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CANADIAN POETRY

By

J. Dean Nugent

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J. Dean Nugent

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Master of Science in Education degree.

Eastern Illinois University

July 20, 1958

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Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to present a balanced view of the development of Canadian poetry and how this development coincides with the social, political, and economic history of Canada. The periods of Canadian poetry are classified and several examples from each period are given. Then an account of society as it was during the same period is presented and discussed in regard to any relationships that might exist.

It would be difficult indeed to depend upon Canadian poetry alone for an interpretation of the social, political, or economic history of Canada, but perhaps even more difficult would be the task without any help from poetry at all. And so from this study of the poetry of Canada there should come a better understanding of the country, but what may be even more important, there will be an opportunity to appreciate a survey of poetic literature of a great nation from its early days to later times. A particularly refreshing part about such a job is the fact that Canadian poetry, for the most part, is content to confine itself to Canada and her people rather than discourse at length upon the mysteries of life and other such weighty problems.

In the fewest possible words, the poetry of Canada might be summed up as a record of life in Canada both as a matter of individual experiences and as it concerns her relationship with other countries and peoples.

For convenience, J.M. Smith's classification of the periods of Canadian poetry may be used. These, as enumerated in his The Book of Canadian Poetry¹, follow rather closely the major political and economic stages of Canada's history. These period

¹ A.M. Smith, ed., The Book of Canadian Poetry (Chicago, 1943).

divisions are listed as:

1. Indian Poetry and French-Canadian Folk Songs
2. Pioneer and Emigrant: The Rise Of A Native Tradition
3. The New Nationalism: "The Golden Age"
4. Varieties Of Romantic Sensibility

Indian Poetry And French-Canadian Folk Songs have mostly come to light through adaptations by modern critics rather than translations of the original poetry. Typical of these adaptations are those found in Songs of the Haida.

While only the literature of the Haida Indian tribe is to be considered here, they were by no means the only Indians to inhabit the area of the Northwest coast of North America. There were five other tribes in this region: the Tlingit, Hwokiutl, Tsimshian, Nootka, and Salish, - all with the same basic culture in an area beginning near the Columbia river in Oregon and extending north more than a thousand miles through western Canada and into Alaska, and from the seacoast to the mountains.

These Indians lived near the sea and for the most part from the sea. So much food from this source was available that many leisure hours were free for ceremonies and festivals with lavish feasts.

It isn't known exactly when these tribes developed a culture of any complexity at all, but it was certainly done

before the white men came into the area in the eighteenth century.

Today these Indians still live much as they always did, but the creative nature of their culture has disappeared. Only a few leaning totem poles remain to remind one of a society that perhaps once was as complex as those of today.

In connection with this paper, the religious beliefs of the Haida Indians are of particular interest. One of these songs of the Haida, Song of Welcome, is an excellent example of mythology in this early period:

Ai, ai, my small red man,
Why do you weep on my bosom,
Here in the Hut of the Newborn,
Fresh from the beak of the Raven,
He who made earth from the rain clouds,
He who made Queen Charlotte Islands,
He who made men from the clam mounds?

Long did you lie in a hammock
Swung near the Hanging Horizons,
Trailing your feathers of swansdown
Blown through the masks of Divine Ones,
Hearing the Whistlers, the spirits,
Pierce the dense blueness of Starland;

Lost, until my heart called to you,
Lost until my body bore you.
Wah, ah way, my small red man,
Welcome, the journey is ended. 2

2 Ibid., p. 35.

When it is known that the Haidas believed the Raven to be a spirit of creation, one who beat spray from his nest which melted to rocks and formed the Queen Charlotte Islands, and one who made the first man and woman from a clam mound -- when all of this is known, the poem tells much about these primitive people and their customs.

Actually, they had no clear-cut set of religious convictions. Their beliefs varied from tribe to tribe and were so closely connected with mythology and totemism that no distinct area of religion can be defined. The Haida Indians did firmly believe that men, animals, and plants housed spirits that were immortal and had supernatural powers which could either help or harm a man. An example of this belief is expressed by the poem which describes a Were-Bear with terrible powers:

Were-Bear, why are you not in hell?
Are you too evil for Het-gwau-la-na?
On my neck is this amulet -- See it well!
A great bear's tooth to charm you away.

Ai! If you follow my faithful squaw,
Twins she may have, if she see you now;
In this Laughing Goose Month she must hide away
In the Newborn hut by the willow bough.

I shall paint my face with a red bear paw
and dance in the light of the flowing flame,
If thou art but sent by High Sha-la-na-
Morning and night I shall call thy name! 3

3 Ibid., p. 36.

The Laughing Goose Month refers to the month of March and to further complicate matters, if the Were-Bear did cause twins to be born, the father must dance and sing as if he were pleased that he had two more mouths to feed instead of one.

