

WHAT HAPPENED TO PAULINE?

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AS EVERYONE INTERESTED in Canadian literary history knows, the Pauline Johnson centennial was celebrated *last* year; indeed, the more obvious activities connected with it took place during or close to her birth-month, March, and are therefore well over a year into the past. But neither in 1961 nor in the time since has there appeared in print — at least, to my knowledge — any reasonably searching evaluation of the real place in Canadian letters of this internationally famous versifier and story-teller. Marcus Van Steen's introduction to a new McClelland and Stewart edition of *Legends of Vancouver* was inclined to repeat the usual commonplaces, although with a refreshing suggestion of doubt here and there. Ethel Wilson's memoir in *Canadian Literature*, delightful as it was, was really a book review of the same new edition.

Recognition of another type was, of course, ample. It included a special five-cent stamp, testimonial dinners, articles in weekend supplements and pilgrimages to Stanley Park, to Mohawk Chapel and to Chiefswood, the old Johnson home on the Grand River. The International Conference on Iroquoian Studies, which drew scholars from all over North America to McMaster University, had as part of its three-day programme a public lecture on "The Place of Pauline Johnson in Canadiana". Perhaps the most important expression of respect for Miss Johnson's memory (judging by the dignitaries present) was a special dinner in Brantford. As reported by the *Expositor*, "Chief Red Cloud (Fred Williams), with his grandson, Little White Bear (Perry Williams), performed a number of traditional dances." Mohawk songs "were sung by the Wright Quartet", and "decorating the tables were paper models of canoes and tepees". Miss Ontario, of the Six Nations Reserve, was there, perhaps very appropriately, and so was

Dr. George F. Davidson, Deputy Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, to give the main speech of the evening. Miss Jessie L. Beattie, author of *The Split in the Sky*, read her poem, "A Message from Pauline" (as her ardent supporters invariably refer to her), and, unaccountably, Mordecai Richler wandered in, retaliating a week or so later, one senses, for the discomfort he felt, by writing a squib for *Maclean's* which, Miss Beattie told me, did not please her at all.

But the learned journals seemed blandly indifferent to Miss Johnson. Yet Pauline Johnson is material for interesting controversy. If we accept her as Indian (which, technically she was not, even when given her Indian name, "Tekahion-wake"), how did she and the people who claim her as their own differ from their brothers and cousins on the other side of a man-made border? What necessarily makes her part of Canadiana rather than of Americana or of North Americana? And then there is perhaps the most searching of all questions: was Pauline Johnson really a poetess — Indian, Canadian, North American or otherwise?

At the Brantford dinner, Dr. Davidson, deploring the fact that the recently published *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* contained not one word of Miss Johnson's writings, took a verbal swipe at academic critics who believed such an anthology gave "a truly representative and completely adequate picture of all the facts of our Canadian craft and skill in this important literary art without including a single word from the pen of the person who, more than anyone else, must be regarded as the main truly Canadian writer of our time." But many literary scholars would disagree with this assessment of Pauline Johnson. A. J. M. Smith, for example, the editor of that same *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* and himself a poet of international reputation, suggests that although the poetry of Miss Johnson was much admired in Canada, "the romantic fact of her Indian birth, played up by critics and journalists, has been accepted as convincing proof that she spoke with the authentic voice of the Red Man". Pauline Johnson, he continues, had a vigorous personality and an excellent sense of the theatre, as well as the good fortune to be praised by "a fashionable London critic", Theodore Watts-Dunton. But, says Professor Smith, the claim that her work is genuine "primitive poetry, or that it speaks with the true voice of the North American Indian will hardly be made by responsible criticism. . . . Her best known pieces are decorous imitations of . . . [Tennyson and Swinburne]. They have a graceful and easy-flowing cadence, which presents admirably vague impressions of pellucid waters and shadowy depths, but they are as empty of content as any devotee of pure poetry could wish. . . ." They are "minor Victorian escape poems"; and when Miss Johnson tried to portray the feelings and aspirations of the aborigines,

she became "theatrical and crude". The rhythm "is heavy, the imagery conventional, and the language melodramatic and forced. Her best work is not to be found in her Indian poetry at all but in one or two pretty and very artificial little lyrics."¹

Here, certainly, are two assessments that if not diametrically opposite appear to have little in common except sense of conviction. And perhaps Canadian literary critics, feeling that Smith had said all there was to be said on Pauline Johnson, could not be bothered to tell Dr. Davidson to stick to his portfolio and leave literary judgments to the qualified. Yet, by interpreting Miss Johnson and her objectives in terms of the literary, social and nationalistic climates in which she lived, we can bring closer the professional and non-professional viewpoints and show why neither side can dismiss out of hand the other.

