

PLAYWRIGHTS IN A VACUUM

English-Canadian Drama in the Nineteenth Century

Michael Tait

OF ALL THE BRANCHES of Canadian literature, nineteenth-century drama has received least attention for reasons that are entirely understandable. Formlessness, ineffective characterization, pretentious moral attitudes, lack of stylistic distinction, stupefying prolixity, together with other unfortunate qualities vitiate most of the serious attempts at drama in Canada between 1860 and 1914. A variety of factors account for this conspicuous absence of merit, but perhaps the most decisive was the separation of the nineteenth-century Canadian playwright from the active theatre of his time. From about 1920 to the present we have witnessed sporadic efforts, first by amateurs and more recently by professional companies, to bridge the gap. If none of these attempts has had sustained success, they have been evidence of an awareness of the issue. In the nineteenth century the gulf was absolute. This early period offers the anomalous spectacle of Canadian dramatists writing in total isolation from the most energetic popular theatre Canada has ever enjoyed. Of course, as most of the plays and almost all the plays were imports, this vitality was, in a sense, specious. For want of even a minority demand for the performance of native plays, these would-be dramatists were compelled willy-nilly to write for the closet rather than the stage. Denied a vitalizing contact with the coarse realities of stage presentation, they produced works at once petrified and undisciplined.

However, if none of these plays qualifies for close analysis as an autonomous work of art, they nevertheless hold a measure of interest. For one thing, although unsuccessful in their entirety, a few of them show a degree of skill, poetic if not dramatic, in isolated sections. For another they reflect, in an oblique and singular way, the temper of the period.

Any account of nineteenth-century Canadian drama must begin with Charles Heavysge whose uncertain claim on the attention of posterity is based chiefly upon *Saul*, a formidable dramatization in three parts and some ten thousand lines of the biblical narrative. There is considerable pathos in the fate of *Saul*. It was this work which received, after its first edition in 1857, such extravagant praise from Coventry Patmore whose account of it appeared in the *North British Review*. Patmore found it "exceedingly artistic, akin to Shakespeare in its characterization and scope". Emerson in a letter referred to its "high merits"; Longfellow is reported to have called Heavysge the "greatest dramatist since Shakespeare". The critics were reinforced by the politicians. Sir John A. MacDonald wrote to the author in 1865: "I read 'Saul' when it first appeared with equal pride and pleasure . . . and as a Canadian I felt proud of our first drama." The level of his contemporary reputation may be gauged by a scene from Mr. Robertson Davies' *Leaven of Malice* in which it is suggested a study of the collected works of Heavysge represents the last ludicrous infirmity of the academic mind.

There is pathos too in the personal history of Heavysge himself. He was born in 1816 in Huddersfield, England, into a puritan working class family who regarded his literary interests with suspicion. His formal schooling came to an end at the age of nine when he was apprenticed to a trade. In 1853 he emigrated with his family to Montreal where he earned his way first as a cabinetmaker and then as a staff reporter on the *Montreal Witness*. In a letter written in 1860 he remarks that throughout his life "he has been obliged to work on the average twelve or thirteen hours a day". His literary endeavours then were confined to brief intervals of leisure or to the occasions when he found it possible to compose in his head while working at his carpenter's bench. The impression he gave his contemporaries was of an aloof, self-reliant figure. John Reade, one-time literary editor of the *Montreal Gazette* and a contemporary of Heavysge's, wrote of him, "His reading was not discursive. The Bible and Shakespeare were his two books. He had a high opinion of his own work and was obstinate about having anything cut out by his friends. Being a man without general culture he could not distinguish in his own work between what was good and what was bad. He never willingly consented to sacrifice a line that he had once penned." *Saul* offers evidence of these limitations. His rage for inclusion prolongs the work interminably. The manipulation of his great mass of material into an artistic shape is quite beyond Heavysge's powers. In fact, considerations of form either in the whole or in the part appear never to have occurred to him. As a result the impact of potentially effective speeches is consistently dissipated in an avalanche of words.

