POET AND POLITICS:

Charles Mair at Red River

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHARLES MAIR in the development of Canada and of her literature is today almost unknown. Some Canadian historians, of course, have remembered him — perhaps only too well — as a controversial figure in a controversial event: the Riel uprising of 1869-70. But their accounts, both fair and prejudiced, of the part he played in that historical episode are concerned with only a few months of a life that lasted nearly ninety years, and he has been depicted, therefore, in a very limited context. On the other hand Canadian literary scholars have ignored him altogether or have dismissed him condescendingly, preferring to name Roberts, Carman, Lampman and Scott as their "Confederation Poets," despite the fact that none of these more famous figures was over the age of seven in 1867 or published anything until almost fifteen years after that date. But Charles Mair not only gave Canada what was regarded in 1868 as its first significant collection of verse; he also, unlike Roberts and Carman, retained faith, however dim at times, in his country's future, and, unlike Lampman, lived long enough to see that faith justified. He offers to the Canadian literary historian, in fact, an ideal illustration of the struggle of post-Confederation letters for survival and recognition.

For even when Mair is revealed as a precious fool and a bad poet he provides a singularly striking parallel to the cross-currents of aspiration and frustration, of success and failure, of even tragedy, that marked that struggle. His life gives us a tableau of some of the most significant aspects of Canadian history — of pioneering in the Ottawa Valley, of the Canada First movement in politics, of both Riel rebellions, of the opening up of the West. His writings and the influences behind them reveal the cultural climate in which he lived — more particularly,

the way in which nationalism and its judgments intruded into literary matters, not only in the nineteenth century but also in a much later period. Because Mair and his work were so closely associated with the political and cultural development of Canada, there is little wonder that journalist Bernard McEvoy could call him a "marvel of miscellaneousness" who had "the knack of carrying a load of versatility," or that the late Lorne Pierce could describe Mair's life as "a thrilling romance" and his work as part of "the structure of our national life." Or, perhaps, that Louis Riel could find him "a barely civilized" Upper Canadian who found amusement in "uttering follies to the world."

Unfortunately for Mair the published commentaries about his career have been both few in number and limited in value. John Garvin's supposedly authoritative biographical essay in the *Master-Works of Canadian Authors* edition is ludicrous in its bias and pretentiousness, its critical posturing and unscholarly inaccuracies. And the articles on Mair in newspapers and periodicals are of the "popular" type: in them he is invariably depicted as a "great singer of Canadian Literature" or as a "saviour of Canada's nationhood." The suspicions stimulated by such apotheosizing are confirmed of course when one reads those social and political histories that have included Mair in their scope; for in these works he is revealed as a quite different figure. Part of this contrast is often explainable by personal and commercial prejudices (J. J. Hargrave's *Red River*), by religious intolerance (R. E. Lamb's *Thunder in the North*), or by journalistic indulgence to popular taste and by distortion of historical evidence (Joseph Kinsey Howard's *Strange Empire*). But an unattractive Mair is also to be found in works of scholarly excellence such as W. L. Morton's *Alexander Begg's Red River Journal* and G. F. Stanley's *The Birth of Western Canada*; unfortunately once again for Mair, however, the objectives of these latter studies have not warranted more than a rather abstracted interpretation of his role as a literary figure at Red River.

A MORE DETAILED EXAMINATION of Mair that must still remain selective in emphasis would begin, nevertheless, with Red River in 1868-70; for better or for worse, his reputation and subsequent career depended largely upon his actions at that time. How he got on the trail to Fort Garry in the first place is a theme worthy of that writer he himself most esteemed, Sir Walter Scott, but since the melodramatic details have already been tortuously exploited by Garvin[1] it is unnecessary and undesirable to repeat them here. Suf-

ficient it is to note that a trip to Ottawa in May, 1868, to see his first book, *Dreamland and Other Poems*, through the press led Mair to the Canada First Association, then to the attention of the Honourable William Macdougall, the Minister of Public Works and ardent proponent of North-West expansion, and then not to Kingston and Queen's to resume medical studies but to Fort Garry, ostensibly as paymaster of a Government road party. "At once we saw the opportunity," said fellow Canada Firster George T. Denison, "of doing some good work towards helping on the acquisition of the territory."[2] And William A. Foster, another member of the group, promised to arrange with George Brown of the *Globe* that Mair should be the paper's North-West correspondent and therefore the advocate of the western policy that Brown had in common with Macdougall.