In the first place, the responsible literary critics of whom A. J. M. Smith speaks, with their comparatively wide knowledge of the struggle of Canadian letters for national and international recognition, have felt that much of Miss Johnson's work falls into a particular, all-too-characteristic pattern. Only three years after she was born, the Reverend Edward Hartley Dewart, in his introduction to British North America's first anthology of verse, intimated the sense of urgency that he and others were beginning to feel over the need for a truly Canadian literature. "There is probably no country in the world", he remarked, "where the claims of native literature are so little felt, and where every effort in poetry has been met with so much coldness and indifference as in Canada."² It is not important here that we note the reasons that Dr. Dewart offers for this neglect; most of them are familiar by now. What is significant, however, is the self-conscious attitude reflected by poet and critic alike at the time, the desire to be *Canadian* as distinct from British or American. The fact of Confederation, of course, served to increase the enthusiasm, and soon the newspapers and periodicals were publishing a veritable flood of verses supposedly Canadian. The poets concerned are known now only to the more devoted student of Canadian letters; the verse, from the intrinsically literary point of view, is undistinguished. But most of it is notable for one or two aspects in particular. In its reflection of national aspiration it both exudes sentimental idealism and implies a sense of colonial inferiority. In short, it is thoroughly romantic, even to deriving much of its imagery and technique from

¹ "Our Poets: A Sketch of Canadian Poetry in the Nineteenth Century", *UTQ*, XII (October, 1942), 89-90.

² *Selections from Canadian Poets* (Montreal: John Lovell, 1864), p.x.

the English Romantic poets of half-a-century before. In it we see significant illustration of the attitudes that determined the way poetry was written in later nineteenth-century Canada. The example set by the English Romantic poets directed it towards the depiction of native landscapes and, sometimes, native people, and although those landscapes and people were viewed as through an English filter — for example, by referring to them by the use of English instead of Canadian idiom — the verse was nevertheless considered “Canadian”. And herein lies a source of confusion. To be dependent upon the literary tradition of England, as Smith has emphasized, surely cannot be a defect. If it is, perhaps all American poets except Whitman are to be dismissed with their Canadian cousins. But in post-Confederation Canada it was more important that the verse be written by a Canadian than that it be poetry; the comparison was more often between the poet and an accepted English master than between poetry and non-poetry. This approach to criticism is, of course, still with us; it reflects, in fact, an attitude that is sometimes expressed by a type of Canadian nationalism still very much alive. Professor Smith wrote in 1946 that “when it is recognized that the claims of nationalism are less important than those of universality and that a cosmopolitan culture is more valuable than an isolated one, our twentieth-century criticism will be prepared to approach contemporary Canadian poets.”³ And as late as 1957 he could remark, “the question of national identity still seems to underlie our thinking and haunt our imagination.”⁴

HOW ALL OF THIS is relevant to Pauline Johnson should be reasonably clear. During her most impressionable years the literary influences upon her were similar to those upon dozens of other versifiers of the eighteen-seventies. And despite her insistence upon her father’s importance in her learning “the legends, the traditions, the culture and etiquette”⁵ of the Indian, her literary education was English. Walter McRaye, her business manager and companion,

³ “Nationalism and Canadian Poetry”, *Northern Review*, I (December-January, 1945-46), 42.

⁴ *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (3rd ed. Toronto: Gage, 1957) p. 36.