The formal inadequacies of *Saul* are more than matched by stylistic ones. It is Heavysege's use of language that most immediately betrays his lack of education and narrow literary experience. The flaws are many and various. At the simplest level his grammar is shaky and his understanding of the meaning of words imperfect. But it is his attempt to approximate the high style that gives rise to the most apparent weaknesses. He contorts his verse with inversions ("clenched his fists" — "austere he looked") and with archaic forms (neath, e'en, methinks, etc.) In most instances the result is stilted and inelegant. Moreover his diction frequently betrays a faith in the power of complicated words, and an astounding vocabulary is put into the mouths of most unlikely figures:

SECOND HEBREW: But did you not make stipulations or propose abatement of those said prerogatives?

However, the echoes of Shakespeare and Milton that reverberate through *Saul* are the chief device by which the author tries to infuse his style with grandeur. Macbeth is most often discernible in the background. Saul at one point addresses himself to

Ye punishing ministers
Ye dark invisible demons that do fly
And do heaven's judgements

and later bids a physician

Look deeper than the skin
Then find me amongst thy compounds or thy simples
An anodyne for undeserved distress.

Heavysege has a particular fondness for the heroic simile and the "even . . . as" construction. Milton is usually the immediate model. "Lo!" exclaims Saul

As when October strews the land with leaves
So hath our fury larded it with dead.

On occasions he goes directly to Homer. His literary innocence is sufficiently intact to enable him to set down

Lo, the rosy-fingered morn . . .

with no hint of quotation marks. His derivative diction has the inevitable consequences. Instead of investing the verse with greater scope and power, these overtones drain it of vitality, and invite disastrous comparisons between *Saul* and the masterpieces it feeds upon. Moreover, because an elevated style is not a natural

mode of expression, for Heavysege, he is liable to abrupt descents to colloquial idioms and bathos. ("Are all wives of such a kidney?" "Bravo, boy"). Occasionally Heavysege manages a line which has an authoritative ring to it:

Swift and silent as the streaming wind
 . . . Sweeps down from Carmel on the dusky sea.

But his most striking and individual verse is of another and more eccentric kind. Heavysege clearly enjoys and is rather good at describing scenes of corruption and gore. Viewing the remains of Agag whom Saul has slaughtered, a soldier is made to say

Listen how
 The ground, after the soaking draught of blood,
 Smacks its brown lips. It seems to like royal wine
 Beyond small beer leaking from beggar's veins.
 So were he living he might wear two crowns
 His face is cloven like a pomegranate.

This is the authentic Heavysege: vigorous, macabre, indecorous, an improbable mixture of Miltonic echoes and Edgar Allan Poe.

It is generally agreed that Heavysege is typical of the immigrant author whose work bears no organic relation to the new society in which he finds himself, and as a consequence, is of little value as a measure of that society. From one standpoint this is obviously true. Neither the subject nor the idiom of *Saul*, *Count Filippo*, or *Jephtha's Daughter*, Heavysege's principal works, owes anything directly to a Canadian environment. Even in *The Advocate*, his one impossible novel which is set in Montreal, none of the realities of life in mid-nineteenth-century Canada are touched upon. In contrast with such a figure as Sangster who during this period was groping towards a language which would adequately describe the Canadian scene, Heavysege, in his plays at any rate, coped with his surroundings by ignoring them.

However, the reasons for his isolation are to be found not only in Heavysege's origins and limitations as an artist. It would be difficult to conceive a milieu less conducive to the development of native dramatists than pre-Confederation Canada. L. J. Burpee, in 1901 in a monograph on Heavysege, understates the case when he writes, "Our people even in these days of imperial growth are not too sympathetic in their treatment of Canadian men of letters and Canadian books." Widespread indifference to the arts generally and a puritan hostility to the stage in particular, the lack of discerning critics, the lack of public recognition,

personal financial losses on unsold volumes — these familiar conditions afflicted Heavysege to the end. The absence of any facilities in Canada for the production of native plays once induced him to try his luck in the United States. At the time of his brief fame in America he prepared with great labour a condensed stage version of *Saul* which a New York manager undertook to present. However, the author's habitual misfortune overtook him; the leading actress suddenly died and the production was shelved.

