

LOUIS HONORÉ FRÉCHETTE.

The substance of Mr. Leigh R. Gregor's address at the last meeting of the Society of Canadian Literature in the Fraser Institute, was as follows: Mr. Fréchette is the only French-Canadian poet whose name is known to English people. This is owing to the fact that one of his books won the distinction of "coronation" in a competition of poets which took place in Paris in 1880. The victory gave him a place among French writers, and established his reputation as leader of the Canadian school. The recent publication of a volume of verse called, *La Légende d'un Peuple*, has given him the prestige of being the French-Canadian national poet.

Mr. Fréchette was born at Lévis in 1839. He received a seminary and college education. He took a law course at Laval. Whilst pursuing his studies at the university he occupied in succession the positions of assistant editor of a journal and translator for the Legislative Assembly. In 1865 he founded a Liberal paper at Lévis, which lived but a short time.

In 1866 he removed to Chicago. He remained there for about four years. On his return to the Province of Quebec he was well received, and induced to present himself as a candidate for Parliament in the County of Lévis. As a politician he experienced a variety of fortunes; happily for his literary work, a good many reverses.

In 1863 Mr. Fréchette published his first volume of verses, entitled *Mes Loisirs*. The name is suggestive of Byron's "Hours of Idleness" and does not challenge criticism. Nevertheless, the young poet was taken to task by the Hon. A. B. Routhier. The critic, whilst commending many excellent qualities, such as the richness of the expression, said: "Large images take place of ideas. * * * With few exceptions the verses have no other quality than a certain sonorous plenitude which fills the ear but does not reach the heart."

Mr. Edmond Lareau considers these words bitter and makes a favourable estimate in his History. Mr. Fréchette himself, according to Darveau, takes a very modest view of the merits of *Mes Loisirs*, and speaks of it as a *pêché de jeunesse*, but the congratulations which he received were very encouraging, if encouragement were necessary, and should be cited as a counterpoise to the foregoing criticism. Victor Hugo and Lamartine were among the number of those who applauded. Mr. Fréchette is an ardent admirer, almost a disciple, of Victor Hugo. He has experienced no stronger foreign influence. Knowing this, we possess a key to the colour and temper of his poems. Hugo is his master. In some of his shorter pieces, *à la mémoire d'Alexina, à Hilda*, he has caught the note of *Les Contemplations* and *L'Art d'être Grand Père*. *La Voix d'un Exilé*, a violent diatribe against the abuses of the administration, invites comparison with *Les Châtiments*. Like its great model, which it has not hesitated to imitate in the intemperance of its invective, it has been spoken of in the most diverse manner. That which in one quarter has been hailed as the just wrath of a censor of morals, others have declared to be an outbreak of resentful disappointment. The following lines have a good deal of vigour:

"Grisez-vous bien, ô vous que le boulet du bagne,
Devrait faire seul chanceler."

As well as—

"Oui, voilà ce que peut l'idée ardente et forte.
Elle n'a pas besoin de pesante cohorte.
De puissants monitors ou de canons rayés."

Mr. Fréchette has written a series of clever and caustic letters, called *Lettres à Basile*. "*Pêle-Mêle*" is a number of short poems without "suite." Among the best are those called *Sursum Corda* (in subsequent collections *Renouveau*), *Jolliet*, *Papineau*, *Le Mississippi*, *Le Printemps*, *à la mémoire d'Alexina, à Hilda*, *Fleurs fanées*. Some persons include *La dernière Iroquoise*. A great many others are not inferior to these in elegance of rhythm.

Les Fleurs Boréales, the volume which had the honour of being crowned by the Academy, con-

tains those pieces which, according to the author's judgment, are the best in "*Pêle-Mêle*." The latter form also the more enduring part of the first mentioned collection.

"*Les Fleurs Boréales*," says the Rev. A. B. Cruchet, in his review in *L'Aurore*, "contains five poems which are simply masterpieces. They are *Renouveau*, *Papineau*, *Reminiscor*, *La dernière Iroquoise* and *La Découverte du Mississippi*. Any of them would have been sufficient to make the author's reputation."

The largest and the most serious of Mr. Fréchette's books is *La Légende d'un Peuple*. It has a purpose—to celebrate the glorious deeds of the French-Canadian people. It has also a plan, and, therefore, continuity. It strikes an ambitious note, sustained with remarkable success, is fervently patriotic, and perhaps will come to be regarded as the national epic. It consists of three groups of episodes from Canadian History, representing three of its phases. The first treats of the discovery of Canada, the sufferings and heroism of its martyrs and pioneers; the second, of the great struggles which culminated in the battle of the Plains of Abraham; the third of the rebellion of '37-'38, and of the efforts which have been made to recover French-Canadian liberties, or, as it may appear to some, to "lead captive their fierce conquerors." In addition to these groups there are two poems by way of prologue and epilogue, called *L'Amérique* and *France*. The former celebrates the discovery of America and salutes it as the land of liberty, the modern land of promise, as doubling the sweep of the world:

"Ton aile immense, ouverte dans le vent,
Doubla l'envergure du monde."