A third example of this period of Canadian poetry is Song To The Wanderer. Again reference is made to the great powers of the Raven. In this instance the bird has stolen the sun to light the earth:

I cannot stay, I cannot stay!
I must take my canoe and fight the waves,
For the Wanderer spirit is seeking me.

The beating of great, black wings on the sun,
The Raven has stolen the ball of the sun,
From the Kingdom of Light he has stolen the sun.

I cannot stay, I cannot stay!
The Raven has stolen the Child of the Chief,
Of the Highest Chief in the Kingdom of Light.

The Slave Wife born from the first clam shell
Is in love with the boy who was stolen away,
The lovers have taken the Raven's fire.

The Slave who was born from the first clam shell
Has made love to the wife who was born from the shell,
This Slave man has stolen her treasures away.

He is the Wanderer spirit who calls me,
He is the One who has charge of the birds,
He is the One who loves plants, beasts, and fish.

I am the one who loves the wild woods,
I am the one who embraces the sea.
I must take my canoe and escape tonight! 4

4 Ibid., p. 36.

The next work of this era to be discussed, The Rousing Canoe Song, gives rather a complete account of the bountiful supply of game that inhabited the vastly rich homeland of the Haidas. Superstition continues to reign in importance even in this song as one finds that all other animals are safe from harm except the female otter whose body contains the soul of a witch-woman responsible for evil magic tricks:

Hide not, hide not,
Deer in lowlands,
Elk in meadows,
Goats on crag-lands.
Hide not brown bear,
Island black bear,
Lynx and cougar,
Mink and beaver.

Safe the marten,
Safe the raccoon,
Now we hunt not
Wolf and cougar,
Brant nor swan
Nor wild geese soaring,
Porpoise, whale
Nor cod nor herring.
Nor bald eagles
From the snow peaks
Curving where the bay is misty.

Lo! we hunt the female otter!
With our spears
We shall surround her.
He who slays her triumphs doubly,
Double prize shall be his portion.

Lo! we hunt the red witch-woman,
Who with magic tricks has harmed us
Even seizing our Great Copper!

Hide not, hide not,
Game in caverns,
Only hide thee, Lost Enchantress! 5

Another group of songs, from the folk poetry of the Haida tribes, that suggest the ideas and beliefs of the people, are important because of the stress they place on the sea as the life-means of the coast dwellers in times long ago just as it is today. One of these, Song Of Whip-Plaiting, must denote some sort of preparation for a small boat or perhaps a kind of net used for fishing:

In the dawn I gathered cedar boughs
For the plaiting of thy whip.
They were wet with sweet drops;
They still thought of the night.
All alone I shredded cedar boughs.
Green boughs in the pale light,
Where the morning meets the sea,
And the great mountain stops.

Earth was very still.

I heard no sound but the whisper of my knife,
My black flint knife.
It whispered among the white strands of the cedar,
Whispered in parting the sweet cords for thy whip.
O sweet-smelling juice of cedar -
Life-ooze of love!
My knife drips:
Its whisper is the only sound in all the world!

Finer than young sea-lions' hairs
are my cedar-strands:
They are fine as little roots deep down.
(O little roots of cedar
Far, far under the bosom of Tsa-Kumts! -
They have plaited her through with love,)

5 Ibid., p. 37.

Now, into my love-gift
Closely, strongly, I will weave them --
Little strands of pain!
Since I saw thee
Standing with thy torch in my doorway,
Their little roots are deep in me.

In the dawn I gathered cedar-boughs;
Sweet, sweet was their odor,
They were wet with tears --
The sweetness will not leave my hands,
No, not in salt sea-washings.
Tears will not wash away sweetness.
I shall have sweet hands for thy service.

(Ah - sometimes - thou wilt be gentle?
Little roots of pain are deep, deep in me
Since I saw thee standing in my doorway.)
I have quenched thy torch --
I have plaited thy whip.
I am thy Woman! 6

In another work, The Chief's Prayer After The Salmon
Catch, direct praise is given to their gods for what they have
given:

O kia-Kunal, praise!
Thou hast opened thy hand among the stars,
And sprinkled the sea with food.
The catch is great; thy children will live.
See, on the roofs of the villages, the red meat drying:
Another year thou hast encompassed us with life.
Praise! Praise! Kunal!
O Father, we have waited with shut mouths,
With hearts silent, and hands quiet,
Waited the time of prayer;
Lest with fears we should beset thee,
And pray the unholy prayer of asking.
We waited silently; and thou gavest life.

Oh, Praise! Praise! Praise!

