

Charles G. D. Roberts, Poet and Novelist

(By R. L. Reid, K.C.)

Canadian Literature in the early eighties was at low tide. Sangster and Mair had ceased to sing: Story-tellers like Mrs. Leprohon and Mrs. Ross had finished their work: Most of what was being written was coming from those who had been immigrants from the old land, whose ideas were adapted to the surroundings of their old home. Suddenly there came a clear call to Canada and Canadians; a call that thrilled the young blood of the day; a call that was answered by those who heard it and resulted in what a prominent writer on Canadian Literature calls "the First Renaissance in Canadian Literature."

This call came from a young Professor of Literature in Kings College, in Windsor, Nova Scotia, C. D. G. Roberts by name. He was not a Nova Scotian by birth, but a native of the sister Province, New Brunswick. Born in Fredericton in 1860, of Loyalist ancestry, the son of a clergyman, he received his education in the picturesque old Capital. After graduation he taught school for some little time, and later was editor of "The Week," in which the first poems of Archibald Lampman appeared. He then accepted an appointment at King's College which he held for many years, carrying out his professional duties and in addition doing an enormous amount of writing, both in prose and verse. After leaving King's, he went to New York for some years and thence to London. He took his part in the Great War, although well along in life, and now he is coming back to Canada to renew old acquaintance and to make new friends among those who had not the privilege of knowing him when he was a resident of his native land.

Roberts has excelled both in poetry and prose; in poetry in his younger days; in prose in later years. In view of his approaching visit it may be opportune to make a short review of his writings as a preface to his appearance on the platform.

His earliest work was in verse. In 1880 he published "Orion," a volume principally classical studies, but including some poems with a Canadian flavor. Dr. Logan very properly calls it "an academic exercise in verse." And yet it was distinctly superior, especially in technique, to the current Canadian verse of the day. In 1887 he published "In Divers Tones." In this appears, with other Canadian themes, the

poem "Canada" which stirred the blood of young Canada from Sydney to Victoria. There are few readers of that time who did not feel a thrill of patriotic pride when they read:

"O Child of Nations, giant-limbed
Who stand'st among the nations
now

Unheeded, unadored, unhymned,
With unanointed brow,—

"How long the ignoble sloth, how
long

The trust in greatness not thine
own?

Surely the lion's brood is strong
To front the world alone!

"The Saxon force, the Celtic fire,
These are thy manhood's heritage!
Why rest with babes and slaves?
Seek higher

The place of race and age.

"But thou, my country, dream not
thou!

Wake, and behold how might is
done—

How on thy breast, and o'er thy
brow,

Bursts the uprising sun!"

It has been called "Magniloquent." Perhaps it is. Youth, in its freshness and passion is apt to be. But it had and has a tremendous appeal and would that we had more of the same kind of magniloquence in Canada today.

Then followed "The Book of the Native" and "Songs of the Common Day," full of the common life and soul of the Maritime Provinces, simple and true and beautiful poems that no lover of Canada can fail to read and re-read and appreciate. Roberts is at his best in these. He knew the life and the people, and he feels their joys and their sorrows as no other writer has done. One that is most striking in its stark terseness is his:

AN EPITAPH FOR A HUSBANDMAN

"He that would rise
Before the crowing cocks,—
No more lifts his eyes,
Whoever knocks.

"He that before the stars
Would call the cattle home,—
They linger at the bars
For him to come:

"He at whose hearty calls
The farmstead woke again,
The Horses in their stalls
Expect in vain.

"Busy and blithe and bold
He labored for the morrow,—
The plow his hands would hold
Rusts in the furrow.

"His fields he had to leave,
His orchards cool and dim;
The clods he used to cleave
Now cover him.

"But the green, growing things
Lean kindly in his sleep
While roots and wandering strings,
Closer they creep.

"Because he loved them long
And with them bore his part
Tenderly now they throng
About his heart."

His "New York Nocturnes," written when he resided in that city, fail to reach the sheer beauty and force of his Maritime Province themes.

He soon turned to prose. The early history of the country around Windsor fascinated him and he published a cycle of novels dealing with the French in Acadia, "The Forge in the Forest," a study of Abbe Le Louvre, sometimes called "The Black Abbe," the opponent to English rule in Acadia; "A Sister to Evangeline;" "The Prisoner of Mademoiselle;" and "The Raid from Beausejour." They were not a great success, not so much perhaps from the writer's lack of skill, for they are well written, but more because they had no great appeal to those who had not some knowledge of the historical setting in which the tales were placed.

He soon found the setting which did appeal. A lover of the woods from his boyhood, he began a series of tales of the denizens of the forest. These had an appeal to everyone and as Dr. Logan says: "In imaginative sweep and artistic structure they are supreme creations. As examples of a literary prose style they stand almost alone in their particular field of fiction.

The first published was "Earth's Enigmas" (1896), and this has been followed by a great number of others all of which have had an enormous circulation. Roberts has an uncanny knack of picking good titles, titles that appeal to the imagination. To name just a few: "The Kindred of the Wild;" "The Watchers of the Trails;" "The Feet of the Furtive;" "The Haunters of the Silences," etc.

Roberts will be with us in April. We will all be glad to see him and to welcome to our city one who has been in his books, our friend for many years. His visit will be an inspiration to our growing body of writers in Vancouver and afford great pleasure to those who, though not themselves the servants of the pen, love good literature and especially that which sheds lustre on our beloved Canada.