The latter hails France as the saviour of Europe in the great upheavals of the future:

"Tu seras—et c'est Dieu lui-même qui t'y pousse—
La pacificatrice irrésistible et douce."

Notre Histoire contains a pretty figure:

"Et notre vieux drapeau, trempé de pleurs amers,
Ferma son aile blanche et repassa les mers."

The following lines are from *Ante Lucem*:

* * La Nature elle-même, aux reflets
Des nouvelles clartés que chaque âge lui verse,
Sourit plus maternelle en sa grâce diverse.

From *Le Frêne des Ursulines* a moving tribute to the memory of *Madame La Peltrie*:

"Et je rêvai longtemps; car jamais, ô vieil arbre,
A nul fronton superbe, au seuil de nul tombeau,
Je n'ai rien vu, fouillé dans le bronze ou le marbre,
De plus touchant et de plus beau.

Que celle qui porta le nom de la Peltrie,
Sainte veuve, enseignant sous tes ombrages frais,
Avec le nom de Dieu, le grand mot de Patrie
Aux petit enfants des forêts."

From other poems:

"Bientôt le blé jauni tombe à faucilles pleines."

"Deux âmes à l'affût de tous les dévouements."

Mr. Fréchette scourges the memory of Louis XV., who so shamefully neglected the colony in her time of trouble:

"Sans honte et sans mystère,
Un Bourbon nous avait livré à l'Angleterre."

"Par un nouvea forfait souillant son diadème,
Le roi de France." * * *

Vive la France, in the third group, is one of the best things that the Laureate has ever written.

"*La Légende*" contains some fine verses addressed to the British flag. With this exception, the patriotism so often spoken of above, is not Canadian, but French-Canadian patriotism. It must not be forgotten, however, that the theme is the glory of the French Canadian people. A suitable epigraph for "*La Légende*" might be drawn from itself:

"Les gloires d'autrefois comme elles sont sereines,
Et pures devant vous, vertus contemporaines."

Mr. Fréchette's style is much improved in "*La Légende*." The greatest gain is in the direction of facility. Everything is more flowing, more natural, more interesting. The narrative element occupies, with justice, a larger place. There are many passages of dramatic power. There is more originality.

been written on the subject in books and pamphlets and the daily press, there is still a mass of valuable and interesting information concerning the stretch of country between the great lakes and the Rocky Mountains which it properly falls within the scope of such a journal as this to place worthily before the public. Apart from the patriotic concern that all Canadians must feel in the development of so grand a heritage, there is in certain phases of Northwestern progress much that is extremely interesting to all cultivated and thoughtful minds. The pictorial and literary illustration of those phases, based on photographs taken and facts elicited at all the chief centres of colonizing activity, we propose to make a principal feature of our paper during the coming summer. No point worthy of special observation in that vast field of human industry will fail to receive the attention that it deserves. The improved methods of cultivating wheat, on a scale of which our forefathers never dreamed, will be portrayed in all their instructive reality. Whatever is most salient and noteworthy in the great ranching district of the further west will be made clear by views and descriptions. The advance over prairie and mountain of the iron steed which, in our day, is the *avant-courier* of civilization, will be shown in a series of graphic sketches taken at various stages along the completed and unfinished lines. Survey parties will also be delineated. The Indian will not be forgotten. Of the Mounted Police our readers shall have glimpses as they appear both on ordinary duty and on spécial service. City and village and farm, with whatever is attractive and instructive in each, will be faithfully depicted, and expanses of fertile country on which no human habitation has yet risen will be seen awaiting the settler's enterprise. Special pains will be taken to do justice to what is most striking by its grandeur or beauty in Northwestern scenery. Plain and mountain, buffalo-trail and river-course, haunt of antelope and rendezvous of water-fowl, will have their place in our panorama. But to make it such in truth—to bring within our projected series of pictures and papers every characteristic trait of our Northwest, its people and its progress—we must have the sympathy and cooperation of those who, like ourselves, are anxious that the world should see Canada as it really is. To facilitate the task of those whose aid we now invite to our project, we have appointed Mr. J. H. Brownlee, of Brandon, our special agent throughout the Northwest; and to that gentleman all correspondence on the subject, as well as photographs and sketches, should be addressed. We bespeak on his behalf and our own the cordial assistance of all patriotic Northwesters who would see "the wheat prairies of Manitoba, the green uplands of Assiniboia and Alberta's broad pastures" presented to the world as their importance demands. It is hardly necessary to insist further on the advantage to the people of the Northwest of having their country, so favoured by nature and so happily situated for supporting a large and prosperous population, described and illustrated as its great resources merit. By aiding us in carrying out our plan, there is no part not only of the older provinces of Canada, but of the United States, of Great Britain and her possessions abroad, and of the European continent, that will be left in darkness as to that splendid region of which we are so proud to-day and in which lies, to a great extent, our hope for the future.