

THE CANADIAN POET

Part I. To Confederation

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BEFORE CONFEDERATION there could have been no poet to reflect a national identity because there was as yet no political framework to link the various widely separated regions together and no economic or social factors in common. Until almost the mid-nineteenth century, the task of subduing and settling the wilderness absorbed the energies of our people and though there existed a number of busy communities — Scottish, French, and English — in the Maritimes, Lower Canada, and Upper Canada, they had little to do with one another. What they shared mostly was loneliness and a sense of local self-reliance. The War of 1812 and the rebellions of 1837 brought Upper Canada to an earlier realization of the advantages of union than they did Nova Scotia or, of course, Lower Canada. Actually, it took the War between the States and the accelerating economic and military disentanglement of Great Britain and the Colonial Office from the affairs of England's trans-Atlantic provinces to scare the various colonies into a realization that they would have to stand together or divided they might fall — into the hands of the armed and aroused Northern states, if Britain, as at one time seemed likely, should provoke a war that the colonies feared and did not want.

The *idea* of something in common, the *aspiration* towards union, and the *hope* of an eventual federation found expression in the writings of versifiers and essayists long before social and economic conditions made Confederation at first a possibility and eventually a necessity. The ideal of a national — or rather, perhaps, a continental — identity was found thrilling by poets, or would-be poets, who hoped

that a national bard would arise to hymn the glories of a new nation in the north. Thus, Standish O'Grady wrote in 1842 in the Preface to *The Emigrant, A Poem*: "This expanded and noble continent will no doubt furnish fit matter for the Muse. The diversity of climate, the richness of soil, the endearing qualities of a genial atmosphere must no doubt furnish a just excitement to the poetic mind, and arouse that energy correspondent with a richness of scenery, which the contemplative mind will studiously portray."

In spite of these natural advantages, however, a poet of commensurate greatness was slow in appearing. Twenty-three years later Henry J. Morgan, writing in his valuable *Sketches of Celebrated Canadians*, had to admit that "We in Canada are unfortunate enough not to have had many persons entitled to the distinction of being marked as poets, though possessing every facility that a grand and scenic country possesses, capable of exciting the proper inspiration and spirit of poetry."

We are tempted to feel such remarks — especially a phrase like "the *proper* inspiration . . . of poetry" — to be incredibly naïve. Yet the idea that the Canadian poet or often, rather, *the Canadian*, that mythical figure, is a product of his natural environment and at once in both a regional and continental sense expresses and is formed by his surroundings appeared early, and is with us still. The question has always been, of course, whether the ubiquitous wilderness and the northern climate in a mainly empty semi-continent was to stimulate or intimidate. On the whole, our poets — (and *here* I mean all of them, modern as well as ancient) — have written out of the conviction that the challenge creates its response; and while the terror, that Professor Northrop Frye sees as providing the great tragic theme of our poetry, is real and intense, our poets have fought it.

Occasionally, the wilderness triumphs, as in Birney's "Bushed," where a stoic endurance becomes the only response; but usually it is man's courage and resourcefulness in subduing the wilderness that is stressed, as in Isabella Crawford's "Malcolm's Katie" of 1884 or Pratt's "Towards the Last Spike" of 1952.

The idea that the rigorous climate and the many natural obstacles to be encountered in the north and west preclude the development of intellectual life and the creation of art and poetry had found expression very early and may be taken as presenting a diametrically opposite but equally sentimental point of view from that of Standish O'Grady or Dr. Morgan. Mrs. Frances Brooke, in the first Canadian novel, *The History of Emily Montague*, written as far back as 1769, makes her heroine write home to England from the snow-covered city of Quebec: "I no longer wonder the elegant arts are unknown here; the rigour of the climate

suspends the very powers of the understanding; what then must become of those of the imagination? Those who expect to see 'A new Athens rising near the pole,' will find themselves extremely disappointed. Genius will never mount high, where the faculties of the mind are benumbed half the year."

This is still a note to be heard in English reviews, even occasionally in such capable publications as *TLS* and the *New Statesman*, of Canadian, or rather, Colonial books. This view has the authority of Professor Toynbee, who notes in his *Study of History* that a line drawn somewhere — just a few miles, one gathers, north of Boston, marks the boundary beyond which no intellectual maturity or artistic excellence can be expected.

