

EMPIRE FIRST.

A BIT OF LITERARY HISTORY—A NATIONAL SONG—TEN YEARS, 1878-1888.

On the 21st of March, 1888, during the debate on Reciprocity, in the House of Commons, Mr. Alexander McNeill, member for North Bruce, wound up an able speech with the following lines:

Britain bore us in her flank,
Britain nursed us at our birth,
Britain raised us to our rank
'Mid the nations of the earth.

In the hour of pain and dread,
In the gathering of the storm,
Britain raised above our head
Her broad shield and sheltering arm.

Stand, Canadians! firmly stand
Round the flag of fatherland!

These verses were declaimed with so much warmth and skill that the House greeted them by a round of cheers.

The next morning, as Mr. John Talon-Lesperance was reading the *Ottawa Citizen*, in the lobby of the Russell House, his eye fell on this passage, and while it tickled him not a little, he wondered whether the speaker knew where he got those lines or who wrote them. Naturally the honourable gentleman had read them somewhere, thought enough of them to learn them by heart, and knew when to cite them as occasion offered. In the next number of the "Ephemerides," on the 24th March, "Laclede" made a brief statement of his own authorship. Meantime the subject was taken up; the verses, which were widely copied when first published, went the rounds again after ten years. Among many communications the author received two interesting letters, which will be given below; and when Mr. Lighthall was putting together material for his *Windsor and Canterbury* volume of "Canadian Poets," out of Mr. Lesperance's verses, he chose first, and at once, "Empire First."

The letters referred to are from Mr. Malcolm MacLeod, Q.C., of Ottawa, and Mr. Alexander McNeill, M.P., of The Corran, Warton, in North Bruce, and they contain several literary and musical paragraphs, which are interesting in connection with the national song. Before publishing them, however, Mr. Lesperance asked the leave of the writers, and here is the reply in each case:—

I.

OTTAWA, October 9, 1888.

John Talon-Lesperance, Esq., Montreal:

DEAR SIR,—Your favour requesting permission to publish my letter, of some time ago, anent the McNeill episode and your national hymn of "Empire First," is to hand. I give it, fully and heartily. No later than last eve, when reading the *rare* of the moment across "The Lines," I thought sharply and keenly of your poem—the plectrum touch, masterly and true—of chords requiring but touch to give forth their never uncertain sounds.

I am glad to learn of your intended publication. It is opportune, and, I am sure, will be most acceptable, not only to our own particular people—this "Canada of Ours"—but to all British peoples, or, to put it more à *precis*, all peoples enjoying the aegis of British Empire.

I don't remember what I said in the correspondence you refer to, but I know it was true, and called for by the circumstances of the case, *selon moi*. It is at your service. Do what you like with it. With all sympathy and good wishes,

I am,
Yours ever truly,
MALCOLM MACLEOD.

II.

WARTON, October 9, 1888.

MY DEAR SIR,—I have your interesting letter of the 2nd inst., and am sorry that I have only just a moment to reply to it. I should, indeed, esteem it a very great compliment to be in any way connected with the production of so fine a poem as "Empire First." I am very glad to hear that it is to be published in the way you mentioned. As to the letter to Mr. MacLeod, I really do not recollect the form of it. I fear it is very crude and hardly fit for publication. But you are welcome to make any use of it you please.

Yours faithfully,
ALEX. MCNEILL.

J. Talon-Lesperance, Esq.

P.S.—I hope to make your acquaintance next session.

The following are the letters to which the preceding have reference:—

III.

OTTAWA, April 3, 1888.

John Talon-Lesperance, Esq., Ottawa:

DEAR SIR,—Though personally a stranger to you, I take the liberty of addressing you. I believe you are "our ever dear Laclede" of the "Ephemerides," of the *Montreal Gazette*.

Struck by the pertinency of your note (in the "Ephemerides" of March 24th) as to the lines so happily quoted by Mr. McNeill, M.P., but without due credit to the author by him, in his speech in the House, on the present question (in debate) of—really—"Annexation to the United States," I cut it out and sent him the slip, with a letter of explanation, in effect, thus:

"The lines quoted by you appeared in the *Illustrated News*, Montreal, just ten years ago, when the events of the hour, like the present, touched (as with a plectrum) the chords of public feeling to like expression. The other verses were equally good, the last,

O triune Kingdom of the brave,

incomparably fine."

I explained that, under circumstances suggestive of the hasty and little effort, I had, before that, dashed off a few lines (9 verses) on precisely the same rhythmic measure, under the heading "Our Land and Flag," published in the *Montreal Gazette*, to an air of my own, inspired by the theme. Before publishing the music, your lines, under the caption "Empire First," caught my eye, and, much preferring them to my own, I gave my air to them, and, with the assistance of a sister and a musical friend (a genius in that way, the Rev. Mr. Longhurst, a Church of England clergyman, now in charge at Granby, in the Eastern Townships, put the thing into song, with accompaniment for the piano, and published it in the *Illustrated News* of the 16th or 17th March, 1878. I enclosed a copy of it to Mr. McNeill.

As to the music, I stated that Mr. Longhurst had sent it to his father, W. H. Longhurst, a doctor of music, for many years (probably forty or fifty), and possibly still, organist and choir leader or master in Canterbury Cathedral, and, I think, professor of music in Oxford or Cambridge University; a leading author in England in sacred music, and he pronounced the thing—lines and music—perfect, and "an inspiration." With four men's voices, strong and deep-toned and fairly rendered—as, under Rev. Mr. Longhurst's leadership, tried by us in Aylmer, where he was at the time—it went fairly well, but evidently the compass is too great for general acceptance.

