

our writer prefers most chirurgically to rub the sore, when he might have brought the plaster. A partisan, it is true, whether pamphleteer or poet (M. Fréchette is both) rarely deliberates; the flattering sensation of aping Tyrtaeus is much too tempting. No one who has read Canadian history to any purpose can be ignorant of the truth. In the treatment of the French-Canadians there was at one time much oppression; there was crying injustice; there was favouritism shown to the dominant race; there was contempt of the most galling kind for the conquered; and too often concessions were made with bad grace. Still, much has been done by the more tolerant men of English blood (Lord Durham, Lord Dorchester, and many Canadians) in attempting to weld the conflicting races and creeds into a homogeneous mass. This it is which a great number of French-Canadians—*le parti national*—not only resist, but with grossest selfishness persistently ignore in all their writings. Rightly jealous of religion and language, they allow this commendable feeling to sour into the worst forms of prejudice, the result of which is wrangling and perpetual discontent on both sides. Poems like several in "Légende d'un Peuple" must bear a large share of the blame if efforts to consolidate this divided people into a nation have till now met with very imperfect success.

The same want of balance occurs in M. Fréchette's treatment of the leaders in the rebellion of 1837. The poem of Papineau, in "Les Fleurs Boréales," is fairly representative. Now, Papineau, like several of his fellow-rebels, was amnestied, and soon after his return to Canada withdrew to Montebello on the Ottawa, where he seems to have spent his declining years in dreaming over the past and framing great schemes for the future of his race.

Gloire, succès, revers, douleurs sans trêve,  
Tout un monde endormi s'éveillait comme un rêve;  
Il lui semblait entendre, au milieu des rumeurs,  
Appel désespéré d'un peuple qui s'effare,  
Son grand nom résonner, ainsi qu'une fanfare,  
An dessus d'immenses clameurs.

The tone of this is too high-pitched. Such eulogy on such a man is overdrawn, if not tumid. One thing for which Papineau was not distinguished in that parody on rebellions was courage. He did not take part in a single engagement; and when the cause became hopeless he rapidly crossed the frontier, leaving, as usual in such cases, several far less guilty men to suffer the penalty of high treason. Most of the leaders did the same; he was merely *primus inter pares*. In fact, the end of the rebellion, so far as its chiefs were concerned, is rather a pungent satire on its pompous *début*—the old, old tale of the chestnuts in the fire. To celebrate the coryphaeus of this movement in the following verses:

L'on eût dit que déjà sa tête glorieuse  
Rayonnait d'immortalité

to speak of his death as

cet astre qui s'éteignait,

or

Ce n'était pas le mort, c'était l'apothéose.

is to employ the most grandiose manner of Hugo on a very unworthy subject. When Hugo writes of Napoleon, he tells us that the numbers throng in crowds upon his fiery lips; but when M. Fréchette falls into the same mannerism in describing the leader in a provincial struggle, whose name in certain circles raises a smile of not altogether quiet contempt why, "c'est tout simplement faire *boum, boum!*" How much greater is the reader's pleasure on turning from this blistered writing to a poem entitled "Vive la France!" in which love for the old land is unspoiled by any expression of hatred towards England. The facts of the narrative are simple—that a few warm-hearted Canadians offered their services to the French consul at Quebec to aid the cause of France after Bazaine's base surrender of Metz. They were humble working-folk, but in a moment of generous ardour they became heroes. Surely one does not think less of their offer because the law of nations would not admit its being accepted. Listen to the simple, heartfelt words of their spokesman:

Monsieur le consul, on nous apprend là-bas  
Que la France trahie a besoin de soldats.  
On ne sait pas chez nous ce que c'est que la guerre;  
Mais nous sommes d'un sang qu'on n'intimide guère,  
Et je me suis laissé dire que nos anciens  
Ont su ce que c'était que les canons prussiens.  
Au reste, pas besoin d'être instruit, que je sache,  
Pour se faire tuer ou brandir une hache;  
Et c'est la hache en main que nos partisans tous;  
Car la France, monsieur, la France, voyez vous.

Où, monsieur le consul, reprit-il, nous ne sommes  
Que cinq cents aujourd'hui, mais, tonnerre! des hommes  
Nous en aurons, allez! Prenez toujours cinq cents,  
Et dix mille demain vous répondront, Présents!

The note is strong and true; never has this poet's hand struck firmer. When in humble places he finds a generous impulse, a thrill of honest love or enthusiasm, or an act of self-sacrifice, his genius answers with a sympathetic burst, and a noble poem is written. Higher praise it is impossible to find; for when a poet's inspiration rises with the moral strength of his theme, and when, on the contrary, the meanest passions and strife of men can stir him up only to brassy verses and language which is little better than the veriest billingsgate of literature, it tends to show that heart and judgment are after all in their right place, and that his wanderings from the narrow way of true poetry must be pardoned fully and freely.

Another example of the best that M. Fréchette can accomplish in this vein is the poem "La Découverte du Mississippi," which stands first in "Les Fleurs Boréales." Its breath of conception and loftiness of tone convey a

strong suggestion of "Les Orientales." Whom, indeed, have those fire-laden verses not inspired? So complete is their influence that it is seen even to the adoption of Hugo's familiar swinging stanza.

Le grand fleuve dormit couché dans la savane,  
Dans les lointains brumeux passait la caravane  
De farouches troupeaux d'élan et de bisons.  
Drapé dans les rayons de l'aube matinale  
Le désert déployait sa splendeur virgine  
Sur d'insondables horizons.

Fertile in historic suggestion, the stream calls up a host of names, but first of all Jolliet.

Le voyez-vous là-bas, debout comme un prophète,  
Le regard rayonnant d'audace satisfaite,  
La main tendue au loin vers l'Occident, bronzé,  
Prendre possession de ce domaine immense  
Au nom du Dieu vivant, au nom du roi de France,  
Et du monde civilisé!

Deux siècles sont passés depuis que son génie  
Nous fraya le chemin de la terre bénie  
Que Dieu fit avec tant de prodigalité;  
Qu'elle garde toujours, dans le plis de sa robe,  
Pour les déshérités de tous le coins du globe,  
Du pain avec la liberté!

Yes, to those sturdy pioneers all honour is due—to the men whose dauntless courage led to the opening up of the Western world. It was time that a fine tribute was offered to the memory of Jolliet and Cavalier de La Salle in his unknown grave. Note, too, the happy manner in introducing the names suggested by the stream:

O grand Meschacébé! Voyageur taciturne,  
Bien des fois au rayon de l'étoile nocturne,  
Sur tes bords endormis je suis venu m'asseoir;  
Et là, seul et rêveur, perdu sous les grands ormes,  
J'ai souvent du regard suivi d'étranges formes  
Glissant dans les brumes du soir.

Tantôt je croyais voir, sous les vertes arcaïdes,  
Du fatal de Soto passer les cavalcaïdes,  
En jetant au désert un défi solennel!  
Tantôt c'était Marquette errant dans la prairie,  
Impatient d'offrir un monde à sa patrie,  
Et des âmes à l'Éternel!

The poet at one time used to spend many hours on the sedgy banks of the slow-moving river, and there, during the intervals of his work, he found the *motif* for what is after all his finest single conception. No pen had before made a special subject of this inland tide, now laden with vessels, but in far-away days disturbed only by the paddle of the red man. So much history lay concealed in the now flourishing western country that one cannot but marvel at the suggestive power which could condense it into the limits of one short poem. The historic sense of M. Fréchette is so marked (except when he writes of the "Anglo-French duel") that light and shadow, perspective and artistic effect, all find due notice in this masterly production. Each great discoverer gets his share of notice and praise.

Such, then, are the poems which win for their author the name of national poet, a title which he may perhaps be willing to accept at the hand of one in whom he has instilled a living interest in his country and its history. For, instead of wasting time and strength on foreign topics, as Crémazie and other French-Canadian poets have done, he has seen in the annals of his native land a wealth of poetical subjects little suspected by those whose knowledge of Canadian history has been formed in the class-room, under a dry and prejudiced pedagogue. That he should defend his own side is not surprising, but that his fire and conviction have not led to false impressionism is indeed remarkable. From the first almost to the last the balance of judgment is preserved, and such exceptions as have been mentioned above, regrettable though they be, serve to give greater vividness to the general excellence of the work. Indeed his good sense is throughout so noticeable that the more rabid writers in Quebec utterly repudiate M. Fréchette's claim to the honour of a national or representative Canadian poet. Can the reader guess why? At the beginning of this article reference was made to the strength of the clerical element in Quebec, but no definite idea was given of the degree to which the Province is priest-ridden. To outsiders it is hardly possible to convey in words an adequate conception of the grinding power of the Church in this country. Suffice it to say that in many of the most barren districts of the Province—in the Sauge-nay District, for example—the traveller sees, in the midst of a collection of hovels, churches and *presbytères* which would do credit to thriving towns; and to one whose human sympathies are active the contrast between the unctuous *curé* and his etiolated parishioners is at once significant and discouraging. The Church flourishes in followers and defenders as well as in purse. Now, M. Fréchette's reading in history has taught him that the influence of the priest, whether single or in cohorts, has never been in the direction of liberty and enlightenment. He has found, as must every candid student find, that, notwithstanding their boasted martyr-monks their endeavours have always been towards temporal power, which, once obtained, degenerates into ecclesiastical tyranny of the most inflexible kind. Could a man of true feeling, a lover of freedom, political and intellectual, find any inspiration in the chronicles of the Church of Rome in Canada, except in so far as a few isolated heroes reminded him that the man was not invariably absorbed in the priest? Save a few touches about the first monks butchered by the Indians, not a line is given to the memory of the Church on this side of the Atlantic. M. Fréchette is far too honest to praise where he does not feel, and he deserves no small credit for having passed over in almost complete silence the acts of an organized despotism with which he

has evidently not the faintest sympathy. Had the Church been the loser in her struggles, he would doubtless have had much to say of her patience and bravery; but seeing that her success has led to systematic oppression and a policy of obscurantism, he cannot, with his principles of liberty, find one word in her favour as an institution. The devotee, who sometimes takes to review writing, is shocked at such an omission, for a writer in *La Revue Canadienne* has recently made a desperate effort to prove that M. Fréchette is no national poet.

