, political vision of Canada as a Northern land is to continue into the 1920's and 1930's with the efforts of the *Canadian Forum* to promote a new and virile art worthy of the young and powerful Canadian nationality. This new art had already been signalled by the strong Northern landscapes of the Group of Seven and was soon to be paralleled in poetry by E. J. Pratt's "Newfoundland", by A. J. M. Smith's "The Lonely Land" and by F. R. Scott's "North Stream". This new Canadian nature described by Smith as "The beauty of strength/ broken by strength/ and still strong" first appears in Pratt's *Newfoundland Verse* (1923). The title lyric asserts the powerful crash of sea on rock and presents a people as strong as the nature they resist. The tides of Newfoundland flow

with a lusty stroke of life  
Pounding at stubborn gates,  
That they might run  
Within the sluices of men's hearts.

In Pratt's view, man, evolving from the sea, still carries part of the sea with him; this primitive inheritance can lead him to fall backward into atavism, or, guided by Christian ethics, he may move forward along the evolutionary road. In his post-Darwinian view of nature and in his stress upon an ethical interpretation of Darwinism, Pratt is characteristic of the Canadian tradition.

That the Darwinian debate in Canada was largely ethical is evident from a survey of articles published in the relatively popular *Canadian Monthly and National Review* for the decade 1872-1882.<sup>9</sup> Articles such as "Darwinism and Morality", "The Evolution of Morality", "The Ethical Aspects of Darwinism: A Rejoinder", "Evolution and Immortality", indicate that the Canadian attempt to adapt evolutionary theory of existing religious and social structures is far closer to the English debate between Darwinism and religion which culminated in T. H.

Huxley's "Evolution and Ethnics" (1893), than it is to the popular reception given to Herbert Spencer's "survival of the fittest" in the United States during the same period. For example, Goldwin Smith's essay, "The Prospect of a Moral Interregnum," which developed one aspect of Spencer's *The Data of Ethnics* was largely accepted when published in the United States in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1879; in Canada, it was greeted with a storm of protest when re-published in the same year in *Rose-Belford's Canadian Monthly and National Review*.

The poetry of the period manifests a similar yoking of evolution and ethics. Isabella Valancy Crawford's poem, *Malcolm's Katie* (1883) may be read as a rejoinder to Goldwin Smith's essay "Pessimism" of 1880, also reprinted in *Canadian Monthly*. Smith had introduced Hume's speculations on a malignant Deity and eloquently described "fatherless" man as "the sport of a blind but irresistible force."<sup>10</sup> Crawford's poem, a Victorian love triangle set against the clearing of the soil and the rising of the Canadian settlement, assigns similarly compelling but ultimately discredited statements to the villain, Alfred,<sup>11</sup> gives the voice of evolutionary progress to the hero Max, and places the whole struggle for survival in the human and natural world within God's hand:

In trance of stillness Nature heard her God  
Rebuilding her spent fires, and veil'd her face  
While the Great Worker brooded o'er His work.

Equally, in Roberts' poetry and prose we find a consistent attempt to bring the Darwinian struggle under divine plan, as is explicit in the title of his first animal story, "Do Seek Their Meat from God".

E. J. Pratt's relation to the English stream was even closer than that of the poets of the Confederation yet, ultimately, he was to move out of it entirely. Born in 1882 in Newfoundland, then still a British colony for reasons best expressed by that popular Newfoundland ballad, "The Anti-Confederation Song," ("Our hearts turned to Britain, our backs to the gulf/ Come near at your peril, Canadian wolf,") Pratt was the son of an English Methodist minister. His early reading included Shakespeare, Carlyle's *French Revolution* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.<sup>12</sup> But his integral relation to the English stream is best indicated in a cursory survey of his first verse: *Rachel* (1917), narrative, is a Newfoundland version of Wordsworth's "Michael"; *Clay* (1917), a badly written verse drama, contrasts evolutionary pessimism derivative of Hardy's *The Dynasts* with Christian evolutionary ethics suggestive of "The Paradox" by Alfred Noyes. However, with the parody of *The Witches' Brew* (1925) and the realism of *The Roosevelt and the*



*Antinoe* (1930), Pratt began to move away from the English stream. The latter poem, a moving account of an actual 1926 rescue at sea, seems to have led Pratt away from literary imitation into the documentation of life.