⁵ Walter McRaye, *Pauline Johnson and her Friends* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1947), p. 19.

reports quite objectively that she read the standard poets and was especially fond of Scott, Byron, Tennyson and Adelaide Ann Proctor — the latter achieving a somewhat dubious fame as the author of *The Lost Chord*. And Miss Johnson herself reveals how she fits squarely into a particular manifestation of Victorian romanticism when she describes her parents. “Their loves were identical”, she writes:

They loved nature, the trees best of all, the river and the birds. They loved the Anglican Church, they loved the British flag, they loved Queen Victoria, they loved beautiful, dead, Elizabeth Elliott. They loved music, pictures and china with which George Johnson filled his beautiful house. They loved books and animals, but, most of all those two loved the Indian people, loved their legends, their habits, their customs, loved the people themselves. Small wonder that their children should be born with pride of race and heritage, and should face the world with that peculiar courage that only a fighting ancestry can give.⁶

There is certainly nothing reprehensible in such an outpouring of love. Unfortunately, however, when many Canadian poets of the time, Pauline Johnson among them, attempted to express their various loves in verse, they did so in a rhetorical, overly sentimental, often self-indulgent, way. In short, they reflected those aspects of flabby Victorian romanticism so familiar in much of the fiction, music, architecture and art of the period. In the United States Mark Twain was scornfully to denote the period as the “Gilded Age”, illustrating his derision, for example, by the tragi-comic story of the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons in *Huckleberry Finn*; Canada, characteristically, had to wait a few more decades for Stephen Leacock and a similar satirical perspicuity. Yet, how can we appreciate what these poets were trying to do unless we are also aware of the contemporary tastes and norms that influenced them? One of Miss Johnson’s many concerts was given at Prince Albert. Here is the programme of another evening of culture sponsored by the PAYMLAC (the Prince Albert Young Men’s Literary and Athletic Club) as it is recorded in the Prince Albert *Times* of November 23, 1883:

SONG: — “A Flower from my angel mother’s grave” very prettily sung by Miss Mackenzie.

READING: — By Mr. Fitz-Cochrane, “Gray’s Elegy on [*sic*] A Country Churchyard”.

SONG: — By Mrs. Col. Sproat, “Jock o’ Hazeldean”, which was so acceptably delivered as to call for an unanimous encore, which produced that ever-popular old song “Comin’ thro’ the Rye”, also very nicely sung.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

The next number was a reading by Mr. J. O. Davis, but he was prevented by illness from appearing.

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Mr. Joseph Hanafin read the celebrated speech by Sergeant Buzfuz from *Pickwick*, in very good form.

Mrs. Brown then favoured the audience with the song "Twickenham Ferry" in such acceptable style as to demand an encore, to which she kindly responded with "Two is Company, Three is None", which was also well received.

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The programme was well wound up by a comic song, "Patrick, Mind the Baby", by T. O. Davis, given in his best style, which brought down the house, and he was obliged to respond with "When McGinnis Gets a Job", which also took the house by storm.

It may be noted that Charles Mair, a man who considered himself of superior cultural tastes and who within a few months was to be widely praised for his closet drama, *Tecumseh*, was one of the officers of the PAYMLAC. I do not wish to suggest by this example, however, that the level of literary taste throughout Canada was of a consistently low level. Two periodicals in particular, the *Canadian Monthly* and the *Toronto Week*, reflected, through the editorship of men such as Mercer Adam and Goldwin Smith, and the contributions of writers such as W. D. LeSueur, Sara Jeanette Duncan, Charles G. D. Roberts and Archibald Lampman, a standard of excellence that the Canadian literary periodical has probably not attained since. It is significant, however, that both magazines had died from lack of support before the end of the century, thereby supplying evidence (not that it was needed) of the gap between the literary critic, the poet and the popular taste. Pauline Johnson herself, determined as she was to write, realized that she could earn no more than a few cents when she was fortunate enough to have work published; she therefore embarked upon a career that essentially catered to that taste. Dressed in Indian costume she went from city to city, town to town, even barn to barn, reciting her verse and reading her interpretations of the Indian legends. And despite the protests of those who see her as "a true poet", we must describe these tours as being in the tradition of the music-hall, not of the concert recital, nor even of the peripatetic bard of old, as has been rather romantically suggested. Walter McRae, writing in 1946, notes that there "were no movies, or radio or Chautauquas" in the 'nineties;

Entertainment was given either by professionals or local talent. These were usually designated "concerts" or "shows". The professionals were brought in from Toronto,

