

## ALEXANDER McLACHLAN'S POEMS.

A Canadian poet: what must he be to justify his title? Is native birth a necessity, or is life-long residence a sufficient qualification? Or is there something deeper than either—a sympathy with the land and with its people, a community of thought and aspiration—that marks the true Canadian and sets its stamp upon Canadian prose and poetry worthy the name?

Long resident in the Dominion, Alexander McLachlan has a further claim to the use of our national adjective in that his writings treat largely of Canadian topics. But he deals with them in the spirit of a stranger; he has never been thoroughly naturalized. In his best work he writes as an exile from his native Scotland. Her hills and vales—"Old Ben More" and "Lovely Leven"—charm him more than the woods and lakes of the land of his adoption. He is best pleased to

"Sing the lays

Of Scotia's bonnie woods and braes,  
Of hoary hills, of dashing streams,  
Of lone rocks where the eagle screams;  
Of primrose banks and gowany glens,  
Of broomy knowes and hawthorn dens,  
Of burn-sides where the linnet's lay  
Is heard the lee lang summer's day."

It is in such passages that McLachlan, seldom wholly free from the charge of affectation, shows most of earnestness and honest feeling. We need not adduce such a bit of scurrilous doggerel as "Young Canada" to prove his utter want of sympathy with Canadian society and politics; it is shown in the lack, in those pieces which profess Canadian patriotism, of the fire and vigour which mark his poems on Scottish themes.

It seems tolerably clear, then, that McLachlan is Canadian only in externals. It is significant that his longest published poem—that containing perhaps the best of his work—is "The Emigrant."

Four several collections of his poems have been issued at different times. His earliest published work, "The Spirit of Love" is now almost wholly forgotten. It was followed by a volume of "Lyrics," which won for its author the favourable opinion of the ablest critics of this country and of Scotland. In 1861 he issued "The Emigrant and other Poems," justifying by the motto on its title-page the conclusion to which we have already come—*"coelum non animam mutant qui trans mare currunt."*

Again, in 1874, he published a fourth volume, containing many new poems with selections from the best of the old, under the title of "Poems and Songs."

Much of McLachlan's work is essentially commonplace. He is possessed of little originality of thought or sentiment, borrowing his ideas, with his metres, from well-known sources. Bathos abounds and would be more marked were it not for the generally low level on which the poet travels. "He that is down need fear no fall." With the exception of a few pieces of real merit, all that he has written seems to have been done for publication; seldom does it seem the genuine reflex of the poet's inner self. He attempts philosophy with poor success, evidently mistaking obscurity and bombastic repetition for profundity. His execution is faulty; his metre is often defective, and his rhymes, considering the sacrifices he makes for them, are not always to be commended.

But, apart from all faults of style and diction, there is much in his productions to evidence real poetic endowment. Passion he has none: he is at his best in the treatment of simple, even commonplace, themes. From this springs the chief claim of his poetry to be called Canadian, for in his painting of the work-a-day world about him, he has given us many a true picture of Canadian country life.

McLachlan's didactic poems, if prosy and often tinged with a suspicion of cant, are at all events sound in their teaching; he is always to be found on the side of freedom, justice, and right.

In "The Indian Maid," and elsewhere, McLachlan displays lyrical power of no mean order;—perhaps it is as a lyricist that he most deserves recognition. There is a composed and homely tenderness about many of his simpler pieces that places them infinitely above most of his more

pretentious productions. "The Death of the Ox" and "Auld Towser" may be instanced as proof of his kindly affection for the lower creation, and of his power of expressing true, if humble, sentiment in verse. This is evidently his vocation, though in his meditative poems all is not unworthy of praise. The lines "To an Indian Skull," beginning

"And art thou come to this at last  
Great sachem of the forest vast,—"

show a rare breadth of sympathy:

"Dreams of the hunting-field were thine—  
What better ere those dreams of mine?  
Ah! my red brother were not we  
By accident compelled to be  
Christian or savage? We indeed  
Alike inherited a creed;  
Race, country, creed were forced on thee—  
Red brother, as they were on me!  
Then why should I have loved thee less,  
Or closed my heart to thy distress,  
Red rover of the wilderness!"

To those who fail to recognize McLachlan's inspiration, we recommend a careful reading of this whole poem. Three others of a different stamp may be here mentioned as revealing the poet in a new and attractive light—"Sir Colin," the "American War Ode," "Garibaldi." They are fresh and vigorous, and display much military spirit.

In "Idylls of the Dominion" occur two poems, "October" and "Indian Summer," which for their merit, as well as for their being descriptive of Canadian scenery, deserve mention. In "October" especially, the poet seems for once to lose himself in his subject:

"Not in russet, sad and sober,  
Com'st thou here, beloved October,  
As in Europe old;  
Not with aspect wan and hoary,  
But arrayed in robes of glory,  
Purple, green and gold,  
Over continent and sea,  
To hold the full year's jubilee,  
Thou again hast come,—  
Borne on thine own fairy pinion,  
To our dear beloved Dominion,  
Our green forest home!

See how the great old forest vies  
With all the glory of the skies,  
In streaks without a name;  
And leagues on leagues of scarlet spires,  
And temples lit with crimson fires,  
And palaces of flame!  
And domes on domes that gleam afar,  
Through many a gold and crimson bar,  
With azure overhead;  
While forts, with towers on towers arise,  
As if they meant to scale the skies,  
With banner bloody red."

To the poems on Scottish subjects, mostly in the Lowland dialect, space will not permit a lengthy reference. Of these, "The Lang heided Laddie" is most widely known, and its shrewd humour justifies its popularity. "Auld Granny Brown," "Elder John," "Skipflint's Advice," "John Tamson's Address," and the anniversary poem on "Burns," which won for its author, some years ago, the Caledonian Society's prize, will repay reading. More touching, however, are "I winna gae hame," and two songs in "The Emigrant"—"Farewell, Caledonia," and Donald Ban's "Song of Regret." Both breathe a tender patriotism, and contain lines which no Scottish poet need blush to have written. Indeed, this regretful love for the land he has left seems his truest inspiration.

On the whole, McLachlan has fairly earned the right to public recognition as a poet of the simpler emotions. His faults are neither few nor slight; his work is marred less by his lack of education than by a too great self-complacency and want of sound judgment. But it has merits to redeem it, and we can persuade ourselves to forgive, if we cannot wholly forget. He is by no means the equal of Burns, to whom he has been rashly compared, and whom, plainly, he aspires to imitate. But there is a certain perspective of nationality which forms a not unworthy factor in a comparative estimate of literary greatness. It is right that we should look with a kindly eye on the modest productions of our own writers. That the sun is shining on the other side of the globe is no reason for snuffing out the moon.

DAVID MACDONALD.