Another problem that poets and men of letters in pre-Confederation British North America saw confronting them was their belief that this was a country without a mythology. Mrs. Traill, in her account of pioneer life in Otonabee County, *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836) laments the fact that this is a new country, unsanctified by myth or legend, settled by matter-of-fact folk who have neither time nor inclination to people the forests with deities or the mountains with nymphs. This state of affairs was thought of as denying to the poet an audience interested in what a poet (even in the wilderness settlement) is interested in by definition — the traditional classical myths of European culture.

This attitude too persisted a long time, and is responsible for much of the imitative "literary" poetry of the eighties and the nineties. The so-called Confederation poets, in one aspect of their work, sought to import from English romantic poetry a mythology they might well have found elsewhere in the tales and beliefs of the Indian. Both Charles G. D. Roberts and Duncan Campbell Scott made the attempt; but only the latter was successful — and that in a surprisingly small proportion of his total work.

Only very late — after the work of anthropologists and scholars like Sapir, Barbeau, and Alfred Bailey — has it become possible to make genuine poetry out of the native mythology of Canada, as for example in the translations of Haida poems by Hermia Harris Fraser or a few of the poems of Alfred Bailey, or to deal dramatically and sympathetically with the Indian, as in John Newlove's moving poem "The Pride." An exception must be made, of course, for "The Forsaken" and "At Gull Lake" by D. C. Scott, the first dating from 1905 and the second from 1935, both of them products of Scott's lifework in the Department of Indian Affairs.

ONE MYTH, however, did seize the imagination of Canadian poets, and that is the *myth of the machine*, especially the machine that becomes a means of transportation and serves to draw us together. Lighthall speaks of the poetry in his anthology of 1889 as a poetry of the canoe; with Pratt it becomes a poetry of steamship and transcontinental railway; with F. R. Scott and Birney it is the airplane — “Trans Canada” and “North Star West.”

“In Canada,” Northrop Frye has written, “the enormous difficulties and the central importance of communication and transport, the tremendous energy that developed the fur trade routes, the empire of the St. Lawrence, the transcontinental railways, and the northwest police patrols have given it the dominating role in the Canadian imagination.” It is Pratt certainly, as Frye affirms, who has most fully and most dynamically grasped this fact, but it is not Frye alone, *nor the modern poet alone*, who has seen the machine as monster or giant. Sangster, the best of the versifiers that James Reaney calls the “dear bad poets Who wrote Early in Canada,” has a good descriptive piece, written in dashing couplets, on the noise and excited astonishment as the Iron Horse bursts for the first time into the forest clearing and its sparse settlement. In some of the spirited Spenserian stanzas of his long Byronic poem, *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay*, he describes an excursion steamer winding its way through the channels of the Thousand Islands. He passes easily from the myth of the Red Man to the myth of the ship as fiery dragon, a *living* monster:

Many a tale of legendary lore
Is told of these romantic Isles. The feet
Of the Red Man have pressed each wave-zoned shore,
And many an eye of beauty oft did greet
The painted warriors and their birchen fleet,
As they returned with trophies of the slain.

That was the past. And now all has returned to primeval loneliness once again . . . “Save where some vessel snaps the isle-enwoven chain,” and the poet watches with an animating eye “the strong steamer, through the watery glade, Ploughing, like a huge serpent from its ambuscade.”

This was in 1856. But already Sangster, and therefore, it is certain, others along the northern shores of Lake Ontario, were thinking of a unification of the Canadian colonies. When the monument to Brock was dedicated at Queenston Heights on October 13, 1859, Sangster wrote a poem for the occasion — a clarion

call to Canadians to unite again as they had been united when they repelled the invader in 1812.

One voice, one people, one in heart
And soul and feeling, and desire!
Re-light the smouldering martial fire,
Sound the mute trumpet, strike the lyre,
The hero deed can not expire,
The dead still play their part.

Raise high the monumental stone!
A nation's fealty is theirs . . .

A nation's fealty. In 1859? This, of course, is not fact, not even at the time it was written a certain feasibility. It was aspiration, hope, an ideal desideratum — not politics but poetry (and, ironically, when compared with Emerson's great "Concord Hymn", written for a similar occasion, pretty hollow poetry). But it demonstrated the birth of a feeling in the hearts and minds of the people of Upper Canada at least that a regional isolation was not enough. Those like Sangster, and others I shall turn to in a moment, who were concerned with the development of poetry and letters in the new country were particularly anxious that a nation should be created that might produce, and be worthy of, a national poetry. The idea of a distinctively national poetry was born at the same time as the idea of a distinctive nation.

