

PREMONITIONS OF MRS. PORTER

RECENTLY, when I was gathering material for a survey of Canadian poetry during the 1960s, and at the same time assembling the titles for a modest checklist relating to the same period, I was impressed by the persistence of the primitive strain. By the primitive strain I mean not the kind of fake illiteracy and bogus naiveté now cultivated by certain academic poets who have tried to transplant American aberrations into Canadian soil, but that unconscious capacity for the incongruous, that unselfconscious desire to glorify the banal and the bathetic which emerges among versifiers in mainly rural societies that have no surviving traditions of oral poetry.

Primitive poetry of this kind is a product of universal instruction that has not become universal education; the power and the desire to manipulate words are there, and even some sense of form, but unrelated to a sophisticated sense of logical structure or of the appositeness of images. Primitive poetry, like primitive folk art, is inclined to thrive in colonial societies, where the educated minority apes metropolitan literature and painting rather lamely (as the Acadian Goldsmith aped the Auburnian Goldsmith), while the men and women who consider themselves the voices of the half-educated minority produce work that projects in comically inflated form the small concerns of their small societies.

Magnification of the ordinary is a way of giving modest and isolated communities the importance in the eyes of their own people which the world denies them. It was shown in action when the people of Ingersoll, Ont., made a seven thousand pound cheese to impress their importance on the people of Toronto, and when the local poet James McIntyre addressed to it his "Ode to the Mammoth Cheese" in which he said, among many other delightful oddities:

Cows numerous as a swarm of bees,
 Or as the leaves upon the trees,
 It did require to make thee please,
 And stand unrivalled, queen of cheese . . .

We'rt thou suspended from balloon,
 You'd cast a shade even at noon.
 Folks would think it was the moon
 About to fall and crush them soon . . .

The primitive painters and sculptors of colonial and early Confederation Canada had their recent day of glory in the fine exhibition of their work that toured the major art galleries of the country during 1973. The primitive poets have been unjustly neglected, and so one greets with proper pleasure the republication of *The Four Jameses* (Macmillan, \$4.95) which William Arthur Deacon, longtime book editor of the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, published originally in 1927.

The poets Deacon chose — his four Jameses — were James Gay, James McIntyre, James D. Gillis, and James MacRae. They are poets so complete and so original in their badness that, as Doug Fetherling remarks in his introduction to the new edition of *The Four Jameses*, they “make the invention of Sarah Binks seem redundant.” For, unlike Sarah, these are *naturally* bad poets, and highly serious poets — so serious that James Gay styled himself, in all solemnity, “Poet Laureate of Canada, and Master of All Poets.” His mastery was shown in poems like “The Elephant and the Flea”, whose jaunty rhythm and succession of unexpected images reminds one of certain Trinidadian calypsos:

Between those two there's a great contrast,
 The elephant is slow, the flea very fast,
 You can make friends with the elephant and gain his good-will,
 If you have a flea in your bed you cannot lie still:
 A flea is a small thing, all times in the way,
 Hopping and jumping like beasts after their prey,
 Oft dropt inside your ear — don't think this a wonder,
 You may think for a while it's loud claps of thunder . . .

When I first read *The Four Jameses*, these early Canadian poets sounded too bad to be true; a quick glance at the Watters *Checklist of Canadian Literature* showed entries relating to at least three of them, which made it fair to assume that Watters had merely overlooked the fourth; after my experience this year in sampling the world of more recent Canadian poets I realized that versifiers of this kind were not merely authentic but representative of a surprisingly large and

persistent movement. Had they been painters such men would long since have been acknowledged. For what, after all, is it that we admire — and call the innocent eye — in naïf artists like Grandma Moses and Henri Rousseau *le douanier* but an inspired silliness? And one can hardly deny inspired silliness to James McIntyre when he sings:

Man in spring logging oft awakes
 From winter slumbers nests of snakes,
 And listens to the music grand
 Of bull frogs, our Canadian band.

Nor — on another level — is it possible to ignore the premonitions of Eliot and his Mrs. Porter in the superb couplet:

St. Catharines famed for mineral waters
 And for the beauty of her daughters . . .

But it is not only Eliot of whom we are reminded. For surely some of our more celebrated nineteenth century Canadian poets with their self-taught oddities acquire a proper background when we encounter Mr. Deacon's Four Jameses. The Jameses, undoubtedly, were among the men-at-arms in that veritable army of autodidactic bards whose captain was the best bad poet of them all, Charles Heavysege. The works of Gay and McIntyre, of Gillis and MacRae, are like bushes in the undergrowth from which that king of primitive melodramas, *Saul*, rises like a giant tree in a jungle painted by Henri Rousseau. They all — even Rousseau — belong in the same artistic ecosystem, parallel with but distinct from that of high and sophisticated art.

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