Montreal or Hamilton. Singers, violinists, cartoonists, comedians and lecturers — Pauline Johnson was of such a company. She read from her own poems and appeared in costume, a beautiful buckskin dress trimmed with ermine skins, and with silver brooches scattered over the bodice. These were very old and had been hammered from silver coins by the native Indian silversmiths. Two scalps hung suspended from her waist, a Huron scalp and one that had been given to her by a Blackfoot Chief. Around her neck was a beautifully graded cinnamon bear-claw necklace, and on her wrists bracelets of wampum beads. Draped around her shoulders was . . . [a] red broadcloth blanket . . . ; in her hair was an eagle feather. This costume was laid aside in the second half of the programme when she appeared in conventional evening dress.⁷

The picture is a striking one; one feels, indeed, that Miss Johnson could have carried at least part of the audience by merely standing on stage. And for those interested in symbolic acts and gestures, the change of costume for the second part of the programme may be of significance.

WE SHOULD NOTE that much of the popular interest in Miss Johnson today is still stimulated by the essentially non-literary aspects of her career — her Indian heritage, her dress, her skill as a stage performer and her personality. Even the fact that she, a woman, would engage in such an arduous and unusual venture might still raise a post-Victorian eyebrow — although, admittedly, to a very limited extent now. But she was unusual, and the fact that her poetry echoed the mellifluous cadences of Tennyson and Swinburne, the Victorian sentimentality of Adelaide Proctor, and the self-conscious nationalism of her own Canadian contemporaries, was ignored by her audiences. They probably were not aware of these borrowed and assimilated characteristics; if they were they probably did not care anyway. They *liked* Pauline Johnson and what she said, and that was enough. But, unfortunately, that is not enough for the literary critic. It is his business to do more than take his seat in the Orpheus theatre or before the hastily improvised stage in a western barn and merely listen to an Indian princess talk about her father's people. In short, he knows too much for his own popularity.

To talk about her father's people. This statement has, perhaps, unfair impli-

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

cations. Let us accept Pauline Johnson as she herself wished to be accepted — as a Canadian Indian. And in her own time this role was the very one in which her audiences *wished* — almost desperately, one feels at times — to see her. Psychologists might even say that her enthusiastic followers would have *projected* this role upon her, whether she wished it or not. For while Pauline Johnson was growing up, the popular image of the Indian was undergoing a significant change. He was no longer only the tomahawk-wielding, scalp-adorned aborigine of earlier times. Nor was he only the noble savage of the eighteen-thirties and 'forties. He had become more than noble; he was also the down-trodden, dispossessed — and vanishing — victim of the ruthless white man. And perhaps most significant in this era of urgent nationalism was the fact that the role of the Indian in preserving Canada herself was apparently being forgotten. Here, for example, are Mercer Adam's comments in the *Toronto Varsity* of March 5, 1886:

It is important that the heroic deeds of the faithful Indian allies of Britain, in the struggle to plant and maintain the flag of the Empire on this continent, should be treasured, and a fitting memory preserved of their loyal services and staunch friendship. Nor should gratitude be lacking, particularly in the Canadian nation, which owes so much to the Indian tribes for the heritage it now peacefully enjoys, and from which it has rudely dispossessed the children of the woods, and done much to make them what they are now — a poor emasculated, vanishing race.

These remarks were written almost exactly one year after the outbreak of the North-West Rebellion. Yet they reflect no antipathy towards, for example, Chief Poundmaker and the Indians who had joined Riel against the Queen's authority. Many Canadians in Ontario felt, in fact, that the tribes had been goaded by the half-French Riel; many in the West sympathized with both Riel and the Indian. And Mercer Adam was only one commentator among many — including essayists, novelists, poets — who were reflecting a depiction of the Indian in rather stereotyped and often self-indulgent terms. Self-indulgent because one cannot help feeling at times an almost patronizing attitude towards the Indian, at times even a reflection of a guilty conscience.