The first Canadian anthology of verse was published in 1864, the Rev. Edward Hartley Dewart's *Selections from Canadian Poets*, and the editor wrote a long Introductory Essay that must be regarded as a manifesto of the new national poetry that might be expected from the new nation soon to be born.

A national literature [wrote Dewart] is an essential element in the formation of national character. It is not merely the record of a country's mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity, and the guide of national energy. It may be fairly questioned, whether the whole range of history presents the spectacle of a people firmly united politically, without the subtle but powerful cement of a patriotic literature.

These brave words are followed by a realistic appraisal. Dewart continues:

There is probably no country in the world making equal pretensions to intelligence and progress, where the claims of a native literature are so little felt, and where every effort in poetry has been met with so much coldness and indifference as in

Canada. And what is more to be deprecated than neglect of our most meritorious authors, is the almost universal absence of interest and faith in all indigenous literary productions . . .

The cause of this lamentable indifference, the critic went on to affirm, was in part the wide prevalence of low and false conceptions as to the nature and influence of poetry itself, but in Canada a more important reason was to be found in the inferior status of a colony.

Our colonial position, whatever may be its political advantages, is not favorable to the growth of an indigenous literature. Not only are our mental wants supplied by the brain of the Mother Country . . . but the majority of persons of taste and education in Canada are emigrants from the Old Country, whose tenderest affections cling round the land they have left. . . .

This curse of colonialism, it can be added a hundred years later, did not leave us after Confederation; E. K. Brown, writing in *On Canadian Poetry* (1943), puts his finger on the colonial spirit as the chief diluter of our poetry just as Dewart did — and so many years and so many political changes later!

Dewart's anthology appeared three years before Confederation. Its chief interest today is its Introduction. The only poems in it that are worth preserving are one or two by Sangster, a couple of rhymes by Alexander McLachlan, and one or two passages from Heavysege's *Saul*. Canadians had to wait until thirteen years after the first Dominion Day for the appearance of a *second survey of Canadian poetry*. This was W. D. Lighthall's *Songs of the Great Dominion*, published in London in 1889.

Here the cautious and rather gloomy sobriety of Dewart has been replaced by a full fledged patriotic enthusiasm. It would seem that Dewart's faith in the efficacy of a national federation to bring a national poetry into being had already been amply justified by an abundance of good works. "The poets whose songs fill this book," wrote Lighthall,

are voices cheerful with the consciousness of young might, public wealth, and heroism. . . . The tone of them is *courage* — for to hunt, to fight, to hew out a farm, one must be a man! Canadians are for the most part descendants of armies . . . and every generation of them has stood up to battle. . . . The delight of a clear atmosphere runs through it too. . . . Canada, Eldest Daughter of the Empire, is the Empire's completest type! She is the full-grown of the family — the one first come of age and gone out into life as a nation. . . .

A good many summers ago I was conducting a seminar in Canadian literature and history at the University of Toronto with Professor Donald Creighton, and I remember his bewildered amusement when we read this passage. That this should have been written in the year of Canada's most serious and almost disastrous economic depression was not beyond comprehension perhaps, but it was almost beyond justification.

Yet I must make the attempt. To begin with, Lighthall could certainly look with pardonable pride at the poetry available for his anthology when compared with that of his pre-Confederation rival. Here now were poems of Isabella Crawford, Mair, Roberts, Lampman, Wilfred Campbell, and Duncan Campbell Scott — the earliest, and some of the best, pieces by the poets who were later to be known as The Confederation Poets or the poets of our "Golden Age". Secondly, when you read the poems collected in Lighthall's anthology — it is still by far the best of the early anthologies — you will find that the poems *are* filled with a spirit of cheerfulness and wonder, delight in the beauty of nature, and confidence in man's power to conquer. What actually the appreciative critic is expressing — and so are the poets — is a general spiritual sense of euphoria induced by Confederation — a certain indefinable spirit of confidence that economic difficulties and political differences could not destroy.