6 Ibid., p. 39.

Open the silent mouths, the shut hearts, my tribe:
Sing high the prayer of Thanksgiving,
The prayer He taught in the beginning to the Kwakiutl--
The good rejoicing prayer of thanks.
As the sea sings on the wet shorthe, when the ice
thunders back,
And the blue water floats again, warm, shining, living,
So break thy ice-bound heart, and the cold lip's silence--
Praise Kunae for life, as wings up-flying, as eagles to
the sun.
Praise! Praise! Praise! 7

The coast dwellers didn't devote their entire lives to
the praise of their gods no matter how much it may seem that way.
In Song Of The Full Catch, a more down-to-earth topic is considered -
that of a man's love for his woman and his home after an
indeterminable period of fishing:

Here's good wind, here's sweet wind,
Here's good wind and my woman calls me!
Straight she stands there by the pine-tree,
Faithful waits she by the cedar,
She will smile and reach her hands
When she sees my thousand salmon!
Here's good wind and my woman calls me.

Here's clear water, here's swift water,
Here's bright water and my woman waits me!
She will call me from the sea's mouth--
Sweet her pine-bed when the morning
Lights my canoe and the river ends!
Here's good wind, here's swift water,
Strong as love when my woman calls me! 8

It will be noticed that, in regard to the mechanics of the
poetry studied, the Haidas usually developed one idea in a
stanza and often ran through a complete stanza with only short

7 Ibid., p. 40.

8 Ibid., p. 41.

pauses--a pause now signified with a comma. They employed a great deal of repetition and must have delivered their songs in a sing-song fashion. As noted before, spirits, charms, and omens were mentioned time and time again and the Indians themselves were given a good deal of attention in their little stories. The very names of the spirits mentioned are also interesting. The poetic quality of such names as Het-qwau-la-na and High Sha-la-na is almost too perfect to be true and might indicate that the Haidas were willing to improvise for the sake of rhythm just as the more modern poets do.

Fire, canoes, rivers, and lakes are also often a part of Indian poetry just as they were so important to a society that depended upon the outdoors for its existence. With the passing of time, the songs of the coast dwellers show a change of emphasis. The emphasis has been shifted from fishing and prayers to the materialism of a "full catch". Again, praise is given to their many gods and spirits.

Another phase of Canadian poetry is that of the French-Canadian folk songs. An example will show that lightness, simplicity, and love of beauty were as much a part of the early Canadian life as were the ever-present hardships:

Le Pommier Daux

An apple tree there groweth,
 Fly away, my heart, away;
An apple tree there groweth
Within my father's close;
 So sweet,
Within my father's close.

Oh, bright is every leaf thereon,
 Fly away, my heart, away;
Oh, bright is every leaf thereon
And sweet the fruit that grows
 So sweet,
And sweet the fruit that grows.

The King's three lovely daughters,
 Fly away, my heart, away;
The King's three lovely daughters
Beneath its branches lay,
 So sweet,
Beneath its branches lay.

The youngest wakens lightly,
 Fly away, my heart, away;
The youngest wakens lightly;
My sister, here is day!
 So sweet.
My sister, here is day!

'Tis but a star that's gilding,
 Fly away, my heart, away;
'Tis but a star that's gilding
With its sweet light our love,
 So sweet,
With its sweet light our love.

Our lovers ride to battle,
 Fly away, my heart, away;
Our lovers ride to battle
Their love for us to prove.
 So sweet,
Their love for us to prove.

And if they gain the battle,
 Fly away, my heart, away;
And if they gain the battle
Our love shall crown the day,
 So sweet,
Our love shall crown the day.

Oh, let them win or let them fail,
 Fly away, my heart, away;
Oh, let them win or let them fail,
Our love is theirs alway,
 So sweet,
Our love is theirs alway. 9

In this translation it is easy to catch the rhythm and repetition that are so important in any folk-song.

Oddly enough, many of the folk-songs originally brought over from France are now unknown in the mother-country and can be heard only in the Province of Quebec and their existence there is threatened by its modern society.

More to the point, however, would be the conditions that existed when these folk-songs were first sung in Canada. Jacques Cartier laid claim to an area surrounding the St. Lawrence river as early as 1534 for France. For sixty years France paid little attention to her holdings until Samuel de Champlain persistently built and held together a trading-post and called it Quebec.

After Champlain's initial efforts, missionaries journeyed into Canada and became a dominant factor in the feudalism of New

9 Ibid., p.46.

France called the seigniorial system. Perhaps because of tradition and perhaps because of necessity, the personal bond between lord and vassal was retained, with the all-important military obligations still intact.