Strongly influenced by his Newfoundland experiences of continued struggle against an implacable nature, a struggle which he characterizes in his "Memories of Newfoundland" (1937) as "the ironic enigma of Nature in relation to the Christian view of the world", and by his early training in theology, much of Pratt's poetry can be seen as the attempt to equip man with an evolutionary ethic to counter Darwin's nature. In an address given at Cornell University during the 1940's he remarked that he could not reconcile the Romantic vision of nature with the Victorian need "to put man in his evolutionary setting." At that time he stated: "We look upon life with the eyes of a Thomas Huxley who saw the ethical and the cosmic in perpetual struggle."

As his acceptance of Thomas Huxley's evolutionary ethics implies, Pratt felt a strong moral revulsion to some of the implications of social Darwinism; in particular, he could not agree with the ethical sanction given by Herbert Spencer to "the survival of the fittest". The early poem, *The Great Feud* (1926), described by him as a "fantastic picture of some stage in the evolutionary struggle for existence," was written "to show how near to extinction a race might come, if the instinct to attack and to retaliate upon attack were given absolute rein without any moral considerations." The poem, an uneasy mixture of jocular beast fable and satiric allegory (of World War I) nonetheless firmly asserts that a perversion of morality and reason, resulting in the destruction of community, must inevitably accompany the survival of the fittest individual. The protagonist of this poem, a female ape, "the cleverest of her time", distorts both truth and a newly evolved moral law as she takes upon herself "the strain/ Of descent". This punning conclusion to *The Great Feud* implies not only the ape's descent to a neighbouring valley where her brood lies hidden, but also the perverted "reason" of the descent of evolutionary man.

In his Romanes lecture, "Evolution and Ethics," T. H. Huxley had argued "the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, . . . but in combating it . . . by the substitution of what may be called the ethical process; the end of which is not the survival of those who may happen to be the fittest, . . . but of those who are ethically the best." It is essentially this view of evolution that E. J. Pratt adopts. The whole struggle on the *Titanic* (of the 1935 poem of the same name) is summarized in the conflicting impulses of the passengers just before the ship goes down; "self-preservation fought/ Its red primor-

dial battle with the 'ought.' ” Red and primordial, this battle is an internalization of the struggle of the survival instinct against the ethical sense. Similarly, the significance of Brébeuf's magnificent endurance under torture in the 1940 epic, *Brébeuf and his Brethren*, is the triumph of moral man in moral community against amoral nature; in the largest sense it is an allegory of western man at the outset of World War II.

