

A GIFT OF LOVE

Lampman and Life

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ARCHIBALD LAMPMAN is rightly remembered for the few nature poems illuminated by his personal "small clear flame". Unfortunately we are still waiting for a definitive biography to deal with all that annoying ash, those refractory clinkers that have to be swept away without putting out the fire. A tantalizing clue to the most important and disturbing single influence in Lampman's life, for example, was not made public until 1959, when Arthur Bourinot published some correspondence between Duncan Campbell Scott and E. K. Brown. These letters reveal the connection between a manuscript copy-book of Lampman's poems — acquired by the University of Toronto Library in the 1940s — and a Miss Katherine Waddell.

This copy-book is in fact one of five in which Lampman transcribed his poetry as he wrote it, and was presented by him (probably in 1893) as a gift of love to Miss Waddell. The volume, tentatively titled "Poems" (1889-1892) is the second of four that follow in a definite chronological sequence from 1883 to 1894. As well as containing 129 of the nearly 3500 lines of Lampman's poetry that remain unpublished, it also affords an interesting commentary on the effects of what Duncan Campbell Scott tactfully called in 1925 "an intense personal drama" concerning his friend Lampman. By 1943 Scott felt free enough to publish "A Portrait in Six Sonnets" in *At the Long Sault and Other New Poems* as "the record of a friendship strong in affection, and, to judge by the last Sonnet, high in emotional value." But to whom do these infuriatingly oblique glances refer?

Katherine Thompson Waddell was twenty-one, four years younger than Lampman, when she joined his office in the Post Office Department on 18 January 1887. According to Scott, whose impressions were recorded by E. K. Brown in a private memorandum, their "love began in the early nineties and was still a powerful thing at the end of Lampman's life."¹ His sole confidant during these stormy years was E. W. Thomson, who was having an affair in Boston at the same time. Scott must have been less a friend to Lampman than he thought, for he only learned what happened from W. D. Le Sueur, Lampman's office chief, after the poet's death.

Part of the cause of their entanglement, Scott suggests, was devastatingly simple: Lampman "found his wife unsympathetic to poetry although she was very devoted to his study and practice of it — and thought that in this girl he would find a spiritual mate. The idea of spiritual affinities was very important to Lampman. . . . His wife was not such an affinity." Although Lampman was sure that Katherine was a soul-mate, she was apparently unresponsive.

In a (mercifully) unpublished and untitled poem written in September 1893, Lampman expressed a quaintly ambiguous and tepid passion :

I may not love you dearest
 And you may not love me
 Tho' one in truth and nearest
 I think our hearts must be
 And so from fear not knowing
 What advent, what surprise
 Might bring the overflowing
 We meet with coldest eyes
 For fear of things sincerest
 We pass and let it be
 I may not love you dearest
 And you may not love me.

By the following February it is clear that Katherine was determined merely to be polite, while her less than ardent suitor plunged himself in misery :

Couldst thou but know my secret heart
 The sorrow that I dare not tell
 The passion that with bitterest art
 I hide so well . . .
 Ah couldst thou know this and descry
 The sorrow and the dull despair

Wouldst thou but smile and pass me by,
Or wouldst thou care?

Scott firmly attests that Lampman failed to circumvent the moral propriety of Ottawa and Miss Waddell; the affair remained “spiritual”, since at its height Lampman’s wife bore him a son, and apparently remained a good friend of Katherine. Although Scott was a very coy witness concerning his friend, another unpublished poem that Lampman confided only to his scribbler in 1895 suggests that Scott was right:

Sweeter than any name
Of power or blessing, tumult or of calm,
The pride of any victory with its palm,
Than praise or fame —
The love we bear to women in our youth
When ardour cleaves to ardour, truth to truth,

When Beauty cuts her sheaf
And flings its loaded ardour at our feet
But bitter, bitter! even as this is sweet
The gathering gulf
Of passionate love misplaced, or given in vain
The love that bears no harvest save of pain.

While it would be unsound to imply that Lampman’s poetry was profoundly affected by his friendship with Miss Waddell, it is clear that his inability to resolve his personal conflicts, and particularly his love for Katherine, heightened his instability to the point of creative breakdown. There exists positive documentary evidence, moreover, to indicate that at this time his vaguely humanistic sentiments were being sharply focussed into poems of social protest. Lampman’s letters to E. W. Thomson describe his “spiritual revolution”; the MS book he presented to Katherine reveals some of the results of this disturbance.