Heavysege bore his fate with exemplary stoicism; it did not occur to him to protest or rebel. He simply endured, secure in his conviction that every word he committed to paper was the fruit of inspiration. He had about him something of the eccentric evangelist whose inner illumination fortifies him in the teeth of the world's disdain. If the light Heavysege followed was three parts false, to some incalculable extent the reason was the darkness of the society about him.

UNLIKE HEAVYSEGE, Charles Mair was a native Canadian. Born in 1838 at Lanark, Ontario, he spent the greater part of his life in the service of the federal government helping to open and develop the Canadian West. As an associate of the Canada First Group, he shared in the post-Confederation quickening of national sentiment and the aspirations toward "Canadian Independence", that ambiguous ideal which provided the first impetus for the movement but ultimately brought about its dissolution.

Mair was among those who stressed the importance of literature in fostering a sense of national identity, in particular of imaginative works based on incidents out of Canadian history. In the preface to his long chronicle play, *Tecumseh*, he writes:

Our romantic Canadian story is a mine of character and incident for the poet and novelist . . . and the Canadian author who seeks inspiration there is helping to create for a young people that decisive test of its intellectual faculties, and original and distinctive literature . . . springing in large measure from the soil and 'tasting of the wood'.

Tecumseh is Mair's most ambitious attempt to write according to these specifications. Unfortunately most of the characteristic weaknesses of nineteenth-century closet drama are evident in Mair's brave undertaking. The gravest fault is the

utter lack of unity of action. Three main conflicts are introduced: (the Indians vs. the Americans; the Americans vs. the British; Tecumseh vs. his brother) together with a variety of satirical and romantic episodes. None of these elements is properly integrated with the others, and the result is a lively chaos. In his eagerness to translate a maximum volume of Canadian history into Canadian literature, Mair simply ignores the problem of form. *Tecumseh* is also defeated by its idiom. Like Heavyside, Mair is imprisoned by the linguistic conventions of nineteenth-century verse drama and his handling of them is, if anything, even more insecure. Evident throughout is an uncomfortable tension between Mair's essentially practical cast of mind and the specious elevation of his style. A further source of incongruity is the subject itself. In contrast with Heavyside, Mair is writing about Canada, and specifically the world of the North American Indian whose natural mode of speech is at some distance from the Elizabethan. Place names present a particular problem. Even Shakespeare's infinitely accommodating measure cannot stand the strain of "Kalapoosa", "Hurricane" and "Kickapoo".

On another level, Mair's militant Canadianism betrays him into a good deal of tub-thumping and some naïve anti-American propaganda. The vehicle for the latter is a remarkable quartet of characters called Slauch, Bloat, Twang and Gerkin, who, although redeemed in part by their names, are dramatically expendable. On the other hand, Mair's bias is not indiscriminate and he includes a favourable portrait of Harrison, the American General and President.

In spite of its limitations of theme and style, its formlessness and flat characterization, certain aspects of *Tecumseh* are interesting and even curiously impressive. The tiresome flag-waving is only the surface of a more genuine patriotism. Canada for Mair was no political abstraction but a concrete and exhilarating reality. As a result of extensive explorations his knowledge of the Canadian West was intimate and his feeling for it intense. Although life on the frontier was harsh, it is evident that in Mair's imagination this wild territory held the qualities of an earthly paradise. In his poem *Kanata*, for example, the region is described as a bright new world where Europe's jaded millions may escape their corrupt societies. In *Tecumseh* itself, Mair invents the figure of Lefroy, a somewhat implausible prairie bohemian, to express his delight in the virgin wilderness.

