

A MARITIME MYTH

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IT IS AMAZING, though not surprising, what Bliss Carman means to a majority of Canadians. They think back to school days, hesitate, and mention “Low Tide on Grand Pré”, falter over whether or not he wrote “Tantramar Revisited”, muse over “Vestigia” (‘I took a day to search for God’), and lapse into memories of other school days in other times. For the people in the Maritimes, things are different, but not much. Thanks to the New Brunswick Tourist Bureau, Fredericton is called the Poet’s Corner of Canada, with the elms—some decayed—magically reminiscent of the vaulted ceilings of the other Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey. At the University of New Brunswick there is a plaque dedicated to Carman, Roberts, and Sherman, and a bronze bust of Carman in the foyer of its library whose much needed haircut receives jibes from students, and professors, alike. Once a tree was planted at Carman’s grave (“Let me have a scarlet maple for the grave-tree at my head”) but that was twenty-five years after his death, and was brought to the attention of the university by an American tourist, and the university succumbed in an anniversary mood. People mumble about Carman, and are proud. His poems are not fondly remembered; rather, there is an apathy, a superficial awareness that a poet once roamed the New Brunswick fields, wrote a few poems, was a nice boy, but died.

And perhaps this attitude is right after all. For was Carman a poet to be proud of? There is pride here, but is it not superficial? There is the bronze bust, the rusted plaque, the grave-tree; but is there anything more? Should there be? Is it worth mentioning if there is? Is this shallow reverence in the Maritimes an acknowledgement of a kind of gift which flourished with the maritime air, and was stilled? Is there greatness here?

Carman wrote some fine regional poetry, and his knowledge of the maritime

scene is authentic and clear. But does regionalism make a good poet? Because a poet is remarkably Canadian, and captures the Canadian mood, does this make him great? Surely a poem which would be understood and appreciated everywhere is called great. Where is Grand Pré? The autumn colours may be scarlet and golden, the hills may be ablaze with colour, but does that picture appear real to a resident of Hawaii, or to one who lives on the Canadian prairies, for that matter? Regionalism does not make a poet great, though to listen to some Maritime scholars, one would certainly think so. What about the poetry, then?

The most remarkable thing about Carman's poetry—if not remarkable, at least it is the most noticeable—is that it is so highly imitative. Desmond Pacey says:

The fact is that Carman is one of the most 'derivative' poets who ever lived. This is as true of his best poems . . . as of the inferior works.

Even the kindly James Cappon says the same thing:

Everything in Carman's training and temperament tended to attach him to the older tradition in literature . . . even his style and methods of composition when they have the most individuality show respect of the standards of older literature.

Any reader can agree with these men. There abounds in Carman's poetry a great deal of conscious, and at times, unconscious, borrowing from the poets whom he admired. And he admired a great many. At times this was done skilfully; at other times the blatant borrowing is stultifying to the reader.

The most obvious pattern in Carman's poetry is one that is essentially Romantic in character and tone. From the publication of *Low Tide on Grand Pré* (1893), through the *Songs of the Sea Children* (1904) and *April Airs* (1916), and in the *Later Poems* (1921), there is the always present Romantic tone. Carman, like his Canadian contemporaries, was much attracted to the beauty and magic of the songs of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. He sang of Nature as Wordsworth did, with the same attitude of child-like fascination. From the Lyrical Ballads he learned that simple diction was the best method to describe Nature. It was easy to imitate Wordsworth; there was the similar environment. Carman was a young man with wild nature all about him, and one whose memories were deeply rooted in New Brunswick's wind-swept marshes and rocky coast-lines when the nature poetry of Wordsworth with its lyrical magic took possession of his verse.

Carman's haunting lyricism is best when he writes about Nature:

And there when lengthening twilights fall
As softly as a wild bird's wing,
Across the valley in the dusk
I hear the silver flute of spring.

