

The Significance of Canadian Literature

By Lionel Stevenson

Through heredity influenced by the traditions of Great Britain, through environment affected constantly by the conditions prevailing in the United States, the Dominion of Canada is intellectually, as well as economically, a country of interesting anomalies. Although for over a century Canadians have been producing literature in a quantity disproportionate to the sparse population, heretofore no effort has been made toward a scientific analysis of their literary output. The whole matter of "overseas literature"—the extension of literary production in the English language into all parts of the empire—is a neglected aspect of nineteenth-century English literature. Yet such an investigation ought to provide an illuminating commentary on contemporary culture, and in the case of Canada there are particularly interesting situations arising from the mingling of British and American elements. The selection of these elements and their adaptation to the circumstances of a new country provide material for the study of the migration of culture; moreover, such data might help toward the formulation of a standard by which to estimate the relative vitality of various current ideas.

Tested by the rigours of a country which is only now emerging from the pioneer stage, and where man and his works are still subordinate to the vastitudes of primeval nature, the institutions and fashions of civilization take on new semblances. Whether this reversion to the primitive is preferable to the involutions of a highly developed society has been a topic of debate since the days of Rousseau; but, setting aside theories of *les temps d'innocence et d'égalité*, there can be no doubt that the human imagination was acting in such an environment when it evolved some of its loftiest conceptions of the supernatural. And indeed, several of the greatest periods in the world's literature, such as those of the Hebraic scriptures, the Homeric epics, and the Elizabethan drama, were ages of pioneering, when man was pitting his strength against mighty natural obstacles. In the light of these truisms, if not for its intrinsic greatness, Canadian literature merits attention. As reflecting the reaction of the modern mind when placed in circumstances approximating those of the primitive myth-makers, and as indicating the attitude of such a mind toward contemporary movements in the world of 'civilization,' Canadian literature has a certain value to anyone interested in the history of culture.

At first glance, Canada's position seems to have produced something of a neutralizing effect. There is little of the characteristic swing and swagger of Australian literature, which may be for convenience labeled as typically 'colonial,' nor are there the bizarre contrasts of oriental and occidental conventions which give distinction to the literature of Anglo-India. So far as subject matter and 'local color' are concerned, Canada does not differ very essentially from the United States. The Indian, the prairie of cattle ranges and grain, the forests and mines—all these exist south of the forty-ninth parallel as well as north of it. Even so unusual a figure as the French-Canadian has his counterpart in Louisiana. There remains the climate, sufficiently distinctive to have earned for



Wadds, Photo
LIONEL STEVENSON, Ph.D.
(Probably one of the youngest "Doctors of Philosophy")

The editor of the **BRITISH COLUMBIA MONTHLY** believes that many readers will be interested in Dr. Stevenson's article on "The Significance of Canadian Literature," which we reproduce from the "University of California Chronicle." This is one way in which we are glad to demonstrate interest in the work of this young Canadian and British Columbia University man of a literary promise, of which this review article itself is an earnest.

Generally speaking, youth may be held a handicap, if not a disqualification, in a literary critic or reviewer: but it is well to remember that, judged by the portion of time devoted to such studies, a person may, comparatively speaking, be considerably older than his years. The recognition of that fact influenced us when we last year asked Mr. Stevenson to contribute a review of "Verses for My Friends" by British Columbia's revered writer, Mr. Bernard McEvoy. How many of us—of riper years than Dr. Stevenson—long to be so situated that we may overtake more than the fraction of reading that the crowded days and nights allow us to do!

We quote from or supplement the outline of Dr. Stevenson's career previously published in this Magazine: Born in Edinburgh in 1902, he has lived in Canada since 1907. He graduated from the University of British Columbia in 1922, and received a Fellowship at the University of Toronto, taking the degree of M.A. there in 1923. He then became a teaching fellow on the staff of the University of California, where he received the degree of Ph.D. this spring and was appointed Instructor in English.

We understand he is continuing to make a special study of Canadian literature. One of his articles in the "Canadian Bookman" was reproduced in the English journal, "Public Opinion," and also in the French "Mercure de France." A later article was published in the "English Review." His poetry has appeared in various periodicals, and a one-act play by him has been produced by the Playshop of Berkeley, California. He is a member of the California Writers' Club and the Canadian Authors' Association.

It is about seven years since the **BRITISH COLUMBIA MONTHLY** welcomed his first contribution, and various verse and articles by him have appeared in these pages since. While in common with his other friends in British Columbia, we wish Dr. Stevenson increasing success in his literary work in California, or wherever his lot may be cast, we may express the hope that sooner or later he will become a member of the staff of the University of British Columbia.

Canada the title, "Our Lady of the Snows"; but this feature of the country has fallen into the hands of the popular fiction-mongers and scenario-concocters, who have reduced it to a convention utterly divorced from reality.

Indeed, Canadian fiction almost without exception has conformed to the formulae of popular magazine stories. Of all literary genres the novel is far the most susceptible to commercialization, owing to the wide public which responds to a certain type of narrative; so any Canadian novelist wishing to make a living by his writings is almost compelled to follow the conventions which the British and American stories with a so-called Canadian setting have taught the public to expect. The most considerable Canadian novelist, Sir Gilbert Parker, practiced the historical romance without making any important innovation, and the other 'best sellers' of the country, such as "Ralph Connor" and L. M. Montgomery, have been content with traditional styles of adventure and sentiment acceptable to numerous readers. Only one type of fiction can be definitely attributed to Canadian origins, and that is the animal story as developed by the two Canadians, Charles G. D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson-Seton, wherein credible episodes replace the discursive and ratiocinative personages of the "beast-epic."

In poetry the subordination of Canadian material to external conventions has been less complete than in fiction. It is true that during the early part of the nineteenth century formalism prevailed. One Oliver Goldsmith, grandson of the more famous bearer of the name, wrote "The Rising Village," in which Sweet Auburn was resuscitated in the western hemisphere; and the styles of Goldsmith and Moore—the latter visited Canada in person and wrote there his well-known "Boat Song"—for many years monopolized the poets of Canada, except in certain Scottish settlements, where Burns was the deity. In the last twenty years of the century, however, a group of poets began to produce work of greater significance. The chief names in this group were Bliss Carman, Charles G. D. Roberts, Duncan Campbell Scott, Archibald Lampman, W. H. Drummond, and Pauline Johnson. The two latter may be considered first, as they stand apart somewhat from the others. Both depicted in verse the life of certain isolated elements in the Canadian population—Dr. Drummond the French-Canadian habitant and Pauline Johnson the Indian. They accordingly may be classed as objective poets, whereas the others of the group are primarily reflective. It is not unprofitable to compare the situation with the greater poetic revival in England a century before, where the objective type was represented by Scott and the reflective by the Lake School. Drummond and Pauline Johnson embody the picturesque of the habitant and the Indian as Scott embodied the picturesqueness of the Highlander; Lampman and Carman interpret nature through intimate communion with her, as Wordsworth did. The analogy between the two eras may be carried farther: as in the romantic revival a younger generation arose in the persons of Keats and Shelley, concerned with neither picturesqueness nor philosophizing but with quintes-