The hoary pines — those ancients of the earth
 Brim full of legends of the early world,
 Stood thick on their own mountains unsubdued,
 And all things else illumined by the sun . . . had rest . . .

The prairie realm — vast ocean's paraphrase
 Rich in wild grasses numberless and flowers
 Unnamed save in mute Nature's inventory,
 No civilized barbarian trenched for gain
 And all that flowed was sweet and uncorrupt.

Mair further suggests (drawing more from Rousseau perhaps than from his own first-hand observations) that the Indian was the blameless inhabitant of this unfallen world:

— The sunburnt savage free —
 Free and untainted by the greed of gain
 Great Nature's man content with Nature's food.

A large measure of Mair's animus towards the United States, "that braggart nation", was owing to America's destruction of the redskin and his innocent wilderness in a pursuit, as Mair believed, of land and riches. In the war of 1812 Mair's cherished Canadian paradise was menaced with a similar sordid invasion. The memory of this threat explains the violence of so many passages in the play.

Some of the purely descriptive sections of *Tecumseh* are interesting for a different reason. It is a commonplace that Confederation obliged the Canadian writer to assume the role of nation builder, to define and communicate an image of Canada which would help make this country hospitable to the mind as well as habitable by the body. An important part of this task was the humanization of an alien landscape which not only represented physical danger but continued to threaten the psychological security of the community long after the more obvious menace of wolves and Indians had been eliminated. One of the chief mental hazards of the Canadian scene was, and to an extent still is, its land mass, stretching arbitrarily for inconceivable distances in almost every direction. In *Tecumseh* for perhaps the first time much of this great space begins to be organized in the mind and made familiar.

Lefroy describes to Brock his journey into the interior:

We left
 The silent forest, and day after day
 Great plains swept beyond our aching sight
 Into the measureless West; uncharted realms,
 Voiceless and calm, save when tempestuous wind
 Rolled the rank herbage into billows vast,
 And rushing tides which never found a shore.

This is not great verse; however such passages, illuminated as they are by Mair's private vision of this vast terrain, represent a first step in bringing the Canadian West under imaginative control.

WILFRED CAMPBELL was in a sense the most ambitious and self-conscious dramatist Canada produced during this period. Unlike Mair he was not primarily concerned with the celebration of national heroes and the creation of a distinctive Canadian literature. His were loftier objectives. In the preface to his *Poetical Tragedies* (1908) he remarks that although the four plays of the volume have very different subjects, they all nevertheless deal "with those eternal problems of the human soul which all the world's thinkers have had at heart." In matters of form Campbell is equally uncompromising. Shakespeare is the only acceptable model. He continues: "The author makes no apologies for the form of these plays. Like other writers he has his own literary ideals and with the great mass of the sane British peoples, believes that Shakespeare is still the great dramatic poet of the modern world." In conclusion, he announces his intention to compose like his great predecessor further collections of histories and comedies if "these plays in spite of their imperfections receive a kindly welcome."

One cannot regret that Campbell allowed this grandiose project to wither. His dramas, in some respects better, certainly no worse than other Canadian verse plays of his time, are still uniquely exasperating. Campbell's personality is not attractive. The modern reader is repelled by his lack of humour, his provincialism, pretentiousness and purblind Anglophilia. It is perhaps because he seems the spokesman for so many negative influences in Canadian art and life which persist into the twentieth century that one leafs through these plays with such boredom and distaste.

A passage or two from *Mordred*, a work based on Mallory's version of the Arthurian legend, will perhaps illustrate the quality of Campbell's dramatic imagination. This scene depicts the first meeting of Lancelot and Guinevere. The latter, having glimpsed Lancelot from her castle window, mistakes him for Arthur and is instantaneously consumed with passion. She disguises herself with a veil and manages to encounter Lancelot at sunset in a convenient rose garden. The scene in outline proceeds thus:

Enter Lancelot.

L: This is a sunset bower for lovers made.
 The air seems faint with pale and ruddy bloom.
 The red for rosy dreams, the white for pure
 And holy maiden thoughts all unexpressed.

