

ROUND THE TABLE.

Those who are continually sniffing the air, if, haply, they may discern afar off the first faint indications of a coming Canadian literature, are wont to assign many ingenious reasons for its non-appearance. Lack of appreciation—the neglect which expatriated Grant Allen and leaves Roberts in obscurity; lack of national sentiment—the apathy which most Canadians manifest towards the ingenious and polished patriotic pieces which most of us have tried to write and which (in all cases but our own) we heartily despise for their want of the true Canadian feeling which their authors profess; lack of literary culture—a want which again we deeply deplore in all our fellows—these are some of the counts in their indictment of the Canadian public.

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And, truly, it would seem that it is rather with the people of the country than with the country itself that the fault lies. Canada is rich in undeveloped poetry. She offers in her past, in her present, in her future; in her hills, her plains; her lakes, her rivers; her forests, her mountains, material in abundance for the patriotic speaker or writer. And, were she less beautiful than she really is, poetry would not of necessity languish, for has not the heavenly weed flourished often in most unpromising soil; even with that graceful Grecian Keats himself, did not the divine afflatus mingle, in his early days, with the noisome odours of a livery-stable?

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It is not with Canada, then, that the fault lies; rather with her votaries, or those who should be her votaries. Her poets have not learned the greatness of self-abnegation. They kneel with a half-hearted worship at the shrine of poesy; they try to serve Nature and Mammon, to mingle dollars with devotion. Are we not right in holding that in our Canadian literature—as we are willing to call it—we find continual reminders of the author's personality; continual hints that they seek, not the Muses' glory, but fame and favour for themselves? In the case of that blunt old Scotchman, even, who has, in giving up his life to literature, displayed a more than ordinary love for such pursuits, we find this true, and bombast and unnaturalness are the result. So with other of our writers. The great trouble with most of them is, that each of them imagines that, by manufacturing a Canadian literature to order, he can win the Muses' favour? Nay, rather name and fame and fortune for X or Y or Z, the great Canadian Poet!

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The situation with reference to the individual writer is well summed up by Trollope in his "Autobiography." He discusses the causes of literary success and failure; and attributes the latter, in many cases, to the compulsion put upon men who have once met with success in the arena of letters, to continue therein. They wrote first because they had a message for the world; they continue writing because a petted public (or their own vain-glory) demands it of them. The distinction between most of our rhymsters and true poets is closely analogous to that drawn by Mr. Trollope between good novelists and bad; the former write because they have a story to tell; the latter because, (in their own belief at least,) they have to tell a story.

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What we need in Canada is a real, not a simulated love for literature and literary pursuits. And if the day ever comes—as in the fulness of time it surely will in Canada—when men shall look back with a smile on the Frenchified pedantries of to-day; when the noble red man shall no longer grunt in blank verse, nor poets peddle as their own the trite maxims of older and wiser heads—when that day comes, it will come as the result of the self-surrender of some enthusiast, loving literature for its own sake, not as a means of making a name or a living for himself. That is to say, not till our poets for-

get themselves in their art, shall we have what we may call, with any degree of self-respect, a Canadian literature.

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A striking example of American journalistic enterprise has just been afforded a wondering public by the New York *World*. Max O'Rell (Paul Blouet), who was over in the States last year making a study of the country and its custom, has recorded his impressions in a book entitled *Jonathan et Son Continent*, a pendant to *John Bull et Son Ile*. On Saturday, Jan. 19th, the book was published in Paris. On Sunday morning it appeared in full, translated, in the New York *World*. Think of the "go-aheadism" required to accomplish this! Of course the book had to be telegraphed across, word for word, translated, set up in type, proofs struck off and corrected, and the whole sent to press and got ready for distribution, not to speak of the rest of the paper, which contains thirty-four pages, and of which the matter of the book only occupies about an eighth, within less than twenty-four hours! It is simply phenomenal. In ordinary shape the book would be a 12mo volume of some 200 pages. Here are a few typical extracts:

"The population of America is sixty millions—mostly colonels."

"In America . . . more than anywhere else, talent without money is a useless tool. . . . The country's genius, instead of consecrating all its time to the production of works which would tend to elevate the ideas and aspirations of the people, is obliged to think of money making."

"Ah, my friend," said one of America's most graceful bards to me one day, as he touched his forehead, 'it seems to me that I have something there; that I possess the *feu sacré*, and that I might do a little share of good by my writings. But how write poems when there are rumours of panic in Wall Street?—Excuse me, I have not a moment to lose, I must rush to the Stock Exchange.'

Of New York the writer remarks: "As in London, hundreds of churches and taverns; . . . it is the same ignoble Anglo-Saxon mixture of Bible and beer, of spiritual and spirituous."

Commenting on the activity and invention of Chicago, he exclaims: "What will they not invent in Chicago? That which looks like a joke to-day may be a reality next week, and I shall not be surprised the next time I go to Chicago to find that the talking-power of woman has been utilized as a motor for the sewing-machine by connecting the chin with the wheel."

The chapter on "The American Girl" is an amusing one.

"She will not embark in romance until she sees her way to profit—and profits thereby. Fortune or a title, that is her aim. She keeps it in view, even in the most touching moments. Between two kisses she will perhaps ask her lover: 'Are you rich?' It is the pinch of rhubarb between two layers of jam."

And so on.

The book is, as it professes to be, a book of jottings. The author's impressions of the United States are given in a lively, humorous, and often epigrammatic style. He says of himself: "In speaking of a people, I like to touch on their pet transgressions, their faults and weaknesses." But he does not confine himself to making fun of the latter; he is not slow to notice and emphasize the good points of a nation. His estimate of America is decidedly an admiring one.

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They tell the story of a Sophomore from—Algoma. His own vigorous denial is discredited by the court as *ex parte* evidence. He is not youthful; he is said, indeed, to have already made such a contract with a maiden up north as will probably influence his future career to a considerable extent. His course—metaphysics—is not wholly congenial to him, and he finds it hard at times to keep his mind from wandering (northward) to the detriment of his more serious studies. Something he must do to lure his mind to labour. Accordingly he presses into service the miniature photograph of his charmer, which he has constantly about his person. This he places in his book always a dozen pages ahead of him, and presses towards it—like Douglas toward the heart of Bruce. The effect on his work, it is said, is extraordinary.