

Canada's Poet Laureate — Bliss Carman

(By R. W. Douglas.)

The eminent writer who some time ago was crowned and declared laureate of Canada visited Vancouver this year for a brief period. Some of us who had never seen him before had the privilege of making his personal acquaintance, and heard him read some of his beautiful lyrics in his own voice.

Two years or so ago there seemed little hope among his friends that Bliss Carman would be spared to make such a journey across Canada. As "Lucian" stated, he was at Saranac Lake, in the north woods, making a brave fight with disease for his life. With encouragement from a host of friends, near and far, he fought with a stout heart an ever-recurring battle over the weakness of the body. One thing made the sharp experience less oppressive to him than it would have been to most city dwellers. To Bliss Carman the outdoor life was the natural life. Tree, shrub and flower; bird, beast and other things that live in the open had been his society from his youth. He found at a time when he needed most to know it that "Nature never yet betrayed the heart that loved her."

Perhaps it is good that Bliss Carman should learn at first hand in what high esteem he is held by his fellow-countrymen. I am afraid there have been times when he was rather more than half persuaded that he was forgotten in Canada.

It is my privilege on this occasion to attempt what can hardly be anything else but a rough and an altogether inadequate description of the poet and his works. When Charles G. D. Roberts occupied the chair of English in King's College, Windsor, Nova Scotia, in the early nineties of the last century, Bliss Carman was one of the foreign examiners in his subject, and a frequent visitor at his home. Windsor is not far from Grand Pre, and he spent many happy vacations in the lovely Evangeline country. "Of all the places I have known," he says, "none is more enchanting in its peaceful and unspoiled serenity than Grand Pre was in those years. In that beautiful land of great tides and wide meadows and comfortable quiet homes among miles of orchards, there was always something magical and charming which touched one with content and gladness. Or perhaps it is only because we were young and happy that the place must seem forever blessed."

Some one has tried to give a sketch of one of these vacation gatherings at the Roberts' home at Windsor. The host, Charles G. D. Roberts, was a medium sized man with a blonde beard and brown-spectacled-eyes, giving him the appearance of a northern Frenchman. This man was muscular, an athlete who could wield paddle, or turn lightly on the horizontal bar. The easy swagger with which he carried himself was of one accustomed to the ways of the woods and wilds. His clothing was homespun or Norfolk knickers with a velvet coat. Then, there was Douglas Sladen, from the Antipodes, a writer of pleasing variety, staying hard by in the little town all one summer, holding converse with his friend the Professor, and who afterwards wrote an account of their doings.

Among others who were of the party were two other very noteworthy men. One was all vivacity, eager restlessness, always on the move. He had the long, olive-tinted, swarthy features of the southerner, with dancing, dark, liquid eyes. He was Bohemian in every rag that he had on, from his limp bow to his smudgy white trousers. He swore and raged at nothing at all, as sudden as a lake squall, and calmed as quickly. When life flowed placidly he played poker. This remarkable individual was Richard Hovey, the actor and poet, and Bliss Carman's associate in the Vagabond books.

The other man was the Professor's cousin, a tall fellow running over six feet, well proportioned, yet with such great long legs that one only remembered them and a diminutive cap and coat. He had a great mop of blonde hair that flopped backward and forward above his regular featured face. His lips guarded a perpetual pipe and seldom opened to do anything but blow a cloud of fragrant blue smoke, or chant in a deep monotone a fragment of verse. A chair was his throne wherein he could lie fully outstretched in the lazy content of one who never exerted himself at all. This man was Bliss Carman. Both men were poets, came to Windsor to visit another poet, and all three were men of distinction. When they foregathered there must have been a medley of dreams, a strange mixture of various intellectual delights in a world of art that the wilderness of the Maritime Provinces was never to see again. It was here that they planned and sketched poems and tales to be, discussed the intricate questions of art, of its form, colour and message. For Bliss Carman, who had unwonted leisure, it was not then a question of keeping the pot boiling. The land of Evangeline kindled him to his purest melody, and he responded splendidly and with all his powers. That was the time when he wrote "Low Tide on Grand Pre," which was published in the "Atlantic Monthly." "Lucian" states that when we read of "Tantramar Revisited" we have a true picture of the marshes at high and low tide, and we find it again in the introduction to his famous Shelley ode. We see what Roberts saw, with some gleam of the light that never was. But in Carman's "Low Tide in Grand Pre" what we see is the state of the tide in the soul of the poet. No one could tell by the record what **Grand Pre** looks like, but one may vaguely and deliciously yet half sadly, guess how the poet feels about it and other things.

Bliss Carman came of good United Empire Loyalist stock, like so many of the notable men bred in the Maritime Provinces. A splendid race with which to people a new colony! They had already made good in New England, had risen to positions of responsibility and influence in their previous home, and in coming to Canada some of them had sacrificed greatly to principle. They were loyal to British ideals, and they brought with them, too, a higher culture and a broader civilization than the new country possessed at that time. They were bound to impress their spirit deeply upon the Canadian people.

The poet was the son of William Carman, a well-known barrister, and Sophia Bliss, a sister of the mother of Charles G. D. Roberts. Both cousins were born in New Brunswick, Bliss Carman on April 16th, 1861. "Lucian" states that Sabine, who wrote a book on the Loyalists, tells of four Loyalists named Bliss, who left the revolted colonies and went to New Brunswick during or after the Revolution. Two, if not three, were Harvard graduates. Three, if not all, were lawyers, and these became members of the council. Two attained the dignity of Chief Justice, and another was senior Judge of the Supreme Court. Several members of the Bliss family, he asserts, wrote verse, of which fragments have been preserved. Several men and women of a later generation had a turn for letters and poetry. Third generation from the eldest Loyalist—still quoting "Lucian," who has carefully studied the matter—third generation of jurists also was G. P. Bliss, attorney-general. Two daughters of his married lawyers, and one a clergyman. The one who married a preacher was the mother of the Roberts' family. One who married a lawyer (afterwards judge of probate) was the mother of Barry Stratton, author of "Lays of Love, and Other Poems," as well as another volume of verse, and vari-