

THE MARTIAL VERSE OF CANADIAN POETESSES

BY J. D. LOGAN

AUTHOR OF "SONGS OF THE MAKERS OF CANADA"

THE literary history of Canada contains several phenomena which are extraordinary, peculiar, anomalous, paradoxical, or unique. It contains one to which all these epithets or qualifications may be applied, namely, the priority, facility, and popularity of Canadian poetesses as martial lyrists—as the first “voices”—first in time and first in power and honour—of the Canadian people’s militant patriotism.

The relative strength of Canada’s “lady singers” (as Mr. W. D. Lighthall finically phrases his nomenclature), I should signalise as an extraordinary and peculiar literary phenomenon. The quickness with which the men of Canada have perennially, from early nineteenth century days to the present, perceived and acknowledged the gift of literary speech in the women of Canada, and the respect and admiration with which the men have regarded the prose and verse of Canadian women—this I should signalise as an anomalous literary phenomenon. Neither of these phenomena, however, may be regard-

ed as paradoxical or as unique. It is conceivable that one or both might have obtained in the literary history of any other country, and may obtain in more notable degree in some later civilisation, when, as it appears must eventually happen, women will attain full spiritual and social enfranchisement—their indubitable natural right to complete freedom in self-expression.

On the other hand, the fact that the “lady singers”—the gentle poetesses—of Canada should have been the first and most potent “voices” of the patriotic military spirit of their country or countrymen, the first and readiest and best in producing, for immediate need, popular martial verse—this seems to me a unique paradox, a literary phenomenon in itself.* For the paradox does not lie in the fact that in Canada during the Civil War of the Rebellion of 1837-8, the Fenian Raids, the Metis rebellions, under Louis Riel, and the South African War, the women, rather than the men, of the country, produced the first and most popular—the best—

*Mr. Eric S. Robertson in the Preface to his excellent “English Poetesses” needlessly worries himself over the fact that, as he says, “Ladies who write verse nowadays do not care to be called ‘Poetesses.’ Just as ‘man’ is a generic term, embracing both sexes, and ‘woman’ a specific term, connoting no loss of spiritual dignity, so ‘poet’ is a generic term for all singers en masse, and ‘poetess’ is a specific term to be used when sex as such is required for exact distinction, the ending ‘ess’ having the function neither of a diminutive nor of endearing innuendo.” As for Mr. Lighthall’s “lady singers,”—that phrase is vulgar and abortive. It suggests the prudish origin of the terms which some “nice” people apply to domestic animals—“lady dog” or “gentleman cat,” for instance.