(“The Flute of Spring”)

Like Wordsworth, Carman revelled in the physical beauty of external Nature; he worshipped the vivid loveliness of a budding tree, a blooming flower, and the restless inimitable sea. He attempted, as Wordsworth did, to liken man to Nature and its phenomena:

Was it a year or lives ago
We took the grasses in our hands,
And caught the summer flying low
Over the waving meadow lands,
And held it there between our hands?

The while the river at our feet—
A drowsy inland meadow stream—
At set of sun the after-heat
Made running gold, and in the gleam
We freed our birch upon the stream.

(“Low Tide on Grand Pré”)

Here is Wordsworth's contemplation and music, mingled with his plaintive wistfulness. Carman adopted the Wordsworthian philosophy that Nature was good. Both poets believed in the essential goodness of man and Nature; and Carman saw God in Nature:

I took a day to search for God
And found him not. But as I trod
By rocky ledge, through woods untamed
Just where one scarlet lily flamed
I saw His footprint in the sod.

(“Vestigia”)

But Carman cannot be called, like Sangster, a true Wordsworthian Canadian poet, for he was too conscious of symbols in his Nature poetry. He saw himself as a part of Nature and considered that he, too, was growing like a plant:

Between the roadside and the wood,
Between the dawning and the dew,
A tiny flower before the sun,

Ephemeral in time, I grew.
 ("Windflower")

Wordsworth used the flower as a symbol of Nature, but his Nature poetry was a summation of philosophy rather than true symbolism. Carman used Nature, its growth and decay, as an inherent symbol, and he related his myth of man to Nature and the seasons.

As did Coleridge and Shelley, Carman expressed his ideas in terms of physical sensations. He modelled his first ballads after Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"; the suggestive and pictorial metaphors are not always concrete and are often illuminated mystically as are Coleridge's. Many of his poems, and especially "The White Gull", suggest Shelley; there is the use of similes in great profusion and the restless spirit of Shelley:

The gray sea-horses troop and roam;
 The shadows fly
 Along the wind-floor at their heels;
 And where the golden daylight wheels,
 A white gull searches the blue dome
 With keening cry.

But where Carman occasionally uses the fervid tones of Shelley, he sings most frequently in the autumn calms of Keats. The Keatsian love of beauty is manifest in all his work; every object to Carman was a 'thing of beauty', and what was sordid he disregarded. By the use of exquisite diction, he tried to attain Keat's supremely natural utterance in order to create a poem that would be individual, spontaneous, and poignantly musical. He never attained the rapture, the joy, and the exuberance which Keats created, but at times he almost succeeded. With his classical training, Carman could equal Keats in subject matter, but the Keatsian atmosphere was unattainable. The influence of Keats is strongest when Carman uses metaphor and personification to give an excessively Romantic character to his verse:

Lo, now far on the hills,
 The crimson fumes uncurled
 Where the caldron mantles and spills
 Another dawn on the world.
 ("A Northern Vigil")

Possibly, too, the undercurrent of melancholy in Carman's verse owes much to Keats. This note was originally heard in his first volume, *Low Tide on Grand Pré* (1893), and was to occur in most of his verse. He sang sad songs of absent

women, of unrest, the futility of striving, and the Arcadian gardens where one would find love and dreams. His epitaph, perhaps, best exemplifies the melancholy of his poetry:

Have little care that life is brief,
And less that art is long;
Success is in the silences,
Though fame is in the song.

Keatsian metaphors seem to come naturally to Carman. In "At Michaelmas" there is the constant ability to find the right concrete image for his thought:

Soon we shall see the red vines ramp
Through forest borders,
And Indian summer breaking camp
To silent orders.