The appointment was a last-minute decision by Macdougall, and because the road-party had left days before, Mair's departure was a hasty one. But he began the adventure as best he could. In his pocket he had a letter of introduction from his friend, the Reverend Aeneas Macdonell Dawson of the Cathedral of the City of Ottawa, to the Right Reverend Monsignor Taché, Bishop of St. Boniface, in which Dawson emphasized that "Mr. Mair's great abilities have commended him to the notice of the leading people" of Ottawa, and that, although "Mr. Mair is not precisely of our communion . . . Dr. Pusey himself does not surpass him in respect for Catholics."[3] And when he reached Toronto Mair took advantage of a stop-over, as his expense account reveals — "revolver and ammunition, $15.25" — to prepare himself even further for the eventualities of the West.

The letters that Mair wrote to his brothers in Perth, Ontario — letters immediately given to the Perth *Courier* and subsequently copied by the Toronto *Globe* and other papers — provide a detailed record of his trip to Fort Garry as well as considerable critical comment on the land and peoples he encountered on the way. The letters in fact are so full of information and are so enthusiastic about the greatness of the new land that with certain exceptions they were almost certainly intended not for private reading but for newspaper publication as a form of "immigration literature."

From Toronto he travelled, as did all who wished to get to Red River in less than a month, by rail to Chicago, and thence by a combination of water, rail and road to Fort Abercrombie, North Dakota, where he hoped to overtake superintendent John Snow and his party. The trip under the best of conditions could be only an arduous one, but Mair, either because of youthful enthusiasm or because of his patriotic obligation, reveals in his reports little if any sense of hardship. Petty annoyances are not mentioned or are treated humorously, and the

more obvious deprivations concomitant with travel through a primitive West are either understated or are exploited as intrinsic to the romance of the great new land. The letters in fact continually emphasize the ease and comfort that the new settler would experience once he had left his Ontario town or farm. In the *Globe* of December 27 Mair reported that after three days on the train to Chicago and LaCrosse, he journeyed by "immense steamer" up the Mississippi to St. Paul — "a splendid two days' sail" made constantly enjoyable by "magnificent and striking" scenery. A further 170 miles by rail brought him to St. Cloud "in time to attend Judge Donnelly's political meeting"; and "four splendid horses, changed every fifteen miles" pulled his stage-coach to Sauk Centre, seventy miles farther west. There, "after great difficulty" (which he does not detail) and "valuable fact! only on account of being a Mason," he obtained a driver to take him to Abercrombie, "where I found Mr. Snow, the Surveyor, waiting for me."

Mair and Snow then travelled together the 250 miles to Fort Garry, this time by a horse and buggy bought by the latter at St. Paul and with "every luxury, even *condensed milk*, an admirable thing." The record of this part of the journey (Perth *Courier*, January 14, 1869) reads like a idyllic travelogue:

> No description of mine can convey to you an idea of the vastness and solitary grandeur of these prairies. Sometimes for a whole day you will drive through a perfect ocean of luxurious grasses now yellow and decaying, and perhaps the next day your tracks will be through an immense expanse of inky soil where the prairie fires have consumed the herbage. The prairies are a dead level, and the traveller drifts along in a sort of a dream between earth and sky over roads as solid and even as marble . . . .

Mair and Snow reached the edge of the Red River settlement one evening in late October just in time to hear "the convent bells of St. Boniface sounding sweetly over the water " (*Globe*, December 27, 1868) and within a few minutes had registered at "Dutch George" Emerling's hotel.

But Mair's stay at Emerling's was brief, for he lost little time in finding his Queen's College friend, John Schultz; and for the few days prior to his leaving with Snow to set up road headquarters at Oak Point, thirty miles to the east, he lived with Schultz at the latter's combined medical dispensary and trading store. There is no extant correspondence between Mair and Schultz prior to 1869, and it is therefore difficult to determine whether or not Mair had more than superficial knowledge about Schultz's standing in the Red River settlement. This point is of some importance because historians have emphasized the "error" committed

by Mair and other "Canadians" in intimately associating themselves with Schultz. To Mair especially, however, such association was not an "error". If he was aware before he arrived at Red River that Schultz was extremely unpopular among the great majority of the settlement, it must be concluded that he would have discounted such an attitude as being unreasonable and short-sighted, for Schultz represented to Mair an *avant-coureur* and agent in Red River not only of his own theories on North-West expansion, but also of those of the Minister of Public Works and of the Canadian Government itself.