Its best expression is the least explicit — in the mythopoeic passages of Crawford's "Malcolm's Katie", in Roberts' sonnets of the New Brunswick landscape, and in Lampman's painterly evocations of the woods and hills around Ottawa in winter or midsummer. These are Canadian *poetry*. Let us look, however, at some of the more explicit treatments of the Confederation theme. In some of the pieces by Mair that came out of the Canada First movement and in the very explicit Confederation odes of Roberts we shall see what people felt they ought to feel. (It is in the true poems of Roberts, Lampman, and Scott that we find what they really felt — and in some cases, to the justification of Lighthall, the two are not very far apart.)

CHARLES MAIR was the poet who most clearly and consciously set himself to advocate and celebrate Canadian autonomy. Like Sangster before him, he had been hailed as a national poet, and he *thought* of himself as one. In addition, he took an active part in politics, being one of the five original members of the Canada First movement, when it was organized by William

Foster and George Denison in 1868 and later he had the distinction of being held a prisoner by Riel during the first Red River Insurrection. As to the "Canadianism" of Mair's poetry, Professor Norman Shrive in his recent biography of the poet, tells us how two of the earliest effusions of Mair, "The Pines" and "Summer" were read in 1862 before the Botanical Society of Canada at Kingston and elicited the praise of the Reverend Principal Leitch of Queen's. Of one, he said, "it is a truly Canadian production, inspired by an acquaintance with and love of the forest"; of the other, that it "has more of the old world stamp." For many of the critics of Canadian verse in the nineteenth and the first three decades of the twentieth these were the comments oftenest made. And they were intended as high compliment. If the Canadian poet could be uniquely and yet vaguely and generally "Canadian" and yet at the same time write like an English poet he was to be given the highest praise. Col. Denison knew better what was wanted of a poet, particularly a practical poet, and after the publication of Mair's first book of poems, significantly entitled *Dreamland*, he wrote in a letter to his friend:

For God's sake drop the old style. You're living in a new world and you must write in the language of the living to living men . . .

And the good soldier continued:

Most Canadian poems should be published with mild Eau Sucrée style of names — such as "Midnight Musings" or, what is more to the point, "Nocturnal Emissions."

Mair did occasionally speak out, and the lines he wrote to commemorate William Foster, the leading spirit in the Canada First movement, who died in 1887, are a clear manifesto of the aims and hopes he held for the future of the young Dominion.

. . . Throw sickly thoughts aside —
 Let's build on native fields our fame;
 Nor seek to blend our patriot's pride
 With alien worth or alien shame!

.
 First feel throughout the throbbing land
 A nation's pulse, a nation's pride —
 And independent life — then stand
 Erect, unbound, at Britain's side.

This, one feels, is a piece of classical verse in which each word and phrase has a precise significance, explicit or implied. What these are we cannot be certain

from the poem alone, — and this is a defect it shares with a good many other political or patriotic poems — but from the writings, letters, and speeches of the members of the Canada First movement we can learn enough about their views to interpret “alien worth” as British worth and “alien shame” as American shame — an implication in the word “alien” found as late as the Massey Report, by the way — and that “Erect, unbound, at Britain’s side” means “courageous, free, equal and ready and able to come to Britain’s aid, not timidly depending on her aid.” A more independent statement than Kipling’s much later famous phrase about Mother and Daughter.

Yet the limitations of Canada First and Mair’s views about Canadian unity are very clear. Professor Shrive speaks of the movement’s self-destructive weakness. “Decrying provincialism, it was itself provincial, even parochial. Culturally it was militantly anti-Ultramontane and anti-French. Socially its members represented the ‘respectable’, even, as in Denison’s case, the upper classes.” The national unity, in other words to be advocated and stimulated, was an English, genteel, and Christian one. It was a union embracing only Upper Canada, the dominant English minority of Lower Canada, and the Maritimes.

This dream of a limited union was shared also by the so-called Confederation poets, particularly Roberts and Wilfred Campbell, and the anthologist Lighthall, but it has been revealed for what it is — only a dream — by the two great events in the history of Canada since the end of the Second World War — the influx of European immigrants into our rapidly expanding cities and the awakening of Québec. Robert’s finely phrased and classically modulated lines beginning “O Child of Nations, giant-limbed” are perfectly turned and present a truly inspiring picture of an ideal, strong, free, independent, and unified nation — but it was only a dream, a dream made unreal by the fact that it was dreamed by only half the nation.