The images are specific; flowers, for example, are never merely flowers, nor trees mere trees; they are always definite species (a marigold, a daisy, a scarlet maple, a silver birch). The Keatsian qualities—those of predominant colours, love of beauty, the poignant melancholy—are obvious influences upon Carman's poetry. He recognizes this debt to Keats in one of his memorial poems:

And so his splendid name,
Who left the book of lyrics and small fame
Among his fellows then,
Spreads through the world like autumn—who
knows when?—
Till all the hillsides flame.
(*"By the Aurelian Wall"*)

CARMAN'S GREATEST DEBT was to the Romantics. His rural background in the Maritimes, and his home environment, produced a temperament which can in part be equated with that of the great Romantics. His education made their poetic values coincide with his own. All his life he was conscious of his own similarities to them, and he attempted to fuse their influences into his own poetry. He was separated by over half a century from them and limited by the standards of a different continent, but like the Romantics Carman was a poet whose main inspiration was Nature; in this respect he fulfilled his desire to con-

tinue and enlarge the Romantic tradition in Canadian poetry.

Woven into the pattern of Carman's poetry is one of the marked characteristics of the Victorian age—moral purpose. Carman was brought up in an environment which accepted the Victorian values, a society which demanded that any creative work should justify its own existence by having a definite moral significance. Carman was deeply aware of Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Carlyle, and Ruskin—men who were definite teachers of society with faith in their message and a conscious purpose to uplift and instruct. But Carman did not have Tennyson's capacity for working out the flaws in his poems, either because he did not recognize them or because he was too impatient to make a satisfactory change. He did, at times, attain the Tennysonian quality of rhythm and musical cadence:

Noons of poppy, noons of poppy,
Scarlet acres by the sea
Burning to the blue above them,
Love, the world is full for me.
(“Noons of Poppy”)

If Tennyson was an inspiration to Carman's method of description and atmosphere, he was also the source for didacticism and moralism. Carman saw, as Tennyson had seen, that perfect man was a result of a reign of order. He was a traditionalist in politics and looked back to the past for an order which would come out of a faith in that past. He was sceptical about the progress of his own society and shared Tennyson's fear of democracy in politics:

We have scorned the belief of our fathers
And cast their quiet aside;
To take the mob for our ruler
And the voice of the mob for our guide.
(“Twilight in Eden”)

But if he learned to teach from Tennyson, it was more in the style of Browning and Swinburne that this teaching was established. He wrote to his mother from Edinburgh in 1893 that he had enjoyed reading Browning, and it is at that time that the Browning influence is strongest in his poetry. “The Wanderer”, written the same year, shows Browning's optimistic vigour:

Therefore is joy more than sorrow, foreseeing
The lust of the mind and the lure of the eye
And the pride of the hand have their hour of triumph
But the dream of the heart will endure by-and-by.

Where the vigour is of Browning, the rhythm of the anapaest lines is of Swinburne, an influence which for a time was predominant in Carman's verse. In *Behind The Arras* (1893), which has the Browning joy in the challenge, Carman achieves a much different style and tone from the soft, elegiac strain of his previous volume, *Low Tide on Grand Pré*. Here the mould is more of Browning; he uses the brisk pace and the metrical device of a long line in sharp contrast with a short one, which was a favourite of Browning. He could not, however, be successful with the dramatic monologue, the frame of which was too vast for Carman's mind. He lacked the intellect to give it a clear and logical development, or any real artistic unity. He could not create a picture of life and retain the sharp flavour which characterized Browning's monologues. But, at times, it was easy for Carman to make Browning's manner his own. He recaptured Browning's vision and frequently the phrases have all the vigour of the master. Browning's narrative style, with its realistic and familiar scenes, is especially apparent in "The Man With the Tortoise" (1901), and in "On the Plaza" (1900):

One August day I sat beside
 A cafe-window open wide
 To let the shower-freshened air
 Blow in across the Plaza, where
 In golden pomp against the dark
 Green leafy background of the Park
 St. Gauden's hero, gaunt and grim
 Rides on with Victory leading him.

Though the Victorian age is generally characterized as practical and materialistic, nearly all the writers, and especially the great poets, attacked materialism and exalted a purely idealistic concept of life. Carman saw Tennyson and Browning as exemplar poets fundamentally, since love, truth, brotherhood, and justice were emphasized by them as the chief ends of life. He agreed with their ideas, and their poetry had a rapid and far-reaching effect on his own verse.

