

CANADIAN POETRY

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PART II.

POETS OF FRENCH CANADA

The French speaking poets of the Province of Quebec have received from their audience more respect and applause than has been the lot of their fellows in English speaking Canada. This accounts for the large contribution which that province has made to the literary activity of Canada. The delight which the people of Quebec have taken in the work of their own people is shown by the large number of Anthologies and collections which have been issued from time to time, gathering up not only the works of those poets who have published books of verse but also those whose work has appeared only in the newspapers of the province. The one best known is that edited by L. H. Tache, published at Ste. Hyacinthe, Quebec, in 1881. The latest and most complete is that edited by Jules Fournier, and published after his death, with a short but scholarly introduction by Oliver Asselin, by Granger Freres in Montreal in 1920. This Anthology gives selections from eighty-five French-Canadian poets with a biographical and bibliographical note on each. It is interesting to note the delightful egotism with which our French Canadian friends appropriate the term "Canadian", and use it as applying to French Canada only. M. Fournier's book is entitled "Anthologie des poetes Canadiens," but not a Canadian English speaking poet is mentioned therein.

The example given by our French Canadian friends is one which should not be followed by us. Whether a writer uses English or French, if he is Canadian, he must be considered. There are very few of us who have any real knowledge of the writers of Quebec, yet, even a superficial sketch such as this must necessarily be, would be incomplete without some mention of those who have added so much to Canadian literature; writers who bring to our attention the existence of a literature in Canada representing Latin Culture and Latin Ideals as contrasted with that which we call Anglo-Saxon; a literature which is well worthy of more consideration and study than has been given to it in the past.

Generally speaking the poetry of French Canada is inspired by the literature of France, in the same way as the literature of English speaking Canada is inspired by that of England and the United States. It, therefore, varies from time to time, as the French schools change. We may, therefore, conveniently divide the French-Canadian poets into three periods—the first from 1800 to 1850; the second from 1850 to 1900, and the third from 1900 to the present.

During the first period, from 1800 to 1850, the poets of French Canada followed in the footsteps of the poorest school of poetry which France ever possessed, viz.: the minor poets of the latter part of the eighteenth century. There is no breadth of inspiration; the style is full of mannerisms, affectations, etc., and what the French call "preciosite." The French poet, Abbe Delisle, is the best (or worst) exponent of this school. While there is charm in the vivacious and alert style of their productions, which are mostly little essays in prose, odes, satires, etc., there is little outstanding merit in the works of the early French Canadian poets. The best known are Mermet, Viger, Norbert Morin, Michel Bibaud, Bedard and Petitclair. They were, for the most part, journalists and politicians who dabbled in poetry as a pastime. There were a few patriotic songs by Morin, Mondelet and Napoleon Aubin, and

some verses in the epic style by F. X. Garneau, the historian.

The three authors of greatest merit during this period, Mermet, Quesnelle, and Aubin, were not Canadian born. The first two were natives of France, the third of Switzerland. Mermet was a native of Lyons. He was an officer in the French army, who came to Canada in 1813 and served with the British forces against the United States. His poem on the battle of Chateauguay is in point of chronology, the earliest epic in Canadian poetry. Joseph Quesnel was a naval officer who was captured by the British during the Revolutionary War, while engaged in taking arms and ammunition to the revolted Colonies. He was brought to Halifax and from there he came to Quebec, and died at Boucherville in 1809. He was the author of several comedies, and a number of epitres, epigrams, chansons, etc. Aubin was a Swiss journalist, who came to Canada in 1834. He was connected with various newspapers in Canada, in which his verses appeared from time to time. He died in Montreal in 1890.

The second period, from 1850 to 1900, shows a marked improvement over that which preceded it. Here we find the names of those who are best known of the French Canadian poets: Cremazie, Frechette, Pamphile Lemay and W. Chapman. The poets of this period were under the influence of the great revival of poetry in France during the years when Victor Hugo, De Musset, Lemartine and Chateaubriand were the pride of French literature. The lesser lights in Canada at this time were men of education and culture, barristers, judges and professional men generally who rhymed sonnets, ballads, satires, etc. Their work was considerable, and though all of it might not be worthy the name of poetry, it is yet a proof of great intellectual activity, and of interest to the student as an example of a literature flourishing thousands of miles from its source of inspiration.

Octave Cremazie, born in Quebec in 1827, is the first of the French Canadian writers who was a real poet. He

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