Huxley had also suggested in the Romances lecture: “It may seem an audacious proposal thus to pit the microcosm against the macrocosm; and to set man to subdue nature to his higher ends.” In “The Truant” (1943), Pratt's most characteristic poem, this ethical paradigm is explored. Here, the microcosm, truant man, is pitted against the macrocosm of the natural order (or cosmic process) jocularly described by Pratt as “a grand Panjandrum” (a false God or pretender to power). Opposing the natural process of mere survival, the truant affirms the grandeur and spiritual dignity of man's heroism in the service of the Christian ideal. In the last epic, *Towards the Last Spike* (1952), a narrative of the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, Pratt turns back to the concerns of the earliest pioneer poetry, the conquering of the land. With this poem, Pratt's evolutionary thought moves full-circle: from Huxley's dominantly pessimistic view of natural process (as expressed in the first narratives) to a dominantly optimistic view of the relation between man and nature in *Towards the Last Spike*. This optimistic view of evolution is highly suggestive of Jan Christian Smuts' *Holism and Evolution* (1926). Smuts had argued that all parts of the evolutionary process work for the good of the whole, whether the organism is rock, cell, man, or the nation state. By adapting Smuts' holism in *Towards the Last Spike* (especially as revealed in the metaphors of metamorphosis which transform Scots labourers to Laurentian rock), Pratt is able to integrate man with nature. Man, composed of the same elements as the rest of nature, is also equipped with “Mind” which, in Smut's view, has the capacity for directing ethically the whole. As in the earlier poem *The Roosevelt and The Antioe*, the ethical triumph is the result of human co-operation as opposed to Darwinistic competitive individualism. It is characteristic of Pratt's poetry that there are no individuals as such; even Brébeuf is generic man, and representative of group idealism. Pratt's insistence on man's capacity to make an ethical choice and so shape his own evolutionary development, is as representative of the Canadian interpretation of Darwinism as Robinson Jeffers' pessimism regarding human progress and his insistence on man's depravity is characteristic of the American.

In his presentation of a moral and hierarchical society, Pratt reflects the histori-

cal development of English Canadian poetry. His poetry, from *Newfoundland Verse* (1923) to *Towards the Last Spike* (1952) spans, both topographically and aesthetically, Canada's development from colony to nation, from the Newfoundland origins of Hayman's *Quodlibets* (1628), still firmly rooted in the English tradition, to the entry of British Columbia into Confederation in 1871 and the beginnings of a distinctively Canadian view of nature. Darwin's nature and T. H. Huxley's cosmology may have provided the intellectual outlines of Pratt's poetic world, but Canadian history, Canadian geography and Canadian cultural experience, as well as Pratt's good heart and his moral vision, give substance to this world. The major narratives, *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, *Behind the Log*, *Dunkirk* and *Towards the Last Spike*, all recapitulate Canadian experience — the struggle against the wilderness, the building of the railroad which united the country, Canadian participation in the Second World War — in terms which Canadians have understood and with which they have identified. It may be that the evolutionary myth is particularly suited for adoption by a developing country where the vision of progress still remains a powerful one and where the struggle against nature has always been a constant feature of life.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Francis Bacon, "Of Gardens," *Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*.
- <sup>2</sup> William Vaughan, *The Golden Fleece*, 1626.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> R[obert] H[ayman], *Quodlibets, Lately Come Over from New Britaniola, Old Newfoundland-Land*, 1628.
- <sup>5</sup> B. Lacy, "A Description of Newfoundland," *Miscellaneous Poems*, 1729.
- <sup>6</sup> Goldsmith quotes these lines from his uncle's "The Traveller," in his introduction to *The Rising Village and Other Poems*, 1834.
- <sup>7</sup> Letter from Lorne Pierce to E. J. Pratt, Lorne Pierce Collection, Douglas Library, Queen's University.
- <sup>8</sup> Carl Berger, "The True North Strong and Free," *Nationalism in Canada*, ed. Peter Russell, 1966.
- <sup>9</sup> Index to the *Canadian Monthly and National Review* and *Rose-Belford's Canadian Monthly and National Review*, Marilyn G. Flitton, "The Canadian Monthly, 1872-1882," unpublished M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1973.
- <sup>10</sup> Goldwin Smith, "Pessimism," *Rose-Belford's Canadian Monthly and National Review*, IV (March 1880).
- <sup>11</sup> Isabella Valancy Crawford, "Malcolm's Katie," *Old Spookses' Pass, Malcolm's Katie and Other Poems*, 1884. Alfred's assertions regarding human mutability and the existence of earlier worlds, now destroyed, are directly suggestive of the arguments of Lucifer in Byron's *Cain* (1821). In effect, Crawford merges Lucifer's Manicheanism with Darwinian pessimism.
- <sup>12</sup> Henry W. Wells and Carl F. Klinck, *Edwin J. Pratt, the Man and his Poetry*, 1947.