Dr. John Christian Schultz had had a stormy career at Red River since his arrival there in 1861. Perhaps he had never really intended to practise medicine, for within a year he had established a lucrative fur trade and a thriving general store. In 1865 he had acquired control of the settlement's only newspaper, *The Nor' Wester*, and had continued with ever-increasing frankness the policy on which that paper had been founded — the necessity for ending Hudson's Bay rule and for opening the country to settlement. Because of this and other factors, by 1868 he had emerged as the most notorious figure in the settlement. In 1864 he had been instrumental in forming a Masonic Lodge; in 1867 he had married a Miss Anne Farquharson just in time to prevent her conversion to Roman Catholicism; and in early 1868, after refusal to pay a debt in favour of his half-brother and partner, Henry McKenney, he had to be taken to jail by force. In this affair, even his release was dramatic. No sooner had he been carried off by carriole than his bride of a few months "forthwith caused all the doors and windows to be barred and secured with nails and spikes, so as to guard the shop against a fresh entry on the part of the Sheriff." Then,

> towards one o'clock on the Saturday morning about fifteen persons, among whom was Mrs. Schultz, forcibly entered the prison where Schultz was confined, overpowered the constables on duty, and, breaking open the door leading to his cell, liberated him. This done, the party adjourned along with him to his house, where report says "they made a night of it."[4]

The special *Nor' Wester* of the following day not only presented Schultz's side of the story but also took the occasion to point up the complete incapacity of the Hudson's Bay Company as both a judicial and executive authority.

Schultz is one of the ambiguous personalities of Red River history. He obviously had many qualities of the natural leader: he was strikingly handsome, of great physical strength, aggressive, ambitious, decisive and intelligent. He was also known as a man of kindness and reserve, even of scholarship; articles he wrote on

Red River botany had been recognized by the Royal Botanical Society of Canada and those on primitive western fortifications and on the Eskimo later led to his election to the Royal Society of Canada. Certainly among his devoted "Canadian party" associates he was an almost archetypal figure of the national patriot and champion against tyranny. Professor W. L. Morton fairly conceded: "He sincerely sought to develop the North-West; he saw its possibilities with the vision of the statesman as well as the eye of the speculator."[5] Schultz's enemies and many other historians, however, saw not the visionary statesman but only the arrogant speculator. The *métis* and the Roman Catholic clergy disliked his Masonic Protestantism and feared his bold expansionist policies; the Hudson's Bay Company resented his abusive vilification of its authority; and those traders and colonists of the settlement who opposed the transfer of the Territory to Canada found it easy to distrust him as a selfish, unscrupulous adventurer.

Mair's immediate association with Schultz at Red River was not in itself a matter of resentment to the anti-"Canadian" group. He himself records the warmth of welcome extended to him by representatives of both the main factions: "We had a very pleasant stay at Fort Garry and received all sorts of entertainment," he reported (*Globe*, December 27, 1868); "they live like princes here"—even to the extent of "nuts of all kinds, coffee, port and sherry, brandy punch and cigars, concluding with whist until four o'clock a.m." And at the home of Alexander Begg, an anti-"Canadian" free trader, he was offered "hospitalities to my heart's content" (*Globe*, January 4, 1869).

But such initial relationships were soon put to test. Mair and Snow made their headquarters in a log and mud hut at Oak Point and prepared to build their road; by Christmas the former's intimacy with Schultz and his support of the "Canadian party" had become obvious enough to cause resentment where previously there had been friendly acceptance. Begg, no longer the hospitable host, wrote that both the road officials "severed the confidence . . . by their joining hands with this ultra and dangerous party." The activities of the road-party itself were also a matter of concern, particularly to the *métis*. Actually, the Canadian Government had as yet no right to construct a road over what was still the territory of the Hudson's Bay Company, although some justification for the project did exist in the oral permission Snow had received from Governor Mactavish. And to those *métis* and settlers who were suffering famine following a grasshopper plague of the previous summer, the announced intention of the road-party to provide money and provisions in return for work was more than welcome. But the first trees were hardly felled when news of trouble was reported back to Fort