In the MS version of “Winter-Store”, written in December 1889, Lampman had simply declaimed the joys of recollecting summer’s fruits in the tranquillity of winter. In the version published in *Lyrics of Earth* (1895), however, he dropped this view, together with the opening twenty-eight lines, to substitute a bitter poem first published in the *Toronto Globe* for 19 November 1892. The “time of songs” of the original version became, through the rearranged stanzas of “Vision” from the *Globe*, a time of spiritual desolation as intense as the “nameless hunger of the soul” that seized the poet at the end of the poem. When

Lampman suggested that we must stop “refashioning what was once divine”, he was speaking of man, not Gattineau timber-farms.

At the same time Lampman had long been “constitutionally sensitive to a morbid degree”, and it might be difficult to ascribe the tone of his unpublished “Individual Duty” (alternatively titled “Life”) to Miss Waddell’s influence, much less Poe’s. Although it is the opening poem in the MS book he presented to her, it was possibly written before she rejected him:

Housed in earthen palaces are we
 Over smouldering fires,
 When through the flames creep witheringly,
 Doubts and hot desires,
 And our souls in that dense place
 Lose their grace.

Some forever grope and climb
 Toward the outer air,
 Some into the nether slime
 Slip and stifle there,
 Others with alternating mind
 Wander blind.

Yet each palace — this we know —
 Hath one central tower,
 Round about it breathe and blow
 Winds for every hour,
 And its spire through ether driven
 Enters heaven.

At its base a narrow slit
 Gleams and that is all;
 And the daylight slants through it
 Like a solid wall.
 Enter lest thou find that door.
 Nevermore.

It is no accident that the spire of each palace enters heaven, for Lampman could always see beyond the “vast seething companies” of frustrated mankind to “the banner of our Lord and Master, Christ.” He was less certain of the role of a Church he regarded as corrupted. In “The King’s Sabbath,” probably written as early as 1884, the King replies to a priest’s petulant reminder that it is Sunday by holding the burning bush in his bare hands. By the 1890s in an untitled piece in the Toronto MS Lampman is rather more direct:

How dealt the world, Oh Christ, with thee,
 Who shrank not from the common rod,
 Whose secret was humility?
 They mocked and scourged, then hailed thee God!

And built out of thine earnest speech,
 Whose gift was for the simplest needs,
 Whose meaning was in all men's reach,
 The strangest of phantastic creeds.

While Lampman's more bitter and despondent poetry may usually be termed poetry of social protest only by broad definition, it is significant as an early contribution to that thin stream which is as figuratively seasonal as the Canadian economy. We might also take it nearly as seriously as Lampman himself did, if we accept his statement written three years before his death:

We form an ideal of ourselves and claim what seems to be due to that ideal. The ideal of myself is entitled to love and approbation from my fellow creatures — but the love and approbation does not appear and I feel and abuse the constitution of things. To the ideal of myself money and power and practical success are no doubt due, but they do not come and again I abuse the constitution of things.

Lampman's letters and unpublished work suggest that Katherine Waddell's "love and approbation" came to be his greatest hope, and their denial his most frustrating disillusionment. It is scarcely surprising, then, to discover that with three possible exceptions — "The Vagrant" (still unpublished), "The King's Sabbath", and "Freedom" — his poetry of social protest was written during and after his "crisis" over Katherine.² We may properly suspect that Canadian literature lost no great poet of social protest at Lampman's premature death in 1899. Nevertheless as one of those "poor shining angels, whom the hoofs betray", both in his poetry and his semi-tragic life, Lampman continues to typify an aspect of that curiously thwarted radicalism which every Canadian appears to carry within him.³

FOOTNOTES

¹ Public Archives of Canada, E. K. Brown Papers. The following three poems are also transcriptions in the Brown Papers made by E. K. Brown from Lampman's notebooks.

² See Library of Parliament, Ottawa, four holograph MS copy-books by Lampman entitled *Miscellaneous Poems*, *Alcyone*, *David and Abigail*, and *The Story of an Affinity*.

^a Remaining unpublished poetry from the Toronto MS is: an untitled four-line fragment, and the four-line stanza originally concluding "The Land of Pallas" (called in the MS "The Happy Land" and, in the identical version in the *Alcyone* MS, "The Country of the Ought-to-be"), both noticed by F. W. Watt in his "The Masks of Archibald Lampman", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXVII, 2 (January 1958); a complete 54-line poem "The Old Berserker", dated October 1889; and seven lines from "After Rain", originally the third stanza. The stanza appearing in the Memorial Edition of Lampman's poems was written on 27 April, 1895, and appears as a revision of f. 7^v of the MS.

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