.....

Enter Guinevere, veiled.

G: My lord, forgive this meeting in this place
 (*aside*) O, if he like it not!

L: Would'st ask mine aid?

G: Yea; would'st thou aid a maiden in distress?

L: Lady, all maidens command a true knight's help.

.....

G: Would'st fight for one like me? (*throwing aside her veil*)

L: (*starts and stands as one in a dream*)

Fair lady!

(*aside*) Wondrous heaven, what be this?

In all my dreams I never saw such beauty

G: My lord, hast lost thy tongue?

(*aside*) I had not dreamed this.

L: Fair lady forgive my sudden lack of speech . . .

There's some fatality that draws me to thee

Like I had known thee somewhere long ago.

G: My lord, . . .

(*aside*) Sweet heaven this be too blessed! . . .

L: It seems that we were never strangers

(*folds her in his arms and kisses her*)

G: All life hath been but shaping up to this.

L: O! could this sunset be but gold forever!

G: My lord Arthur!

L: (*starts back*) Great God!

G: Kiss me. Why Great God?

L: Why callest thou me Arthur?

G: And art thou not?

L: O who art thou that callest Arthur lord?

G: As thou art Arthur, I am Guinevere.

(*Lancelot starts back in horror*)

L: Guinevere! Make thick your murky curtains!

Day wake no more! Stars shrink your eyehole lights,

And let this damned earth shrivel!

G: (*clutching his arm*) And art thou not great Arthur?

Who art thou?

- L: Not Arthur, no! But that foul Lancelot
 Who 'twixt his hell and Arthur's heaven hath got.
 G: Then I am a doomed maid. (*swoons*)
 L: Black murky fiend of hell! Come in thy form . . .
 And I will clang with thee and all thy imps . . .
 G: (*rising up*) O mercy! Damned or not I love thee still!
 L: Why does not nature crack and groan?

This is a representative passage. Its flaws are almost too numerous and evident for exposition. Most obvious is the immense discrepancy between intention and performance. The attempt is to portray a moment of high passion in a rich Elizabethan idiom. Artificial diction, insecure grammar, grotesque rhythms — all contribute to the final absurdity. Although the author bewailed the sensationalism of the popular stage, this scene like so many of Campbell's is itself nothing but rudimentary melodrama with mistaken identities, swoons, asides, mechanical manipulation of emotions and the rest.

This excerpt points to a more fundamental flaw at the core not only of Campbell's plays but of virtually all nineteenth-century English literary drama. The fault is rooted in an insuperable linguistic difficulty. The prevailing source of inspiration for this drama was of course Shakespeare, whose language these nineteenth-century playwrights attempted to duplicate. Imitations are invariably weak, but to explain why Shakespeare's nineteenth-century disciples produced such unlikely disasters one may conveniently borrow a little of Professor Northrop Frye's critical terminology. The Shakespearean style is the natural accompaniment to a drama conceived instinctively in the high mimetic mode. The speech of heroes who still have about them something of the radiance of gods is necessarily eloquent. It is through language that the common man recognizes the stature of the hero. When we turn to mid-nineteenth-century poetic drama it is clear what has happened. The playwright is still attempting to cast his work in the high mimetic mode which for reasons of cultural history is no longer available to him. At first glance his characters appear to talk like demi-gods, but they quickly betray themselves as creatures of their authors' own Victorian middle class sensibility; (" . . . white for pure and maiden thoughts all unexpressed"). Singular incongruities result. In Campbell's play, Lancelot thrashes about like Pip in the armour of Mark Antony.

In "Shakespeare and the Latter Day Drama", his most extended piece of dramatic criticism, Campbell states his case with querulous dogmatism. He denounces Ibsen as "immoral", Shaw as "a mere cynic", and both with Goethe as

“unBritish in ideals”. He further protests that any plays which are not founded on “sublimity, beauty and reason” should not be tolerated. Although this article appeared in 1907 when Ibsen and Shaw were gaining a measure of European acceptance, it stirred no controversy in Canada.

