

The Book World

A PLEA FOR A HIGHER LITERARY STANDARD

By Robert Allison Hood

A REVIEWER in the October "Canadian Bookman" passes the remark and probably with some justice that at the present time the Canadian novel "is much better practiced by women than by men." As explanation of this, he states that the latter, following Ralph Connor, have specialized in the different sections while the former have devoted their efforts to portraying the characters and setting forth the customs as well as describing the scenery of certain rural districts and so have given a much more truthful and representative exposition of Canadian life and character.

The men, he declares, have sought out the West as their favourite field while the women have stayed by the older and more populous districts where customs and convention have a stronger hold and where the elemental passions are kept under better control than in those wilder sections where the average man is more adventurous in spirit and the conditions of life more primitive.

Under such conditions, the resort to fisticuffs or to brute force rather than to backbiting or lawsuits for the settlement of disputes is likely to be more frequent and natural and the novelist dealing with the West is hardly to be blamed if the former obtrude themselves oftener into his tales than the latter. He must deal with his milieu as it exists. The danger is that he should place too great an emphasis on such physical contest or on mere thrilling incident and forget that even in the novel of adventure, character must be convincing-

ly portrayed and should be made to interplay with action. We have as yet had no such interpreter for our frontier life as for instance, California possessed in Bret Harte whose miners and gamblers and mountain heroines live in our memories with the favorites of Thackeray and Dickens. So far our Western literature has produced few if any that show the signs of immortality such as M'liss or Jack Hamlin or the renowned Colonel Starbottle. Characters like these are the result of an artistry far more subtle and exacting than has usually been practised by the novel-writing exponents of our Canadian West.

We must require in our writers the cultivation of a stricter literary conscience and a capacity for taking pains such as Stevenson possessed when he would write a chapter seven times over in order to get it to his liking. But this is not all. Painstaking student of his art as he was, Stevenson was aware that the technique is the only groundwork of excellence and that to achieve the finished work it requires the copestone of artistic inspiration. His was not the realistic school. "Artistic sight," he says, in one of his letters, "is judicious blindness..... It is not by looking at the sea that you get

'the multitudinous seas incarnadine.'

nor by looking at Mont Blanc.

'And visited all night by troops of stars.'

A kind of ardour of the blood is the mother of all this and according as the ardour is swayed by knowledge and seconded by craft, the art of expression flows clear, and significance and charm, like a moon rising, are born above the barren juggle of mere symbols."

'Significance and charm,' truth and beauty, therefore, as well as greater diligence in the technique of their art, are what the Canadian reading public must demand of its writers if our literature is to be worth while. They must learn to wait on inspiration and refuse to proceed without it. The public must decline to be satisfied with the mere stirring story slipshod in expression and hurriedly thrown together that will pass away an hour or two pleasantly but is not deserving a permanent place on the shelves. A good book should give as great pleasure in the second reading—if not greater—than in the first, and this is one of the truest tests of literary quality.

Our poets must seek to strike a national note and to identify themselves with the genius of the country. They may use the old forms as their vehicle but the spirit should be genuinely Canadian and their work should celebrate all that is best and most distinctive in our own country. If the ardour of patriotism animates them, foreign gold will not tempt them to forego what is their privilege even although they may complain as Wilson MacDonald in a recent book of verse remarkable for its high quality and the ferventness of its Canadian appeal:

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