

## Some of Our Canadian Poets.

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GREAT difficulty we find when endeavoring to properly estimate the value of our Canadian poets and their work, is that comparatively few of them have

given their poems to the world in book form. For the most part they have written under some *nom-de-plume*, and their works are only to be found scattered

through the evanescent columns of the daily papers, or in the pages of the magazines which represent the Canadian literary world.

But in these same papers and magazines how often we find priceless little gems of verse, that with their human touch seem to have come from the very depths of the writer's heart, and in the flowing rhythm of the words we find an echo of our own griefs and joys, our own laughter and sorrow. We cut them out, and



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perhaps tuck them into the edge of a picture frame, or the mirror on our dressing table, where we can see and read them often, or tenderly paste them in the pages of a big, motherly scrap book that holds so many others of their kind, and as we smooth them into place we wish we could know whose hand wrote them, whose heart inspired them. Take, for instance:

If I should die to-night  
Would my friends look upon my quiet face,  
Before they laid it in its resting place,  
And deem that death had left it almost fair,  
And, laying snow white flowers against my hair  
Would smooth it down with tearful tenderness,  
And hold my hands with lingering caress—  
Weak hands, so empty and so cold to-night

Oh, friends! I pray to-night,  
Keep not your flowers for my dead, cold brow,  
The way is lonely, I am travel-worn,  
My faltering feet are pierced with many a thorn.  
Forgive, oh, hearts estranged, forgive, I plead  
When dreamless rest is mine, I shall not need  
The tenderness for which I long to-night

Who, in reading these, has not felt the slow tears rise, that made the words grow dim, and the chords of the heart tighten, as memory

retouched the picture of some quiet room where the drawn blinds shut out the sunlight from the closed eyes and the marble face, and the laughter of the children passing in the street jarred on the aching heart that longed so passionately for a sound of the hushed voice, a touch of the folded hands. A place apart and sacred from the rest of the world, where the quiet dead slept on, unconscious of broken sobs, and the heavy perfume of flowers, and the song of birds outside—unconscious of the remorseful heart that looked back and remembered little things that could never be undone bitter speeches and unkind words, that meant so little at the time, but the remembrance of which brought such an overwhelming wave of remorse, when it was too late for the patient heart to hear the plea for forgiveness.

And who has not read the first lines of the Fool's Prayer with a smile of expectation that faded into a sigh, as the realization came of how wise was the Fool, and what fools were they who called for a jest from one who had tasted so deeply of life's bitterness.

The royal feast was done, the King  
Sought some new sport to banish care,  
And to his jester cried, "Sir Fool,  
Kneel now and make for us a prayer."

The jester doffed his cap and bells,  
And stood the mocking court before,  
They could not see the bitter smile  
Behind the painted grin he wore.

He bowed his head, and bent his knee  
Upon the monarch's silken stool,  
His pleading voice arose, "O, Lord,  
Be merciful to me, a fool."

"No pity, Lord, could change the heart  
From red with wrong to white as wool;  
The rod must heal the sin; but, Lord,  
Be merciful to me, a fool."

"Earth has no balsam for mistakes,  
Men crown the knave and scold the fool  
That did his will; but Thou, O, Lord,  
Be merciful to me, a fool."

The room was hushed; in silence rose  
The King, and sought his garden's cool,  
And walked apart, and murmured low,  
"Be merciful to me, a fool."

There are more poets in the world than those whose names are written of, and very often the sweetest songs are from the pen of those who go out with the unknown millions, leaving behind neither name nor fame.

In passing judgment on the character of our national poetry, we must confess that it is largely marked by crudity and imperfection, yet here and there a fresh note has been struck, and we find poems vibrating with life, and full of that freshness and vigor to which only the genius of a young and strong nation can give utterance.

Perhaps the earliest poems which we find in Canada are the old Chansons du Voyageur, which have always been favorites in our French provinces. The number of these is incalculable, ranging in quality from the nonsense verses sung to the child in the cradle, to the wild strains of the voyageurs, as their frail canoes shot through the rapids of the St. Lawrence, or wound their way throughout the mazes of its thousand isles. Of these chansons the most universally known is *A La Claire Fontaine*, which has been translated by Mr. W. D. Lighthall as follows:

Unto the crystal fountain  
For pleasure did I stray,  
So fair I found the waters  
My limbs in them I lay.

Other favorites are *En Roulant*, *Mouette*, *Marianson*, and *Dame Jolie*.

Ballad making still continues in the lower provinces, but most of the old charm has died

out. The place of the ancient balladists has been taken by the more polished poetry of the modern Frenchman of culture, of whom the four most prominent are Louis Honore Frechette, the Hon. P. O. Chauveau, Benjamin Sulte and M. Pamphile Le May. John Talon-Lesperance, better known to Canadian readers as *Laclede*, has also written many exquisite poems, of which, perhaps, *Epicedium* is the most beautiful.

Among our poets of Upper Canada, one of the earliest and best known was Charles Sangster, the great hearted friend of nature, whose love of lake, and wood, and mountain comes out so touchingly in his verses, and whose health gave way under uncongenial newspaper and civil service work. He was born near Kingston, on July 16, 1822, his father being a shipwright in the Royal Navy. Sangster had to struggle with great educational disadvantages, yet despite this his poems have a force and vigor, a clear insight into the beauties of nature which has earned for him the title of the Canadian Wordsworth. He published a small volume called *The St. Lawrence*, the *Saguenay*, and other poems, in 1856, and a second in 1860, but since then has given us very little. He is best remembered by his *Song for Canada*, *Brock*, and his lines on *Quebec*.

Charles Heavyside, the next poet of any importance, was born in Liverpool, 1816. He was a man of a very strange and original cast of mind, whose work was in no sense of the word distinctively Canadian. He is but little read in this country at the present time, although we will always be proud to own him as one of our greatest thinkers and writers. He published his drama, *Saul*, in 1857, *Count Filippo*, in 1860, *Jephtha's Daughter*, and *The Advocate*, a very curious novel, originally a blank verse drama, in 1865. In order to get out the third edition of *Saul* he was obliged to borrow money, which he was afterwards unable to pay. He died in great poverty in 1869.

Alexander McLachlan, born 1820, has written many poems thoroughly Canadian in tone and subject, winning for himself by his lyrical sweetness and sympathy with rural life, the title of the *Burns of Canada*. In 1845 he published a small collection of his poems, followed in 1858 by *Lyrics*, in 1861 *The Emigrant*, and *Other Poems*, and in 1874, *Poems and Songs*. His *Hall of Shadows* is well known, and in the poem *October*, he has given



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us a vivid picture of that most beautiful of months. His sense of color is especially well developed, as shown in the first stanza: