

CANADIAN POETRY

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Part III.

POETS OF ONTARIO AND QUEBEC (ENGLISH)

No distinction can be drawn between the English speaking poets of Quebec and those of Ontario. They are all members of the same community with a common language and subject to the same influences and ideals. While they have been to a great extent dominated by the great English writers of their time, there has been a slow but sure development of Canadian ideals and Canadian nationality and this has been particularly noticeable since the commencement of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Some give the credit for this to the work of Bliss Carman, and C. G. D. Roberts, of New Brunswick, but it would be fairer to say that both in Eastern and Central Canada there grew up in the latter part of the last century a school of poets who were distinctively Canadian, and who expressed Canadian ideas and Canadian life in their verse to a greater degree than had been done in the work of their predecessors. We will, therefore, divide the poets of this part of Canada into two classes—those prior to 1880 and those since that date.

The two earliest whom we shall name are W. T. Hawley, of Montreal, who published "Quebec, The Harp, and Other Poems" in 1829, and was so pleased with its reception by the public that he followed it with a second volume, "The Unknown, or The Lays of the Forest," in 1831; and Adam Kidd, of the same place, who published in 1830 his "Huron Chief and Other Poems." Both were dominated by the spirit of Byron, using Canadian and especially Indian tales for their settings.

Following these are four who are among the best known of Canadian poets, Charles Sangster, Charles Mair, Charles Heavysege and T. D'Arcy McGee.

Charles Sangster was born in 1822 at Point Frederick, Ontario. As a boy he took part in the troublous times of 1837. He was editor of the Amherstburg Courier; later was connected with the Kingston Whig, and died at Ottawa in 1893, a member of the Canadian Civil Service. He published "The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay," in 1856, and "Hesperus," in 1860. While his earlier work shows the influence of Byron and his later, that of Tennyson and Wordsworth, yet he has genuine independence of thought and form. In all his work he has the message of a true poet, a love of nature and an appreciation of Canadian national life. His lyric, "The Rapid," from "Hesperus," is, perhaps his best known poem, but space will only be taken to quote a few verses from

My Prayer

O God! forgive the erring thought,
The erring word and deed,
And in thy mercy hear the Christ
Who comes to intercede.
My sins, like mountain weights of lead,
Weigh heavy on my soul;
I'm bruised and broken in this strife
But Thou canst make me whole.

We walk in blindness and dark night,
Through half our earthly way;
Our clouds of weaknesses obscure
The glory of the day.

We are as pilgrims toiling on
Through all the weary hours;
And our poor hands are torn with thorns,
Plucking life's tempting flowers.

I ask not wisdom, such as that
To which the world is prone,
Nor knowledge ask, unless it come
Direct from God alone.

Send down then, God! in mercy send
Thy love and truth to me,
That I may henceforth walk in light
That comes direct from Thee.

Charles Mair, while a resident of British Columbia and lately a visitor to Vancouver, has not published any verse since "Dreamland" in 1868, and "Tecumseh" in 1886, and must, therefore, be placed among the earlier writers. His first book was a collection of fugitive poems of varying value. In it he foreshadows his later and greater work by a prologue to Tecumseh, showing that the great Indian Chieftain was even then occupying his thoughts. "Tecumseh" is a drama founded on the invasion of Canada by General Hull in 1812, the siege and surrender of Detroit, the death of Brock at Niagara, the retreat of Proctor and the death of Tecumseh at Moraviantown. Whether it would stage is doubtful. But whether it can be acted or not, it is a magnificent piece of stately verse and a trumpet call to Canadian patriotism.

Charles Heavysege was a Yorkshireman who emigrated to Canada and published "Saul," a tragedy, at Montreal, in 1857, followed by "Count Fellippo" in 1860; "Jephthah's Daughter," in 1865, and other works. Though counted among Canadian writers because he lived in Canada, his work has no distinctive Canadianism, and might just as well have been written in England or elsewhere, as in Canada. He was a genius, burdened by poverty and lacking education. "Saul" is worthless as a play, containing over ten thousand lines as finally revised. He has no power of selection—no feeling for suspense or climax. Still, it has many excellencies; great soliloquies; vivid description. It was received with favor in both England and the United States and no less than three editions were published.

Anyone who knows the history of the Confederation of the Dominion, has heard of T. D'Arcy McGee, the eloquent Irishman, whose speeches in favor of the scheme so greatly assisted in making it a success. His connection as a young man with the Young Ireland party in Ireland, necessitated his fleeing to the United States. He returned to Ireland, but was again forced to seek his former asylum. Finding, as William Lyon MacKenzie did before him, that Liberty in the United States was no greater than that under the flag he had spurned, he came to Canada, where he soon became prominent in public life. He was assassinated in Ottawa, in 1868, owing to his opposition to the Fenian Movement. His poems, the recreation of his leisure moments, were published in New York, in 1870. Most of them are truly Irish, and are in the style of Moore, but some of the later ones are truly Canadian. His ballad on Jacques Cartier is particularly fine. A part may be quoted:

"In the Seaport of Saint Malo, 'twas a smiling morn in
May,
When the Commodore Jacques Cartier to the Westward
sailed away.
In the crowded old Cathedral all the town were on there
knees—
For the safe return of kinsmen from the undiscovered seas,
And every autumn blast that swept o'er pinnacle and pier
Fill'd manly hearts with sorrow and gentle hearts with fear.