Pauline Johnson actually was one of the few people who saw through the new popular image of the Indian and who said so in writing. Aside from certain prose pieces in *Legends of Vancouver* some of the most perceptive, the most unaffected writing she did was in private letters to friends and in fugitive newspaper articles, writing that reflects an author of distinction more than the Pauline Johnson of the stage and of "The Song my Paddle Sings". The term "Indian", she noted,

signifies about as much as the term "European", but I cannot recall ever having read a story where the heroine was described as "a European". The Indian girl we meet in cold type, however, is rarely distressed by having to belong to any tribe, or to reflect any tribal characteristics. She is merely a wholesale sort of admixture of any band existing between the MicMacs of Gaspé and the Kwaw-Kewlths of British Columbia, yet strange to say, that notwithstanding the numerous tribes, with their aggregate numbers reaching more than 122,000 souls in Canada alone, our Canadian authors can cull from this huge revenue of character, but one Indian girl, and stranger still that this lovely little heroine never had a prototype in breathing flesh and blood existence!

This conventional, seemingly invariable and inevitable maiden, Miss Johnson continues, is known as Winona or Wanda.

She is never dignified by being permitted to own a surname, although, extraordinary to note, her father is always a chief, and had he ever existed, would doubtless have been as conservative as his contemporaries about the usual significance that his people attach to family name and lineage.

Above all, however, she is to be recognized by two distinguishing characteristics: her suicidal mania and her misfortune in love. She is, Miss Johnson notes,

always desperately in love with the young white hero, who in turn is grateful to her for services rendered the garrison in general and himself in particular during red days of war . . . Of course, this white hero never marries her! Will some critic who understands human nature, and particularly the nature of authors, please tell the reading public why marriage with the Indian girl is so despised in books and [yet is] so general in real life?

Mercer Adam's Wanda, she notes, is much in love with Edward McLeod, "makes all the overtures, conducts herself disgracefully, assists him to a reunion with his fair-skinned love, Helene; then betakes herself to a boat, rows out into a lake in a thunderstorm, chants her own death-song and is drowned". Jessie M. Freeland's Winona is also the unhappy victim of violent love that is not returned. She assists young Hugh Gordon, "serves him, saves him in the usual 'dumb' animal style of book Indians, manages by self-abnegation, danger, and many heart-aches to restore him to the arms of Rose McTavish, who of course he has loved and longed for all through the story." But Winona also finds the "time-honoured canoe, paddles out into the lake and drowns herself."⁸

There is a temptation to give further exemplification of this quite delightful

⁸ Toronto *World*, March 22, 1892.

critical perspicuity, but the point is clear enough. Pauline Johnson, the person, knew the Indian and could perceive the artificiality that had become associated with him. The irony is, however, that she in some respects became part of that artificiality, either deliberately or unknowingly. That it was the latter is perhaps indicated by the lapse in her powers of discrimination when she applied them to poetry. For example, in the glow of her enthusiasm for Charles Mair's verse-drama depiction of the Indian, a depiction she felt to be far more realistic than that of any other Canadian author, she reveals the romantic tendencies of both her own nature and of the age. "Oh! happy inspiration vouchsafed to the author of *Tecumseh*," she exclaimed, "he has invented a novelty in fiction — a white man who deserves, wins and reciprocates the Indian maiden's love — who says, as she dies on his bosom, while the bullet meant for him stills and tears her heart:

Silent for ever! Oh, my girl! my girl!
 Those rich eyes melt; those lips are sunwarm still —
 They look like life, yet have no semblant voice.
 Millions of creatures throng and multitudes
 Of heartless beings flaunt upon the earth;
 There's room enough for them, but thou, dull fate —
 Thou cold and partial tender of life's field
 That pluck'st the flower; and leav'st the weed to thrive —
 Thou had'st not room for her! Oh I must seek
 A way out of the rack — I need not live
 . . . but she is dead —
 And love is left upon the earth to starve,
 My object's gone, and I am but a shell,
 A husk, an empty case, or anything
 That may be kicked around the world.⁹

This rhetorical, melodramatic homage to Shakespeare Pauline Johnson found "refreshing", thus indicating, perhaps, the standards she set for herself in verse-writing. Mair became one of her closest friends: "Oh!", she wrote to him, "you are half an Indian, I know — the best half of a man, anyway — his heart." She invariably addressed him as "My Dear Tecumseh" and on one of her tours she wore an exquisitely-made costume that Mair had sent her from Prince Albert. He frequently insisted that if ever his play were brought to the stage only Pauline Johnson could play his Indian heroine. She was, he said, a "true poet", one "of a race knit up in the noblest way with our history", the "Canadian Sappho"