Garry. The relief programme had proved a disappointment: fewer men than expected were hired, and these few (about forty) claimed their wages were low. In addition was the more serious charge, according to J. J. Hargrave, "that Messrs. Snow and Mair were purchasing from the Indians portions of land to which the actual occupants laid a pre-emption claim." The actual occupants were *métis* and such was their indignation that "Mr. Mair was brought to Fort Garry under compulsion of an excited crowd of French half-breeds who required he should forthwith quit the country, as he was, in their opinion a man likely to create mischief."[7] Governor Mactavish intervened, however, and "after some altercation" Mair was permitted to return to work. Snow was not quite so fortunate. For having sold liquor to the same Indians he was fined ten pounds in Petty Court and later accused by Riel of trying "to seize the best lands of the *métis* . . . at Oak Point."[8]

Because of the welter of conflicting evidence and bias it is difficult to determine the truth of these charges. Hargrave, nephew and secretary of Governor Mactavish and no supporter of Mair, admits that the episode that he himself reports was the result of a misunderstanding about payment for work on the road. The Mair Papers include "private vouchers" from Mair to Alexander Begg for considerable quantities of brandy and gin, but such transactions between a trader and the paymaster of a road-party would hardly be unusual. Snow's sale of liquor was proved; but surely it is irresponsible to state blandly, as Joseph Kinsey Howard does, that "Snow started dickering with the Indians for property . . . and one of his favorite mediums of exchange was whiskey."[9] Professor Morton suggests instead that there may have been "some *treating* of Indians to induce them to tolerate the claim-staking."[10] In any case these irritations might have been forgotten or pardoned if they had not been aggravated by Mair himself, not only by his association with Schultz, but also by what Begg described as his "preaching a doctrine sufficient of itself to cause distrust in the minds of the Red River people."[11]

THIS "DOCTRINE" was contained in the supposedly private letters Mair's brothers gave to the newspapers and in those Mair himself later sent when he was appointed special correspondent. The young poet (*Dreamland* appeared in the bookshops while Mair was en route to Red River) either did not realize that his commentary would cause "distrust", or was indifferent to such

a consequence. His correspondence indicates that he saw himself as a professional writer from the east with a responsibility both to his own newly-acquired reputation as a man of letters and to his special appointment as a Governmental agent. And certainly his reports in the newspapers contain some of the most vivid descriptive prose ever written in Canada. It is effortlessly fluent, revealing the same sensitivity to sights and sounds that mark the better lines of *Dreamland* (Mair's notebooks give ample evidence of his propensity to jot down whatever interested him at a particular time). The letters are lengthy — in some cases over 2,500 words — but they are consistently stimulating. A description of the prairie may be followed by historical or even geological comment. That of a "genuine out west political meeting" includes the humorous "tall tales" related by the speakers and the earthy, sarcastic observations of their listeners. And pictures of the river steamers, the mule-trains, the Red River carts, of the Indians, the half-breeds, the white settlers, are all made more vivid by interpolated accounts of incidents and events that may befall the frontier traveller or immigrant. It is when Mair's depictions seem exaggerated, a little too lush, even though always maintaining a tone of sincerity, that the reader is reminded that the letters were written not for their own sake nor, as Hargrave innocently — or ironically — suggested, "to vary the monotony of existence in the backwoods,"[12] but to convince Canadians of the desirability of settlement in the North-West and of the great possibilities of Canada's future. "So far as I have yet seen," Mair informed his readers (*Globe*, January 4, 1869),

> the country is *great* — inexhaustible — inconceivably rich. Farming here is a pleasure — there is no toil in it, and all who do farm are comfortable, and some wealthy. What do you think of a farmer within a bowshot of here, being worth seven or eight thousand pounds sterling, and selling to the Hudson's Bay Company last week £5,000 stg. worth of cattle: a man who came from Lower Canada nineteen years ago, not worth sixpence?

Beyond Red River is the prairie (*Globe*, May 28, 1869):

> There the awful solitude opens upon the sight and swells into an ocean, and the eye wanders over the "silent space" of the West. The man must be corrupt as death who, unaccustomed, can look unmoved upon this august material presence, this calm unutterable vastness. Man is a grasshopper here — a mere insect, making way between the enormous discs of heaven and earth.

Portage la Prairie, is not just a thriving settlement; it is really a *portal*, through which will flow "the unspeakable blessings of free government and civilization."