The lowest member of the seigniorial system was the habitant. With an average of 100-400 acres he raised his food, served his lord, and sang the folk-songs that are so seldom heard today.

While the following song was first heard only in the old country, its meaning may very well have held just as well in New France after a skirmish with the ever-present savages:

Malbrouck

Malbrouck has gone a-fighting,
Miron-ton, miron-ton, miron-taine,
Malbrouck has gone a-fighting
But when will he return?

Perchance he'll come at Easter
Or else at Trinity Term.

But Trinity Term is over
And Malbrouck comes not yet.

My Lady climbs her watch tower
As high as she can get.

She sees her page approaching
All clad in sable hue:

"Ah page, brave page, what tidings
From my true lord bring you"?

"The news I bring, fair Lady,
Will make your tears run down;

"Put off your rose-red dress so fine
And doff your satin gown.

"Monsieur Malbrouck is dead, alas!
And buried too, for aye;

"I saw four officers who bore
His mighty horse away.

"One bore his cuirass, and his friend
His shield of iron wrought;

"The third his might sabre bore,
And the fourth - he carried nought.

"And at the corners of his tomb
They planted rose-marie;

"And from their tops the nightingale
Rings out her carol free.

"We saw, above the laurels,
His soul fly forth amain;

"And each one fell upon his face
And then rose up again.

"And so we sang the glories
For which great Malbrouck bled;

"And when the whole was ended
Each one went off to bed.

"I say no more, my Lady,
Miron-ton, miron-ton, miron-taine,
I say no more, my Lady,
As nought more can be said." 10

10 Ibid., p. 45.

The second major period of Canadian poetry is classified as The Rise Of A Native Tradition. Oliver Goldsmith, namesake of his famous granduncle, is one of the writers of this period whose works contributed to the moulding of a "native" tradition among the Canadians. His contribution is also interesting because of its implications concerning his uncle's well-known work, The Deserted Village. It will be recalled that this poem described the tragedy of a village as it fell victim to the ravages of commercial industry.

The Deserted Village was completed in 1770 by Oliver Goldsmith, two years after it was begun. The death of his brother, the Rev. Henry Goldsmith, occasioned his return to the home of his youth where he found:

.....Thy sports are fled, and all thy charms
withdrawn;
Amidst thy bowers the tyrant's hand is seen,
And desolation saddens all thy green:
One only master grasps the whole domain,
And half a tillage stints thy smiling plain;
No more thy glassy brook reflects the day.
But, chok'd with sedges, works its weedy way;
Along thy glades, a solitary guest,
The hollow sounding bittern guards its nest;
Amidst thy desert walks the lapwing flies,
And tires their echoes with unvaried cries.
Sunk are thy bowers in shapeless ruin all,
And the long grass o'ertops the mouldering wall,
And, trembling, shrinking from the spoiler's hand,
Far, far away, thy children leave the land! ll

ll Horatio S. Krans, introduction, The Poems of Oliver Goldsmith (New York and London, 1908), p. 54.

Goldsmith actually felt that England was being depopulated because of trade and commercial prosperity while, in reality, such conditions create population. What he didn't take into consideration was the fact that as peasant farmers are turned from their land they become a part of another economic world. This is inevitable -- it is the new replacing the old and Goldsmith's views were probably ones of lamentation rather than careful consideration.

The younger Oliver Goldsmith felt it his duty to picture, in turn, The Rising Village:

What noble courage must their hearts have fired,
How great the ardor which their souls inspired,
Who, leaving far behind their native plain,
Have sought a home beyond the western main;
And braved the terrors of the stormy seas,
In search of wealth, of freedom, and of ease!
Oh! none can tell but they who sadly share
The bosom's anguish, and its wild despair,
What dire distress awaits the hardy bands
That venture first on bleak and desert lands;
How great the pain, the danger, and the toil
Which marks the first rude culture of the soil.
When, looking round, the lonely settler sees
His home amid a wilderness of trees:
How sinks his heart in those deep solitudes,
Where not a voice upon his ear intrudes;
Where solemn silence all the waste pervades,
Heightening the horror of its gloomy shades. 12

These few lines of The Rising Village will be enough to present Goldsmith's idea of a group of Loyalist settlers facing

a wilderness. Throughout the poem he reviews those reasons given in The Deserted Village for the suffering of English peasants and then compares their miserable life to the life in The Rising Village where one

.....Now finds his dwelling, as the year goes round,
Beyond his hopes, with joy and plenty crowned. 13

Oliver Goldsmith himself entered the government service in Canada and later became commissary-general of Nova Scotia.