Quite clearly Campbell’s quarrel is not simply with the new drama, but with the modern age in general which he assails for its “love of pleasure”, “lack of reverence”, and most deplorable of all, its “falling off in ideal”. The conflict between orthodox Victorian and “modern” values forms the basis for his play *Morning*. In his preface Campbell underlines the gravity of the issue. “This play has no historical foundation . . . but its theme is plainly modern and deals with the tremendous problems of modern society. The belief in God and a larger hope, as vitally affecting man’s whole life, actions and ideals here, is the central problem of the play. The question, ‘Is the worldly cynic right or wrong in his summing up of human nature?’ is destined finally to settle the fate of our whole modern civilization . . . Which ideal is to prevail in society, that of the cynic, or that of faith and hope?” In *Morning* the question is dramatized through the struggle for the mythical city of Avos between Leonatus “A noble minded citizen” and Volpinus “A clever and scheming citizen . . . envious of Leonatus.” There is of course nothing intrinsically wrong with Campbell’s theme. Ibsen has already demonstrated the dramatic possibilities in the conflicting claims of visionary idealism and pragmatic worldliness. Certainly the matter had real urgency for a Victorian society beginning with Ibsen to pay the piper for its long worship of moral abstractions. What defeats Campbell’s play aside from the stylistic factors touched on previously is the jejeune treatment of this complex issue. The author never for a moment doubts that Leonatus, beneath whose classical robe lives a windy Victorian parson, is altogether virtuous, and Volpinus wholly evil. Campbell aims at tragedy but the crudity of his moral categories is reflected on the level of dramatic action in stark melodrama (“Caught, thou fox at last!”) and lifeless characterization.

The other two plays in this volume are *Daulac* and *Hildebrand*. *Daulac* is an absurd historical piece which endeavours, as Campbell puts it, “to depict the ultimate triumph of the fate of unsuspecting innocence over the wiles and plots of a clever and scheming malice.” It is Campbell’s one attempt to dramatize Canadian material, but any truth, imaginative or historical, is dissipated once again in the shoddy conventions of romantic melodrama.

The action of *Hildebrand* centres around Pope Gregory’s decision to create a celibate clergy. The consequences of the Pope’s inflexible stand are brought

home to him when he encounters his long-lost daughter (presumably Campbell would argue that Shakespeare also took liberties with history) wandering deranged by the loss of her priest-husband. The play is negligible except insofar as it too suggests a thematic parallel with Ibsen. Both *Morning* and *Hildebrand* have as their potential subject the price in suffering exacted by the uncompromising idealist, a very Ibsenesque preoccupation. To this extent at least Campbell was willy-nilly a child of the modern age he so deplored.

A number of factors beside lack of native gifts explain Campbell's total failure as a dramatist. He chose to embrace a bankrupt dramatic tradition, consciously repudiating the new developments which had begun to revitalize the stage. That he did so was not, however, entirely his private failure. It was difficult for a nineteenth-century Canadian writer to be anything but conventional and insular in his literary attitudes. Canada was geographically remote from the creative centres of civilization and as a nation the product of deep-rooted conservative impulses. In the field of literature this was reflected in an acceptance of those canons of taste shared uncritically by polite English society. Shaw and Ibsen were, after all, formidable revolutionaries. Canada was born of a temperamental resistance to revolution. Campbell's rigid conservatism, however, had dire consequences for his work as a playwright. Drama like other arts derives its vitality from its dynamic relation with the age in which it is written. Campbell was the spokesman for a dying era, his mind informed by a collection of concepts and a moral vocabulary that were rapidly losing their force. As a result he remained in his imagination at several removes from the immediacies of human experience and his plays accordingly emerged still-born.