It is there that the Canadian "for the first time clearly recognizes the significance and inevitable grandeur of his country's future." Far behind him "are his glorious old native Province[s],[13] the unsullied freedom of the North, the generous and untiring breed of men;" before him "stretches through immeasurable distance the larger and lovelier Canada — the path of empire and the garden of the world."

The letters seemed to justify the high hopes of Macdougall and Mair's Canada First friends when they had urged him to open "the sealed book" of Rupert's Land. The Toronto *Globe* of June 11, 1869, remarked that "the greatest interest has been manifested in every section of Ontario in the letters . . . from Mr. Charles Mair," and emphasized with some specificity Mair's call for settlers. "We hope to see," it said, "a new Upper Canada in the North-West Territory — a new Upper Canada in its well-regulated society and government — in its education, morality and religion." Denison wrote Mair (March 10, 1869) of his pleasure in reading "such good accounts . . . of the great North-West," and added characteristically that "together we Men of the North . . . will be able to teach the Yankees that we will be as our ancestors always have been, the dominant race." But such bold confidence might have been somewhat qualified if Denison had known that his friend's ardently nationalistic journalism had a few weeks before caused him to undergo a most humiliating experience.

The *Globe*s containing the first two or three of Mair's letters began arriving in the settlement some time in January, 1869. To a people already tense over recent events and the implications of the approaching transfer the letters were little short of sensational. Their glowing accounts of the possibilities of the West were in themselves enough, as Begg states, to cause "distrust" among the settlers and natives; but certain passages of a more personal nature infuriated them. The *métis*, said Mair (*Globe*, December 14, 1868), "are a harmless obsequious set of men and will, I believe, be very useful here when the country gets filled up." But they are "a strange class," he continued (*Globe*, December 27, 1868); "they will do anything but farm, will drive ox-trains four hundred miles — go out on the buffalo hunt — fish — do anything but farm." The *métis*, indeed, said Mair — and this annoyed many settlers receiving or awaiting assistance as a result of the famine — "are the only people here who are starving;" of the rest, "not one of them requires relief other than seed wheat which they are quite able to pay for." But to add to this impression of a lazy, self-indulgent *métis* and to that of himself as a rather superior being viewing the lower orders with disdain was one especially offensive passage in the *Globe* of January 4, 1869:

> After putting up at the Dutchman's hotel . . . I went over and stayed at Dr. Schultz's after a few days. The change was comfortable, I assure you, from the racket of a motley crowd of half-breeds, playing billiards and drinking, to the quiet and solid comfort of a home. I was invited to a dinner-party at Beffs [sic], where were the Governor's brother-in-law, a wealthy merchant here, Isabister [sic] and other Nor' Westers. Altogether, I received hospitalities to my heart's content, and I left the place thoroughly pleased with most that I had met. There are jealousies and heart-burnings, however. Many wealthy people are married to half-breed women, who, having no coat of arms but a "totem" to look back to, make up for the deficiency by biting at the backs of their "white" sisters. The white sisters fall back upon their whiteness, whilst the husbands meet each other with desperate courtesies and hospitalities, with a view to filthy lucre in the background.

MAIR SURELY NEVER INTENDED that such lines would be made public and had hoped his brothers would use greater discretion in giving them to the papers. He later defended them as reflecting "the usual freedom and flippancy of a private letter to a friend," and himself as a victim of "an unpardonable indiscretion" that "allowed the letter to be published *verbatim*." He sincerely regretted the letter's appearing in print, for he "had received much kindness in Red River, and certainly bore no feelings of dislike or ill-will to anyone. But political and monopolist antagonisms ran high, and . . . this letter . . . , amongst sensible people, at any other time would have only provoked a smile" (Saskatchewan *Herald*, March 15, 1880).

The good folk of Red River, however, were not amused. Hargrave records that one of the first to react was "Dutch George" Emerling, who "threatened that should the author of these philippics ever enter the house he had maligned, he should be expelled." Much more severe was the anger of the Red River ladies:

> One lady pulled the poet's nose, while another used her fingers rudely about his ears. A third confining herself to words, said his letters would be productive of serious mischief by circulating doubts about the reality of the destitution, of which they gave an account highly calculated to mislead and to paralyse the efforts being made to raise money abroad for the relief of the suffering poor.[14]

The scene of the settlement post office, as recorded by Abbé Georges Dugas, the Roman Catholic director of St. Boniface College, was even more violent:

> Mair, having committed the indelicacy of writing, in the Ontario papers, some words offensive to the women of Winnipeg, underwent the humiliation of being

horse-whipped in the town post-office, by the wife of one of the most notable citizens, Mrs. Bannatyne. She asked the clerk of the store in which the post-office was located to let her know when Mair came at his regular time on Saturday at four o'clock in the afternoon, when the store was full of people. Daniel Mulligan, the clerk, seeing Mair coming, ran to tell Mrs. Bannatyne. She quickly threw a shawl on her head and arrived like a bomb at the post-office; she held a large whip in her hand. Without hesitating, she seized him by the nose, and administered five or six strokes of the whip to his body: "There," she told him, "you see how the women of Red River treat those who insult them."

The scene lasted only half a minute. But it seemed long to Mair who hastened to leave, daring neither to speak nor retaliate. That evening the episode was known throughout the district.[15]

The unfortunate affair made Mair the object of all the resentment that the majority of the populace felt for the "Canadian" party. A "French gentleman" wrote to his friend Hargrave: "The indignation against Mr. Mair is going on furiously."[16] According to another witness it was so great "that he was ordered to leave the territory," but through the intervention of Governor Mactavish he was allowed to return and remain "after apologizing to the leading half-breeds and promising that he would write no more letters of such a nature."[17] This latter report probably inspired Joseph Kinsey Howard's glibly inaccurate comment that Mair "apologized abjectly, abandoned journalism, and thereafter confined himself to epic verse."[18]

Mair's enemies made certain that their impressions of his early conduct at Red River would never be forgotten. Hargrave, Begg and Dugas were not only antagonistic participants or spectators in the events of this time and afterwards; they were also, to varying degrees of proficiency, journalists, and some of their works have become basic documents. Begg in particular carried on a form of literary harassment, and among his many writings is what is considered the first historical novel of the North-West, *Dot-It-Down*,[19] a smugly naïve and rather clumsy satire in which Mair plays a notorious role and for which — by his propensity for note-taking — he even provides the title. As Begg describes "Dot", he is a bumptious and cocksure young man constantly trying to impress the modest, hospitable Red River settlers with his social and literary prowess. He is also depicted as a would-be gallant, too free with both wine and ladies. As a result Dot's friends are soon only "Cool" (Schultz) and "Sharp" (Snow); but after several brushes with the law and the righteous folk of Red River — one is over claim-staking — these three are reduced to utter disgrace and leave the settlement. "Ah! Canada, how your champions suffered for your sake! Ah! Canada,

how you have also suffered by their deeds." Sharp becomes the proprietor of "a third-rate boarding house" in St. Paul; Cool disappears to some other community where "assuredly there was trouble in store for them," and Dot,

> the unfortunate correspondent, found to his cost that he had got into bad company, and felt that he was consequently a loser by the connection. His land speculations were frustrated by the action of the settlers in the matter. His expenses while in Red River had been enormous, through his extravagance, and he found that he possessed few friends on account of his untruthful letters to Canada. He, therefore, decided to follow in the footsteps of Cool; and it is to be hoped when he reached Canada he tried to make some reparation for the evil he did while in Red River.[20]

How much of *Dot-It-Down* can be accepted as a realistic depiction of personalities and events at Red River is difficult to determine. Begg certainly deviates from fact when he disposes of his villains: Mair, Schultz and Snow were to play even more dramatic roles in the near future. His characters and situations, although they may have historical basis, are mainly caricatures — Begg did not have the skill to make them any other. Unfortunately for Mair, however, his friends in the East have helped to confirm the impression that Begg created. Fellow Canada Firster, R. G. Haliburton, reviewing *Dreamland* (Halifax *Daily Reporter*, July 13, 1869) refers to him "as brimful of fun and frolic as a schoolboy . . . as if cricket or croquet, boating and flirting, were more likely to be engrossing his thoughts, than the quiet mysteries of nature." The correspondence of Foster and of Henry J. Morgan (the other founding member of the Canada First group) contains more than one reference to the frivolity of a rather dubious quality that enlivened their evenings when Mair was with them in Ottawa. "Speaking of girls," wrote Morgan (April 4, 1869), "reminds me that information has reached here of a little mishap on your part with a little feminine Nor'Wester. Haliburton and I had a good laugh over it, but the elderly gentlemen frown dreadfully, and say all sorts of things against you." These eastern friends treated Mair's adventures with the good humour and tolerance that common interests and distance could allow, and they sympathized with Mair in his self-imposed banishment. As Denison said (March 29, 1868): "I do not doubt that you are lonely enough out there, and you ought to have some friends — white folks — with you. It is not right you should be entirely alone among those wretched, half starved half-breeds."