The rise of a native tradition or nationalism in Canada actually began with the experiences of the War of 1812. This entirely unsatisfactory war, as far as both England and the United States were concerned, had its origin over controversies about the neutral rights of the United States during the Napoleonic Wars. This and an unfavorable attitude toward Great Britain by Americans in general caused three years of fighting and ended with no major decisions for either country. Such was not the case with Canada, however, because the fighting brought British and French Canadians closer together than ever before.

The War of 1812 also convinced the Americans that Canada was not to be included in their "Manifest destiny."

So great, in fact, was this new-found nationalism that Canada began to drift away from English domination. General

13 The Poems of Oliver Goldsmith, p. 54.

unrest caused by political blunders and a serious depression after the War of 1812 led to a rebellion in 1837 which, while it was wild and unorganized, did call to the attention of England the fact that Canada was developing a maturity which demanded some sort of independence and recognition from England.

Most of the type of poetry written during this post war period was similar to The Rising Village and was of about the same mediocre quality. It was produced by judges, ministers, and schoolmasters and had a Puritan air about it much different from what one would expect from the rugged men of the times. One minor exception to this nationalistic trend is a work by the Reverend George Mountain who eloquently expressed how the Indian had suffered injustice and cruelty at the hands of the white man:

The Indian's Grave

Bright are the heavens, the narrow bay serene;
No sound is heard within the shelter'd place,
Save some sweet whisper of the pines, - nor seen
Of restless man, or of his works, a trace;
I stray, through bushes low, a little space:
Unlook'd - for sight their portel leaves disclose;
Restless no more, Lo! one of Indian race;
His bones beneath that roof of bark repose

Poor savage! in such bark through deepening snows
Once didst thou dwell - in this through rivers more;
Frail house, frail skiff, frail man! Of him who knows

His master's will, not thine the doom shall prove;
What will be yours, ye powerful, wealthy, wise,
By whom the heathen unregarded dies? 14

No study of the period of Canadian native traditions would be complete without giving reference to at least one of Joseph Howe's poems. Joseph Howe is known both for his literary contributions and politics, having served on many important commissions and having been made premier of Nova Scotia in 1860. His major accomplishment, however, came when he was honored with the lieutenant-governorship of his province in 1864. An example of his loyalty to England and devotion to Nova Scotia can be found in The Flag Of Old England. The Mayflower in this poem is the emblem of the Province of Nova Scotia:

All hail to the day when the Britons came over,
And planted their standard with sea-foam still wet,
Around and above us their spirits will hover,
Rejoicing to mark how we honor it yet.
Beneath it the emblems they cherished are waving,
The rose of Old England the roadside perfumes;
The Shamrock and Thistle the north winds are braving,
Securely the Mayflower blushes and blooms.

chorus

Hail to the day when the Britons came over,
And planted their standard with sea-foam still wet,
Around and above us their spirits will hover,
Rejoicing to mark how we honor it yet.
We'll honor it yet, we'll honor it yet.

In the temples they founded, their faith is maintained,
Every foot of the soil they bequeathed is still ours,

The graves where they moulder, no foe has profaned,
But we wreath them with verdure, and strew them with
flowers!

The blood of no brother, in civil strife pour'd,
In this hour of rejoicing, encumbers our sould!
The frontier's the field for the Patriot's sword,
And curs'd be the weapon that Faction controls!

Chorus - Hail to the day, etc.

Then hail to the day! tis with memories crowded,
Delightful to trace 'midst the mists of the past,
Like the features of Beauty, bewitchingly shrouded,
They shine through the shadows Time o'er them has cast.
As travellers track to its source in the mountains,
The stream, which far swelling, expands o'er the plains,
Our hearts, on this day, fondly turn to the fountains
Whence flow the warm currents that bound in our veins.

Chorus - Hail to the day, etc.

And proudly we trace them: No warrior flying
From city assaulted, and fanes overthrown,
With the last of his race on the battlements dying,
And weary with wandering, founded our own.
From the Queen of the Islands, then famous in story,
A century since, our brave forefathers came,
And our kindred yet fill the wide world with her glory,
Enlarging her Empire, and spreading her name.

Chorus - Hail to the day, etc.

Ev'ry flash of her genius our pathway enlightens --
Ev'ry field she explores we are beckoned to tread,
Each laurel she gathers, our future day brightens--
We joy with her living, and mourn for her dead,
Then hail to the day when the Britons came over,
And planted their standard, with sea-foam still wet,
Above and around us their spirits shall hover,
Rejoicing to mark how we honor it yet.

Chorus - Hail to the day, etc. 15

15 Ibid., p. 64.

Joseph Howe gained a reputation as an orator in 1835 when he was tried for libel because of an article which he wrote for a newspaper. In the article he spoke against corruption and inefficiency in the Halifax government. His defense of his statements was impressive and there is no account that he was found guilty.