IN BRIEF, then, the aspiring playwright of this era was defeated in the main by three interrelated factors. In the first instance, he accepted the English literary drama, at best a mediocre genre, as his model. Its worst features — characterization in terms of the crude operation of a ruling passion, conspicuous didacticism, artificial diction — all, as we have seen, he assiduously preserved. In the second place he capitulated to certain social pressures which were inimical to the free exercise of what rudimentary dramatic talents he possessed. In most Canadian communities of the time an antique suspicion of the stage was still strong. It is instructive, for example, to read in a 1908 issue of the

Canadian Magazine how stern fathers "tore the theatrical pages from the foreign magazines and burned them lest they should reach the eyes of the children of the house". This anxiety did not have altogether obvious repercussions. During the last quarter of the century innumerable theatres flourished; the larger centres had as a rule several imposing establishments and almost every small town had its opera house. However, the non-conformist conscience of the community subtly dictated the Canadian dramatist's selection and treatment of his subject. To neutralize any offence he might give by writing in a suspect medium he was disposed to choose "safe" themes either from history or the Bible, and his handling of them was correspondingly solemn. In cases where character and plot were his own inventions an impeccable moral scheme was invariably observed. The virtuous triumph in this world or the next, the vicious are confounded and sinners repent. Such an excess of propriety does not always make for entertainment and it is clear most of the nineteenth-century dramatists were aware of it. *Saul*, *Tecumseh*, and *Hildebrand*, among others, contain episodes and characters calculated to provide comic relief. Unfortunately the detachment and irony indispensable for the success of such scenes were not qualities these dramatists could cultivate without jeopardizing their respectability. Thus these comic characters, suffocated at birth by their creators' inhibition, are uniformly grotesque and tedious. As one might expect, the few attempts at political and social satire in dramatic form are similarly feeble. Sara Curzon's *The Sweet Girl Graduate*, Nicholas Davin's *The Fair Grit* and W. H. Fuller's *HMS Parliament* (to name three) all suffer from their authors' inability to cut sufficiently free from the confines of gentility and public decorum.

I suggested at the outset that of all the circumstances which undermined the nineteenth-century Canadian dramatist his lack of contact with the hurly-burly of the practical theatre was the most injurious. The writers themselves seem to have been aware of the fact of their deprivation although not of its extent. There is evidence that a number of these figures did not write closet drama by choice and most resisted the realization that they had accomplished nothing better. The stage directions in *Tecumseh* for example, suggest that Mair had a performance half in mind, and Campbell was distinctly aggrieved over Irving's refusal to produce *Mordred*. It is unlikely of course that had an indigenous theatre been available to these early dramatists, this alone would have transformed their work. The weakness of the dramatic conventions they accepted were too fundamental. However, the exigencies of the stage might at the least have encouraged considerations of economy and dramatic relevance.

This unhappy divorce of writer and theatre in Canada invites certain generalizations. Drama is nothing if not a staging of conflicts. Two of the major conditions of a strong popular drama would appear to be: first, a persuasive social awareness of the existence of important conflicts; secondly, a widespread impulse within a society to have these conflicts played out in its presence. Nineteenth-century closet drama was a compromise based on only one of these conditions. The exertions of these authors suggest a sincere attempt to formulate in dramatic terms the tensions of their world in the absence of audiences to witness them.

A discussion of recent dramatic developments lies outside the scope of this account. It is clear, however, that the playwright in the present century, although enjoying certain advantages denied his predecessors, has suffered from the same lack of a supporting and controlling interest in his work, the kind of popular involvement which in other countries has given rise to a recognizable dramatic tradition. In consequence, the conflicts in much contemporary drama strike one as those of a single mind capable of being honest with itself, rather than those of the community at large. Although no modern Canadian playwright has produced anything comparable to the astonishing curiosities of the previous age, the conditions under which he writes have, in some cases, encouraged him to give free rein to eccentricity. It may be argued, I think, that the vacuum which surrounded the nineteenth-century Canadian dramatist, pulling his work into such a variety of bizarre shapes, still afflicts his contemporary counterpart and presents an equally complex challenge.