FROM MAIR HIMSELF there is little even to be guessed concerning the charges against him. The liquor vouchers in the Mair Papers are doubtful evidence; other documents are similarly ambiguous. Three days after John Garrioch of Portage la Prairie had reported that there was "a perfect misunderstanding" between Mair and the Indians over what land "they would allow immigrants to occupy" (June 18, 1869), Mair wrote to Macdougall that he had applied "a modest pressure" upon the Indians by "pointing out their insignificant numbers compared with the incoming multitude and the obvious necessity, hence, of acting friendly and honestly."[21] In the same letter, however, he decries the methods used by certain landseekers and advises Macdougall that one of the greatest problems will be "to devise a method of distributing Indian annuities in such a manner that they shall be of real service to the recipients and not find their way into the pocket of the rum-seller as soon as paid." The only indication of Mair's personal acquisition of land is a quit claim deed between himself and one Charles Demerais, with Schultz as witness, by which he bought a thousand square chains of property at Portage for eighty pounds sterling — a quite reasonable price.

The memory, certainly, of his humiliation at the post office was to haunt Mair for many years. Ten years after the event an official of the Hudson's Bay Company recalled it during a newspaper-letter controversy with him. Of the Reverend Georges Dugas, when his *Histoire Veridique* appeared in 1905, Mair wrote to Denison: "[He] impales your humble friend as the *Advocatus Diaboli*."[22] And in a letter of 1911 from a relative in New Zealand, a significant comment — "I saw . . . a Judge Mair had been horsewhipped at Prince Rupert, I think; surely he is not one of our Mairs" — is underlined, undoubtedly by Mair, in red pencil.[27]

Whatever his feelings may have been on those occasions, during the first months of 1869 Mair must have felt beleaguered by friend and foe alike. For despite the good-natured levity of his Canada First cohorts, there was another friend whose whole future depended upon the manner in which the transfer of the territory was effected and who had to view Mair's conduct from a perspective different from that of Denison and company. This was the Honourable William Macdougall, who on June 13, 1869, wrote to his paymaster-*cum*-correspondent:

> I regret to have heard some rumours, which upon enquiry I found too true, that prevent me from doing all I had intended in your case. I need not be more precise, but you will at once admit — your own good sense will tell you — that full confidence cannot be placed in one who sometimes forgets himself, and what

is due to those who become answerable for his conduct. I hope for the best. Your future is in your hands. You have talents and genius of a high order — don't follow bad examples, or the end will be like theirs. I write you as a friend who is willing and may be able to do you service, but not if you become your own enemy.

There was also another correspondent, but one who obviously did not write "as a friend," and who expressed his opinion publicly in the pages of the Montreal *Nouveau Monde* of February 25, 1869:

Red River, February 1, 1869.

Mr. Editor:

Please be so good as to give me a little space in the columns of your journal, in order that I too may write of Red River.

I cannot resist that desire since I have read the enormities which a journal of Upper Canada, the *Globe*, has just uttered, in publishing a letter of a certain Mr. Mair, who arrived in Red River last fall. This gentleman, an English Canadian, is, it is said, gifted in making verses; if such is the fact I should advise him strongly to cultivate his talent, for in that way his writings would make up in rhyme for what they lack in reason.

Scarcely a month after his arrival in this country, Mr. Mair desired to describe it and its inhabitants. He succeeded rather like the navigator who, passing by a league from the coast, wrote in his log: "The people of this country seemed to us to be well disposed . . . ."

I know some men who have more than two weeks' experience and who say the opposite to this gentleman. He says finally: *the city of Portage la Prairie is destined to become one of the most important in the country: however, I shall not speak to you of it until I have seen it.*

And why not? You speak of a great many other things that you have not had time to see or know; that would be worth as much as the remainder of your letter; as much as the scarcely courteous terms, I will even say barely civilized, which you use in speaking of the ladies of the country, who certainly by all reports are equal to the ladies of your country.