Alexander McLachlan is also an interesting poet to consider during the period of The Rise Of A Native Tradition because his interests were not so much in the future of Canada as they were in the present of Scotland. In a song from The Emigrant, he begins what was to have been an epic of the pioneer. He never finished the work, but enough is given here to explain his reasons for "leaving home."

Old England is eaten by the knaves,
Yet her heart is old right at the core,
May she ne'er be the mother of slaves,
Nor a foreign foe land on her shore.

I love my own country and race,
Nor lightly I fled from them both,
Yet who would remain in a place
Where there's too many spoons for the broth.

The squire's preserving his game.
He says that God gave it to him,
And he'll banish the poor without shame,
For touching a feather or limb.

The Justice he feels very big,
And boasts what the law can secure,
But has two different laws in his wig,
Which he keeps for the rich and the poor.

The bishop he preaches and prays
And talks of a heavenly birth,
But somehow, for all that he says,
He grabs a good share of the earth.

Old England is eaten by knaves,
Yet her heart is all right at the core,
May she ne'er be the mother of slaves,
Nor a foreign foe land on her shore. 16

It is easy to recognize the faults of this poetry, but for one of little schooling and no knowledge of self-criticism McLachlan expresses a sincerity that is of value in itself.

The third major period of Canadian poetry, The New Nationalism: "The Golden Age" falls roughly within the eighteenth eighties and nineties. Canadian verse at this time developed into a school of descriptive nature poetry. A brief look at political and economic conditions during the eighties and nineties at first makes one wonder how any new nationalism could arise from such apparent government corruption and depression. The truth of the matter is that "The Golden Age" applies only to poetry because of the breaking away from England's influence and in no way coincides with any like-movement in any phase of Canadian life and culture.

One big reason that Canada failed to develop any great traditionalism was the continuous loss of her citizens to the United States. Certain trade agreements between the United

16 Ibid., p. 66.

States and Canada that were no longer applicable placed commerce in a state of stagnation, leaving Canada with the larger losses. As a result her people left Canada and entered the United States by the thousands.

Added to the generally poor economic state of affairs in Canada were the growing charges of corruption in a government which had been in power for twelve consecutive years. The head of the department of public works was charged with such "mismanagement, corruption, and graft, that in comparison the notorious Tammany machine of New York was said to "smell sweet." 17

A good example of the concentration upon descriptive nature poetry of the "The Golden Age" is Isabella Crawford's The Canoe:

My masters twain made me a bed
Of pine-boughs resinous, and cedar;
Of moss, a soft and gentle breeder
Of dreams of rest; and me they spread
With furry skins, and laughing said,
"Now she shall lay her polish'd sides,
As queens do rest, or dainty brides,
Our slender lady of the tides!"

My masters twain their camp-soul lit,
Streamed incense from the hissing cones,
Large, crimson flashes grew and whirl'd,
Thin, golden nerves of sly light curl'd
Round the dun camp, and rose faint zones,
Half way about each grim bole knit,

17 Carl Wittke, A History of Canada (New York, 1942), p. 108.

Like a shy child that would bedeck
With its self clasp a Brave's red neck;
Yet sees the rough shield on his breast,
The awful plumes shake on his crest,
And fearful drops his timid face,
Nor dares complete the sweet embrace.

Into the hollow hearts of brakes,
Yet warm from sides of does and stags,
Pass'd to the crisp dark river flags;
Sinuous, red as copper snakes,
Sharp-headed serpents, made of light,
Glided and hid themselves in night.
My masters twain the slaughter'd deer
Hung on fork'd boughs - with thongs of leather.
Bound were his stiff, slim feet together--
His eyes like dead stars cold and drear;
The wand'ring firelight drew near
And laid its wide palm, red and anxious,
On the sharp splendor of his branches;
On the white foam grown hard and sere
 On flank and shoulder.
Death--hard as breast of granite boulder,
 And under his lashes
Peer'd thro' his eyes at his life's grey ashes.

My masters twain sang songs that wove
(As they burnish'd hunting blade and rifle)
A golden thread with a cobweb trifle--
Loud of the chase, and low of love.

"O Love! art thou a silver fish?
Shy of the line and shy of gaffing,
Which we do follow, fierce, yet laughing,
Casting at thee the light-wing'd wish,
And at the last shall we bring thee up
From the crystal darkness under the cup
 Of lily folden,
 On broad leaves golden?"

"O Love! art thou a silver deer,
Swift thy starr'd feet as wing of swallow,
While we with rushing arrows follow;
And at the last shall we draw near,
And over thy velvet neck cast thongs--
Woven of roses, of stars, of songs?
New Chains all moulden
Of rare gems olden!"