One aspect of Carman's poetry which is practically ignored by his critics is his love poetry. Here, the influence of Rossetti is seen most strongly. His metaphors have the Rossetti qualities of picture and suggestion, and are often magically illuminated:

In the cold of the dawn I rose;
 Life lay there from hill to hill
 In the core of a blue pearl,

As it seemed, so deep and still.
 ("XXVII", *Songs of the Sea Children*)

He followed Rossetti's extensive use of colour words to create mood. Though Rossetti's words are usually applied to physical descriptions or room furnishings, Carman applies the medieval colour words to external Nature. He follows Rossetti in an over-indulgence in detailed descriptions. But often his many pictures are too heavy for his verse. In "Eyes Like Summer After Sundown" (1901), the tone is Rossetti, and the images have the concrete qualities which Rossetti gained in "The Blessed Damozel":

Eyes like summer after sundown,
 Hands like roses after dew,
 Lyric as a blown rose garden
 The wind wanders through.

Swelling breasts that bud to crimson,
 Hair like cobwebs after dawn,
 And the rosy mouth wind-riffled
 When the wind is gone.

The inanity of the image "hair like cobwebs after dawn" is Carman at his very worst, though it is not as bad, surely, as the image of Rossetti in "The Blessed Damozel":

Her hair that lay along her back
 Was yellow like ripe corn.

But he does achieve greatness in "Bahaman":

Where the gorgeous sunset yellows pour aloft
 and spill and stain
 The pure amethystine air and the far faint
 islands of the main.

Carman's poetry is only occasionally Pre-Raphaelite, and when it is, it is more a blending of Keats, Rossetti, and Carman's own distinctive application of the influences. From the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Carman assimilated a musical quality ("noons of poppy, noons of poppy"), a richness of colour ("Gold are the green trees overhead, and gold the leaf-green grass"), and a reaffirmation of the Keatsian love of beauty. The Pre-Raphaelites strengthened Carman's interest in the first Romantics and so, from the "last Romantics", Carman created a poetry which is for the most part Romantic in style, thought, and tone.

Bliss Carman bridged the era between the last of the great Victorians, and the new writers who evolved the complexities of Twentieth Century poetry. During this period no great major poet appeared on the literary scene: Yeats had not yet attained his greatness; the groupings of poets—the Rhymer's Club, the Georgians, the War Poets—never reached undebateable fame; Eliot was still extremely "avant garde" even toward the end of Carman's life. World poetry was in a state of fluctuation; there was no definite contemporary poetry.

Despite this, Canadian poetry flourished. The well-known Canadian poets—Carman, Roberts, Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott—wrote at this time. None of them were innovators; most of them were imitators. Carman is typical of them in that his poetry is a restatement of certain Nineteenth Century poetic values. These poets were greatly influenced by the writers in England, and tried to make Canadian poetry in the British tradition. Some poetry of imitation reaches beyond the teacher, but the verse of these poets does not. Rather, it is poetry which is reminiscent of English poetry, that vaguely refers to the Canadian scene, and poetry that is never completely successful. It is characteristic of Canadian writers to forget that to write in the English language is to compete with the best writers in Britain and the United States.

CARMAN IS THE MOST WELL-KNOWN of this flourishing in Canadian poetry, well-known mainly because his poetry is taught in Canadian schools for its strong resemblance to the great English poetry that is also taught. In both form and mood his strongest link is to the Romantic Movement. His predominant mood is one of sentimental emotionalism which his sincere and humble personality could accept without any strongly mature stabilizing factor of mind. This emotional quality has a certain charm and poignancy which was characteristic of the age and the result of the simplicity of his personality. He saw everything in terms of Nature. The connecting link in his poetry is seasonal; he correlates emotion to either spring, summer, autumn, or winter. For the most part, spring and summer, with their awakening and youthful associations, have most attraction for him. His moods are always equated with some natural phenomenon: the budding of the trees, the falling of the leaves, the ebb and flow of the tide. This is Carman's one approach to originality. The seasonal and natural phenomena are present in almost every poem, and provide the central theme of

his work, and also mark Carman's poetry as distinct from that of other poets. But it is not, after all, a very fresh idea.