Be it said in passing, Mr. Mair, if we had only you as specimen of civilized men, we should not have a very high idea of them. If I wished to amuse myself by wielding the pen as you do for the sole pleasure of uttering follies to the world, I should have some amusing things to say on your account . . . .

L. R.

The editor of *Le Nouveau Monde* noted that the letter had been written "by a half-breed . . . rightly indignant of the stupidities which a certain Mr. Mair" had published. If "L.R." was "almost certainly"[24] Louis Riel, he would later

have an opportunity to show his indignation in a much more forceful and personal manner.

But that is part of another story, one that is more familiar to Canadians because of its tragi-comic elements of bravado and bloodshed, because of its central importance in their history. Not so well known is how a minor versifier from a small village in the Ottawa Valley provided significant material for its opening paragraphs. For Charles Mair, less than a year after he had journeyed to Ottawa with his manuscript of *Dreamland*, a work intended to sound a key-note of a new, unified nation, had by his pen, ironically, helped to create a situation of potential danger to Confederation itself. This Upper Canadian had brought to the West the attitudes and prejudices that had been formed over a period of thirty years and then sharpened by his alliance with a particularly aggressive group of other Upper Canadians; one of them, Macdougall, was even a "Father of Confederation." In Ontario such pro-British, Protestant attitudes and prejudices could flourish with little or no opposition. In the melting pot of the new West they were almost bound to provoke conflict.

Notes

[1] *Master-Works of Canadian Literature,* Vol. XIV (Toronto: Radisson Society, 1926).

[2] *The Struggle for Imperial Unity* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1909), pp. 13-14.

[3] Queen's University Library, Mair Papers, October 6, 1868. All subsequent references to Mair's correspondence and papers, unless otherwise indicated, are from this source.

[4] J. J. Hargrave, *Red River* (Montreal: John Lovell, 1871), p. 426.

[5] *Alexander Begg's Red River Journal* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1956), p. 22.

[6] *The Creation of Manitoba* (Toronto: Hovey, 1871), pp. 20-21.

[7] *Red River,* p. 458.

[8] Morton, *Begg's Journal,* Document XXVII, "Memoir of Louis Riel," p. 528.

[9] *Strange Empire,* p. 87.

[10] *Begg's Journal,* p. 528, n. 5.

[11] *The Creation of Manitoba,* p. 41.

[12] *Red River,* p. 451.

[13] Thus Mair corrected his own copy of the *Globe*; but it is highly likely that his letter read simply "Province," as the newspaper had it.

[14] *Red River,* p. 456.

[15] *Histoire Veridique des Faits qui ont préparé le mouvement des Métis à la Rivière Rouge en 1869* (Montreal: Librairie Beauchemin, 1905), p. 27. The quotation is translated from the French of Dugas.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 455.

[17] Thomas Spence, deposition, Report of the Select Committee on the Causes of the Difficulties in the North-West Territory in 1869-70, Canada, *Journals of the House of Commons*, VIII, app. 6, 133.

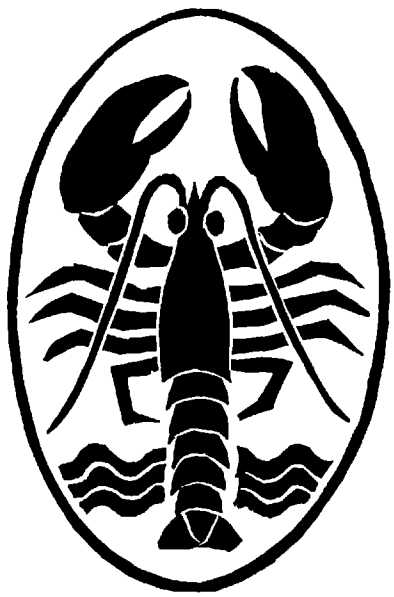
[18] *Strange Empire*, p. 86.

[19] *A Story of Life in the North-West* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose, 1871).

[20] Pp. 354-6.

[21] Public Archives of Canada, Public Works Files, ser. 98, subj. 429, June 21, 1869.

[22] *Ibid.*, Denison Papers, 5148, June 2, 1905.

[23] Ethel Harrington to Mair, December 20, 1911. Mair did become a Justice of the Peace in Prince *Albert*.

[24] Morton, *Begg's Journal*, p. 399, n. 2. The translation of the letter and the original appear on pp. 399-402 and pp. 567-9, respectively.