They hung the slaughter'd fish like swords
On saplings slender--like scimitars
Bright, and ruddied from new-dead wars,
Blaz'd in the light--the scaly hordes.

They pil'd up boughs beneath the trees,
Of cedar-web and green fir tassel;
Low did the pointed pine tops rustle,
The camp fire blush'd to the tender breeze.

The hounds laid dew-laps on the ground,
With needles of pine sweet, soft and rusty--
Dream'd of the dead stag stout and lusty;
A bat by the red flames wove its round.

The darkness built its wigwam walls
Close round the camp, and at its curtain
Press'd shapes, thin woven and uncertain,
As white locks of tall waterfalls. 18

An exception to descriptive nature poetry comes from George Frederick Cameron who displays a pessimistic quality that more nearly approaches a classical stature than the traditional works of his period. In The Way Of The World he expresses the pessimism and emotionalism that was his contribution to Canadian poetry.

18 The Book of Canadian Poetry, p. 130.

We sneer and we laugh with the lip--the most of us do it,
Whenever a brother goes down like a weed with the tide;
We point with the finger and say - oh, we knew it! we knew it!
But, see! we are better than he was, and we will abide.

He walked in the way of his will--the way of desire,
In the Appian way of his will without ever a bend;
He walked in it long, but it led him at last to the mire,--
But we who are stronger will stand and endure to the end.

His thoughts were all visions--all fabulous visions of flowers,
Of bird and of song and of soul which is only a song;
His eyes looked all at the stars in the firmament, ours
Were fixed on the earth at our feet, so we stand and are
strong.

He hated the sight and the sound and the sob of the city;
He sought for his peace in the wood and the musical wave;
He fell, and we pity him never, and why should we pity--
Yea, why should we mourn for him--we who still stand,
who are brave?

Thus speak we and think not, we censure unheeding, unknowing,--
Unkindly and blindly we utter the words of the brain;
We see not the goal of our brother, we see but his going,
And sneer at his fall if he fall, and laugh at his pain.

Ah, me! the sight of the sod on the coffin lid,
And the sound, and the sob, and the sight of it as it falls!
Ah, me! the beautiful face forever hid
By four wild walls!

You hold it a matter of self-gratulation and praise
To have thrust to the dust, to have trod on a heart that
was true, -
To have ruined it there in the beauty and bloom of its days?
Very well! There is somewhere a Nemesis waiting for you. 19

Probably the best known Canadian poet is Bliss Carman.

Carman wrote about nature as did his contemporaries, but he

19 Ibid., p. 146.

introduced a spiritual quality along with his call-of-the-wild ideas that was attractive and more appealing to more people.

Bliss Carman's most-praised work, Low Tide On Grand Pre shows this mingling of nature and, in this instance, death.

The sun goes down, and over all
These barren reaches by the tide
Such unclusive glories fall,
I almost dream they yet will bide
Until the coming of the tide.

And yet I know that not for us,
By any ecstasy of dream,
He lingers to keep luminous
A little while the grievous stream,
Which frets, uncomforted of dream--

A grievous stream, that to and fro
Athrough the fields of Acadie
Goes wandering, as if to know
Why one beloved face should be
So long from home and Acadie.

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.

There down along the elms at dusk
We lifted dripping blade to drift,
Through twilight scented fine like musk,
Where night and gloom awhile uplift,
Nor sunder soul and soul adrift.

And that we took into our hands
Spirit of life or subtler thing--
Breathed on us there, and loosed the bands
Of death, and taught us, whispering,
The secret of some wonder-thing.

Then all your face grew light, and seemed
To hold the shadow of the sun;
The evening faltered, and I deemed
That time was ripe, and years had done
Their wheeling underneath the sun.

So all desire and all regret,
And fear and memory, were naught;
One to remember or forget
The keen delight our hands had caught;
Morrow and yesterday were naught.

The night has fallen, and the tide....
Now and again comes drifting home,
Across these aching barrens wide,
A sigh like driven wind or foam:
In grief the flood is bursting home. 20

Pauline Johnson gained a measure of success for her poetry, not so much because of its excellence, but mostly because her father was a full-blooded Indian chief of the Six Nations Confederacy, and her mother was an Englishwoman. Critics and journalists played up her poetry and made it seem that she spoke with the authentic voice of the Indian. Actually, most of her poems are cut-and-dried lyrics such as Shadow River:

A stream of silver gladness,
Of filmy sun, and opal-tinted skies;
Of warm midsummer air that lightly lies
in mystic rings,
Where softly swings
The music of a thousand wings
That almost tones to sadness.

