

Northern Spring: The Flowering of Canadian Literature in English

The Early Years

One of the anecdotes often told by literary historians in Canada relates to the late nineteenth century poet, Archibald Lampman, who in 1880 read with delight a book called *Orion*, the first poems of another Canadian writer, Charles G.D. Roberts. It seemed to Lampman that Roberts showed an ability to write of the Canadian landscape as well as the English poets wrote of theirs, and he remarked: "It seemed to me a wonderful thing that such a work could be done by a Canadian, by a young man, one of ourselves."

At the same time Lampman also made a remark which has not so often been quoted. "A good deal is being said as to whether a Canadian literature exists. Of course it does not." And, at the time he was writing, just about a century ago, what he said was correct.

Ever since the British North American colonies came together in 1867 to form the Confederation of Canada, cultural nationalists like D'Arcy McGee had been talking of the need for a national literature. Indeed, the thought had been expressed even before Confederation when in 1864 an Upper Canadian clergyman named Edward Hartley Dewart published an anthology entitled *Selections from the Canadian Poets*, and in his introduction declared:

A National literature is an essential element in the formation of national character. It is not merely the record of a country's mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity and the guide of national energy.

But a literature is not created by a collective act of will, and for many years Canadian writers were enslaved by the pioneer mentality, which seeks to recreate in a hostile wilderness the institutions and the cultural patterns of the lost homeland. Canadian poetry and fiction, until late in the nineteenth century, were derivative in their form and imagery, while other literary genres, like drama and criticism, hardly existed at all.

It was Lampman and his friends and contemporaries, Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Car-

man and Duncan Campbell Scott, who realized that their inspiration must be found at home. They wrote the first poetry that took the Canadian landscape and the life people lived in it as the source of their imagery; starting off with a style derived from the English Romantics, the best of them recognized in the end that their new content demanded a new idiom. The first experimental Canadian poetry in a modernist sense was written by Roberts and Scott in their later years, while Roberts because of his animal stories, and Carman because of the popularity of his poetry among Americans, were the first Canadian writers to acquire an international readership.

An excellent anthology of these four men, *Poets of the Confederation*, was compiled by Malcolm Ross and published in 1960. They were the first true Canadian classics, but they hardly created a Canadian literature, for they had no immediate successors of equal stature, while Canadian fiction hardly developed at all until after the Great War. The good pre-1914 Canadian novels do not take even the fingers of a single hand to count: William Kirby's historical romance, *The Golden Dog* (1877); James de Mille's utopian fantasy, *Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888); Sara Jeannette Duncan's ironic political novel, *The Imperialist* (1904); and Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), less a novel than a series of linked humorous stories.

The Beginnings of a National Literature

It was really in the 1920s and 1930s that Canadian literature began to acquire a distinctive identity. In the western plains a whole school of prairie realists emerged, led by novelists like Robert J. Stead (*Grain*, 1926), Maria Ostenso (*Wild Geese*, 1925), and — most important — Frederick Philip Grove. Grove, who had already written novels in German as Felix Paul Greve, began his Canadian career with a book of essays,