⁹ *Ibid.*

whose poetry would live "even in this dark age."¹⁰

The "dark age" referred to was that period just before and after Pauline Johnson's death. Perhaps at no other time has the prospect for Canadian literature been bleaker than what it was then. As Desmond Pacey has aptly suggested, if the last three decades of the nineteenth century could be termed "the golden age" of Canadian literature, "the first two decades of the twentieth were without a doubt the age of brass."¹¹ Said Mair, referring cynically to the work of Ralph Connor, "No one reads poetry except the poets themselves; the whim of the flimsy day is the novel."¹² Even most of the verse writers were considered in some quarters as mere dilettantes and not poets at all. Mair, for example, regarded Service, MacInnes and Drummond as "jinglers, coarse rhymesters or worse".¹³ And the story of how Pauline Johnson's days were made reasonably happy ones only through the generosity of devoted friends is a well-known one. By the end of the war she, like so many personalities of another era, was virtually forgotten.

THIS NADIR in the history of Canadian letters introduces one last significant aspect of Pauline Johnson's reputation — its quite remarkable re-ascendency in the nineteen-twenties. Why this should be can be partly and certainly interestingly explained by reference to another literary personality — John W. Garvin.

Garvin is surely one of the most fascinating figures in Canadian letters. A stock-broker by profession, he had evidently decided during the war that his ability as a businessman and his enthusiasm as a student of literature could be combined to sell Canadians an awareness of their literary achievements. He admitted to having written "about 130 poems", but, he said, "I have greater confidence in my philosophical theories and in my capacity as a literary critic."¹⁴ Beginning modestly by an edition of Isabella Valancy Crawford's poems and some articles on poets in the *Public Health Journal*, Garvin was by the early nineteen-twenties a well known anthologist and booster of Canadian writing. These achievements, how-

¹⁰ Public Archives of Canada, Denison Papers, 6001, Charles Mair to George T. Denison, April 19, 1913.

¹¹ *Creative Writing in Canada* (1st ed. Toronto: Ryerson, 1952), p. 82.

¹² Denison Papers, 4454, December 28, 1901.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4424, October 15, 1901.

ever, were to exact in the next decade a large price from both the man and his reputation. Garvin's "pet hobby", as he called it, was to bring him (and his wife, Katherine Hale) financial ruin. Even worse, perhaps, it was to identify him in the minds of later rebelling poets and critics as one of F. R. Scott's "expansive puppets" who "percolate self unction" when the "Canadian Authors Meet". For Garvin and his literary pretensions seem no more at home than where "the air is heavy with 'Canadian' topics", where one is mixing with the *litterati* and the maple leaf is praised "beneath a portrait of the Prince of Wales".

But none can deny that Garvin (and others like him) helped to generate a new awareness of Canadian literature. Garvin's circle of enthusiastic *litterati* in Toronto indicated the beginning of a movement such as Canada had not beheld since Confederation. Garvin edited anthologies, undertook lecture tours, even organized newspaper controversies over such topics as "Who was the real Father of Canadian Poetry?" or "Who are our greatest poets?" Today we cannot help flinching before some of his superlatives. In one of his letters he wrote: "I and other discriminating critics rate Charles Mair and Isabella Valancy Crawford as the greatest poets Canada has produced."¹⁵ In other correspondence he styled Charles G. D. Roberts, his son, Lloyd Roberts, Albert Durrant Watson, Pauline Johnson and Robert W. Norwood as also "great". After a careful reading of Norwood's "Song of a Little Brother", he reported that he "unhesitatingly ranked him" as great too. It may not be irrelevant here to note that Norwood, an Anglican minister, had other talents as well. As Garvin described him: "He is such a splendid fellow, so brilliantly versatile; read[s] Browning's 'Calaban' in a masterly manner and sings comic songs incomparably. He could make a fortune on the vaudeville stage".¹⁶

The posturing extravagance of these people in both their verse and criticism has had a rather curious influence upon the history of Canadian letters. For this whole literary movement of the early 'twenties had an anachronistic affinity with that of the post-Confederation period. As then, the poets of the later time, supported by patriotic critics, seemed obliged, as A. J. M. Smith has noted, to gather "their singing robes about them to hymn the mysteries of Life and the grandeurs of Empire",¹⁷ to regard their craft as one of a very high "high seriousness". But,

¹⁴ Queen's University Library, Mair Papers, Garvin to Mair, May 23, 1913.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, November 17, 1915.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, December 14, 1915.

¹⁷ *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, p. 2.

as Desmond Pacey has remarked, with their nineteenth-century emphasis upon nature and love, they seemed unaware that a new age had come into being, and that even it was changing rapidly.¹⁸ The revolutionary trends that were influencing poetry elsewhere in the world were barely reflected in Canada; here again this country had to wait another decade. The poet and man of letters of the time, in fact, stood apart from the restless world around him; he was fastidious or affected in his dress, even to celluloid collar, ribboned pince-nez and stick-pin in his cravat; new members of the group were "new singing voices" who would "surely be heard afar"; if they were female, they were "brilliant daughters" of Toronto or Montreal; if male, they were "sons of Apollo". And if they reflected the changing currents of the world outside, they did so esoterically. Albert Durrant Watson, for example, had a medium by whom he aspired to communicate mystically with voices of the past, and he was a keen follower of the adventures in spiritualism of Oliver Lodge and Conan Doyle. One of his works, *The Twentieth Plane*, Garvin described as "a remarkable book, a product of psychical research seances". Other poets were similarly souls apart.

These remarks will introduce one last paradox concerning Pauline Johnson. She became one of those Canadian poets chosen for immortality by the literary boosters of the 'twenties, and whereas she herself had encountered difficulty in having her verses published during her lifetime, her name and somewhat romantic career now assured space for those verses in a large number of text-books and anthologies. "The Song my Paddle Sings" and "In the Shadows" became familiar to pupils of elementary and secondary schools throughout Canada, pupils who, significantly enough, were undergoing, it will be recalled, what the jargon of today would call an indoctrination programme, by which the maple leaf, the beaver and Jack Canuck became almost holy symbols and Empire Day and Victoria Day occasions for nationalistic reverence. In their enthusiasms to apotheosize Canadian writers, however, the critics did themselves and their subjects more harm than good, for when more sober, less chauvinistic judgment viewed many Canadian poets as being somewhat less than great, the consequent reaction tended to sweep all our early poets aside, along with the whole corpus of what has become known as the Maple Leaf school of criticism. Thus we have the remarks of Woodcock, MacLure and Levine, which were quoted in *Canadian Literature* last summer, but are humorously significant enough to bear repeating: "Victorian versifiers like Heavysesge and Sangster and Mair were dead before

¹⁸ *Creative Writing in Canada*, p. 84.

they reached the grave”, “Lampman is a good old cheese, but Roberts and Carman belong on captions in the New Brunswick museum (Carman’s verse is to poetic speech what Baird’s Lemon Extract used to be to Demerara Rum)” and “the dead wood of the nineteenth century”.

But such criticism is just as invalid as that of Garvin and his friends of the ’twenties. Pauline Johnson has suffered from both. The time has long since come, surely, for what she as an intelligent woman would have most wished, an unprejudiced, dispassionate assessment not of her verse in isolation, but of her verse in reference to the conditions by which it was written. If we attempt this, I think we shall see that she is to be neither unrestrainedly praised nor sneeringly scorned. For she tells us something about what it was like to be a writer in the eighteenth-eighties and ’nineties in Canada; she tells us something about what became the fabric of our literary history. She herself, certainly, had none of the pretensions to that greatness so romantically ascribed to her by over-enthusiastic critics and well-meaning schoolmarm and schoolmasters. Nor did she wish anyone, one can infer from her private correspondence, to make apologies — or even anthropologies — for her. Perhaps what she was, what she tried to do and what effect she has had upon the enlightened, contemporary Canadian are reflected by Ethel Wilson’s reminiscence in, ironically, the same number of this periodical as were the remarks quoted above:

Many years later I saw her in a crowded street. She was much much older, yet she had a sad beauty. She was ill, walking very slowly and lost in sombre thought. Memory rushed in and, stricken, I watched her as though I had done it.