20 Ibid., p. 198.

Midway 'twixt earth and heaven,
A bubble in the pearly air, I seem
To float upon the sapphire floor. A dream
Of clouds of snow,
Above, below,
Drifts with my drifting, dim and slow,
As twilight drifts to even.

The little fern-leaf, bending
Upon the brink, its green reflection greets,
And kisses soft the shadow that it meets
With touch so fine,
The border-line
The keenest vision can't define;
So perfect is the blending.

The far fir-trees that cover
The brownish hills with needles green and gold,
The arching elms o'erhead, vine-grown and old,
Repictured arc
Beneath me far
Where not a ripple moves to mar
Shades underneath, or over,

Mine is the undertone;
The beauty, strength and power of the land
Will never stir or bend at my command;
But all the shade
Is marred or made
If I but dip my paddle blade;
And it is mine alone.

O! pathless world of seeming!
O! pathless life of mine whose deep ideal
Is more my own than ever was the real!
For others Fame
And Love's red flame,
And yellow gold: I only claim
The shadows and the dreaming. 21

21 Ibid., p. 211.

Varieties of Romantic Sensibility, featured the addition of an intellectual spirit to descriptive nature poetry. The intellectual contribution was a good thing in itself, but at the same time the nature aspect of the poetry became a matter of convention rather than originality.

The period of the Varieties of Romantic Sensibility covered the early twentieth century which found the people of Canada enjoying new prosperity and development. A small part of this prosperity was due to increased trade with England, but the mother country was not alone in reaping the rewards of Canada. Discoveries of minerals, exploitation of lumber, and wheat exports resulted in foreign capital from many nations pouring into Canada. This in turn created a westward expansion movement much like the one in the United States a few generations before.

By 1905 Alberta and Saskatchewan had reached provincial status and the Northwest Territories gained political power.

Also, as in the United States, the westward expansion in Canada produced a particular variety of poetry -- the strong type writing about the brutal realism that was so much a part of his life. The most familiar of this poetry was by Robert Service, author of The Shooting of Dan McGrew.

There were few Robert Services, however, and most of the poets fell back to descriptive nature and romantic intellectualism. Tom MacInnes was one of the most noted of these writers and his The Tiger Of Desire is given as an example of the period:

Starving, savage, I aspire
To the red meat of all the World:
I am the Tiger of Desire!

With teeth bared, and claws uncurled,
By leave o' God I creep to slay
The innocent of all the World.

Out of the yellow, glaring day,
When I glut my appetite,
To my lair I slink away.

But in the black, returning night
I leap resistless on my prey,
Mad with agony and fright.

The quick flesh I tear away,
Writhing till the blood is hurled
On leaf and flower and sodden clay.

My teeth are bared, my claws uncurled,
Of the red meat I never tire;
In the black jungle of the World
I am the Tiger of Desire! 22

Another more famous poet in the twentieth century was John McCrae who wrote In Flanders Fields. Another of his works, The Dying Of Pere Pierre, while not so popular, attempts to describe the feelings of a priest when he meets death:

22 Ibid., p. 238.

"Nay, grieve not that ye can no honour give
To these poor bones that presently must be
But carrion; since I have sought to live
Upon God's earth, as He hath guided me,
I shall not lack! Where would ye have me lie?
High heaven is higher than cathedral nave:
Do men paint chancels fairer than the sky?"
Beside the darkened lake they made his grave,
Below the altar of the hills; and night
Swung incense clouds of mist in creeping lines
That twisted through the tree-trunks, where the light
Groped through the archedes of the silent pines:
And he, beside the lonely path he trod,
Lay, tombed in splendour, in the House of God. 23

When Canadian poetry reached the period of the romantic writers in the twentieth century much of the simplicity of the earlier periods was lost. More time was devoted to intellectual matters and any comparison of poetry and the society became difficult. Such a development as this seems to be the pattern for the literature of most nations: simplicity of thought and expression as long as the peoples were primitive, and gradually increasing in complexity as the society became more specialized. This may be the result of the time available for concentration of efforts or the advancement of educational facilities or both, but at any rate it does offer a possible, if somewhat crude, standard of measurement of a society's progress or disintegration.

This standard of measurement has been quite applicable in

23 Ibid., p. 243.

the case of early Canadian poetry. Developing from the rough realism of the wilderness to the intellectual romanticism of a more complex society, Canadian poetry has altered its form as Canada has grown.

This ends the study of Canadian poetry. To say that from the time of the Haida Indian to the works of Robert Service and John McCrae, Canadian poetry reached an excellence that might rival the literature of any other country would be far fetched. But to say that it developed in scope along with the people and culture of Canada from primitive folk-songs to poems worthy of world wide criticism would be entirely correct.

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