The remaining poems are contained partly in "Les Fleurs Boréales," partly in "Les Oiseaux de Neige," and in a small collection entitled "Pèle-Mêle." They are for the most part short copies of verses written for friends, for special occasions, for albums; they naturally show the merits and the defects of such writings. Scrupulously finished in metre and diction, they reach a high level of stylistic excellence, and might be held up to many a provincial verse writer as models of neat form. Rarely does a writer, trained by himself rather than by the criticism of enlightened reviewers, succeed in attaining so high a standard as does M. Fréchette in most cases. But a poet who has, like him, adopted without question the principles of the Romantic school, who openly confesses to *Hugolatry*, is bound to pay strict attention to details of execution; and the reader need not be reminded of the variety demanded of a writer of French verse. He displays in these compositions written many years ago, a thorough knowledge of versification that proves his study of the greatest of modern masters. Details would be superfluous, but any reader would at a glance be struck by the turns and mannerisms, the diction and technique, so familiar to every one from his first reading of Hugo. The hiatus, the shifted caesura, the full stop in the middle of the verse, the broken couplet, the abuse of the note of exclamation, are perhaps less noticeable in the early work than in "Légende d'un Peuple," upon the style of which a word will presently be said; but the stanzaic form, the sway of the verse, the flashing epithet and simile, are everywhere, brilliant examples of the wish to write in keeping with the magnificent model. An excellent specimen is found in "La Dernière Iroquoise," a hideous tale of Indian cruelty. The squaw has stolen a white child. Before tearing it to pieces and dancing around the remains in a style that would have delighted Dante, she breaks out into a frenzied address to the St. Lawrence, calling to the spirit of the river to remember the past, when the Indian was sole lord of forest and stream.

Fleuve, te souvient-il de ces jours sans nuage,  
Quand dressant au printemps son wigwam sur la plage,  
L'Iroquois sur tes bords venait chasser le daim?  
De nos courses sans fin te souvient-il encore  
Quand le vol cadencé de l'aviron sonore  
Emportait nos canots bondissant sur ton sein?

Te souvient-il encore de la brune Indienne  
Dont la voix se mêlait, sonore, aérienne,  
Aux mille murmures du soir,  
Quand elle suspendait à la frêle liane,  
Et balançait au vent sa mouvante nâgane,  
Berceau d'un guerrier à l'œil noir?

In spite of the highly poetized expression, the Indian is not treated as a hero of romance; there is no trace of Cooperism. The poet is far too well aware, as all Canadians are, of the general moral worthlessness of the red-skin to be carried away by single cases of good conduct into vague admiration for the race. Still, savage pride and persistence are worth preserving, even though one may think America happy in reducing the Indian's hold upon the land, while deploring the method and its results. Such examples of aimless and beast-like vengeance are only too common in the history of this continent.

Without further multiplying quotations, it is worth noting that here and there our poet breaks out into flashes of poetic imagery, now vivid, now graceful. In "La Liberté" occurs the following:—

De saints espoirs ma pauvre âme s'inonde,  
Et mon regard monte vers le ciel bleu,  
Quand j'aperçois dans les fastes du monde  
Comme un éclair briller le doigt de Dieu!

Again, in a sonnet on the Thousand Islands, we find them described as

Chapelet d'émerquade égrené sur les eaux.

Any one who has seen the lovely group will feel the fitness of this delicate figure. Touches of this sort are frequent in M. Fréchette's lighter work. So far as sonnets go (and pity it is that every verse-writer feels bound to engender sonnets), the less said is perhaps the better. A cluster of purely descriptive ones, entitled "L'Année Canadienne," in which a sonnet stands for each month and tells of Canadian duties or pleasures, with several odd ones originally written for albums, which might have been left to fulfil their blameless function in peace, complete his tale. Mr. William Morris once declared that "a mediocre sonnet is more hateful to gods and men than any other versified mediocrity, . . . and complete success is not common, even where the thought is not over deep." Learning and practising a dictum of this kind are only second to formulating it; but a good second is not always attained,—certainly not by M. Fréchette in this instance. It is well to remember that an indifferent sonnet is scarcely more acceptable than an indifferent egg. Let us hope that the forthcoming volume, "Feuilles Volantes," will not be marked by weakness in sonnet-writing.

The later work, "Légende d'un Peuple," shows little of that exquisiteness of finish so characteristic of the early poems, the attention to trifles which suggests a morning spent in chasing a rhyme or a sounding epithet. Vigorous