Mr. McNeill writes of it as a "translation from the French." This is a mistake, of course, probably from your name and names (Lesperance and Laclede.) In any case, it is a pleasure to find that he was ever anxious to find out the author of the lines, which, as he truly says, "it would be a thousand pities if they were not rescued from oblivion."

Palman qui meruit ferat.

Yours ever truly,

MALCOLM MACLEOD.

IV.

HOUSE OF COMMONS, March 31, 1888.

MY DEAR SIR,—I have to apologize for having allowed your most interesting letter to remain so long unanswered. I had not seen the communication from the *Montreal Gazette*, which you enclosed, and so the whole of your information was quite new and fresh to me.

I am delighted to discover the author of the verses of true poetry, which I have so long admired. The last verse, commencing:

O triune Kingdom of the brave!

is, in my opinion, unsurpassed by anything of its class in the language, and it is very interesting that it is a translation from the French. I had an idea that the poem was written by a Toronto man, and I had intended concluding my speech there, last Saturday night, by quoting the last verse, and enquiring if the author were present.

I handed your letter to the correspondent of the *Empire*, who will make a note of it. In this I hope I have not done wrong. It would be a thousand pities if these lines were not rescued from oblivion. As to the music, I am not a judge. But what you tell me of those who have seen and approved it, I should judge that it must be worthy to be wedded to the accompanying words. I could imagine no higher praise for it.

So much delighted was I with the verses, that I made my boy, then 5 years old, commit them to memory, so that he might recite them to his relatives in the old country, and thus give them an idea of Canadian sentiment to England, and this the child did, in 1880, greatly to their delight.

Yours faithfully,

ALEX. MCNEILL.

Malcolm Macleod, Esq., Q.C.

V.

Here are the words of the song, as it appeared at first, and, in ten years, the author has not seen fit to alter a syllable, nor to add a line, the strain being as fitted to the feelings of our time as it was to that of the day when he struck them off at one dash.

EMPIRE FIRST.

Shall we break the plight of youth,
And pledge us to an alien love?
No! We hold our faith and truth,
Trusting to the God above!

Stand, Canadians, firmly stand
Round the flag of Fatherland!

Britain bore us in her flank,
Britain nursed us at our birth,
Britain reared us to our rank
'Mid the nations of the earth.
Stand, Canadians, etc.

In the hour of pain and dread,
In the gathering of the storm,
Britain raised above our head
Her broad shield and sheltering arm.
Stand, Canadians, etc.

O triune Kingdom of the brave,
O sea-girt Island of the free,
O Empire of the land and wave,
Our hearts, our hands, are all with thee!
Stand, Canadians, firmly stand,
Round the flag of Fatherland!

The song was set to music twice within a month of its appearance—first, by Mr. Malcolm MacLeod, as stated in his letter, and, secondly, by Mr. Jules Hone, the distinguished violinist and professor of this city.

THE VIRTUES OF CELERY.

The following from the *Leeds Mercury* is worthy of special notice:—

New discoveries—or what claim to be discoveries—of the healing virtues of plants are continually being made. One of the latest is that celery is a cure for rheumatism; indeed, it is asserted that the disease is impossible if the vegetable be cooked and freely eaten. The fact that it is always put on the table raw prevents its therapeutic powers from being known. The celery should be cut into bits, boiled in water until soft and the water drunk by the patient. Put new milk, with a little flour and nutmeg, into a saucepan with the boiled celery, serve it warm with pieces of toast, eat it with potatoes, and the painful ailment will soon yield. Such is the declaration of a physician who has again and again tried the experiment, and with uniform success. He adds that cold or damp never produces, but simply develops, the disease, of which acid blood is the primary and sustaining cause, and that while the blood is alkaline there can be neither rheumatism nor gout. Statistics show that in one year (1876) 2,640 persons died of rheumatism in this country, and every case, it is claimed, might have been cured or prevented by the adoption of the remedy mentioned. At least two-thirds of the cases named heart disease are ascribed to rheumatism and its agonizing ally, gout. Small-pox, so much dreaded, is not half so destructive as rheumatism, which, it is maintained by many physicians, can be prevented by obeying nature's laws in diet. But, if you have incurred it, boiled celery is pronounced unhesitatingly to be a specific. The proper way to eat celery is to have it cooked as a vegetable after the manner above described. The writer makes constant use of it in this way. Try it once, and you would sooner be without any vegetable, with the single exception of the potato, rather than celery. Cooked celery is a delicious dish for the table, and the most conducive to the health of any vegetable that can be mentioned.

GOOD-BYE, OLD YEAR!

Good-bye, Old Year, good-bye!

I love thee well, and fain would keep thee ever,
Nor yield thy sweetness to the past, to sever
The links that bind me to thee,—ah, so dear!
Good-bye, Old Year!

Good-bye, Old Year, good-bye!

The bells ring out upon the air right gladly,
In conflict with my heart, that beats so sadly
That I can scarce restrain the falling tear—
Good-bye, Old Year!

Good-bye, Old Year, good-bye!

Thou'rt gone at last! The New Year, soft and tender,
Is here. But, heart, be still! Thou dost remember
The reason why the past to me is dear!
Good-bye, Old Year!

Windsor, N.S.

HATTIE R. McLELLAN,