His colours and imagery, too, are derived from this central theme. There is little classical, Christian, or literary imagery in his work. Even in the *Pipes of Pan*, the source of word-pictures and music is in the world of Nature. Such word combinations as "gold-green shadows", "soft purple haze", "pale aster blue", are frequently present. His musical imagery, too, is derived from the same source. For him "music is the sacrament of love" and he is a "harpstring in the wind", aware of the subtle tonal effect in Nature:

Outside, a yellow maple tree,
Shifting upon the silvery blue
With tiny multitudinous sound,
Rustled to let the sunlight through.
(“The Eavesdropper”)

Like many poets, Carman uses colour and music, not so much for their own sake, as for the mood and atmosphere which their cumulative effect would produce. Words and images are used to create intense mood-atmosphere, and to evoke in the reader an emotional reaction by means of tonal effects. Romantic and Victorian poetry is an attempt to give a subjective interpretation of life, and so is Carman's.

The whole tone of Bliss Carman's poetry is that of the Romantic Movement. His poetry is the manifestation of all the basic assumptions of Romanticism. He had the Romantic's faith in the creative imagination and the potentialities of the individual; the preoccupation with the particular rather than the general; an interest in the past; and a feeling of close companionship with Nature and God. Since his was an emotional rather than an intellectual personality, Carman found reflections of his own attitudes and moods chiefly in the poetry of the Romantics and the Victorians, concerned as they both were with subjectivity. When Carman is influenced by the Victorians, the Romantic elements of their work appear in his poetry. Carman brought nothing new to poetry as poetry—though it was new to Canadian poetry—and sought only to bring together his own favourite expressions in poetry which seemed to suit his limited view of life.

Carman's whole attitude to poetry was that of the devotee rather than a true creator. He worshipped at the shrine of poetry, but was unable to penetrate to the inner circle; his was a minor inspiration because of the narrow range of subject matter and mood. Had Carman been a truly original poet—in so far as any

poet can be original—he would have shown a development toward a greater assurance of style and a deeper emotional and intellectual content. However, between the early Carman and the late Carman the differences are of minor tones and that, for a time, one idea is predominant over others. For a while one may believe that there is a development, but always he returns to something which he had pursued before. There is no sign of growth as in Keats, no strongly conscious change as in Yeats. Carman's outlook and attitude changed very little from the beginning to the end of his work.

In the Maritimes, the people worship at this shrine of Carman, as Carman himself worshipped at the shrine of poetry. Perhaps the lack of real knowledge about his work indicates that Carman contributed nothing to world poetry, but because he was at least a poet in a world of few poets there should be the bronze bust, the plaque, and the grave-tree. Perhaps, too, it is guilt on the part of the New Brunswickers who realize that Carman had to go to the United States to have his work published, and somehow the material tributes can recompense for this, and show gratitude to Carman's wish to be buried in Fredericton.

The myth persists. Should it persist? Everything that Carman said had been said before; it was only the monotonous effect which was characteristically Carman. He used the same styles and themes as had the Victorians and Romantics, but in Carman the original intensity was lost. There is about his work a pervading monotony of tone, a lack of strength, and a slightness of content. His diction and his ideas lack the vigour of a Shelley or a Browning. He was a poet who had very little to say; yet, there is a characteristic quality to his work, a tone showing a delicacy of expression, a haunting melancholy, and a musical lyricism. Within his own artistic limits he displayed a consistency of expression; he was always able to capture the melody of a mood, the tone of an atmosphere, the colour of a setting. And even though his themes are limited, he was able to give a spontaneous quality to his verse. But all this does not make him a great poet; neither does it put him into the category that critics often do, that of a "minor but good" poet, an excuse which the myth surrounding his name seems to demand. It is the quantity rather than the quality of his verse which gives him a place in a study of Canadian poetry. He brought to Canadians an awareness of poetry and poets, and also the knowledge that when good poetry is wanted, it is found in other places rather than Canada.