Canadian Writers

(By Tom MacInnes in "The Star.")

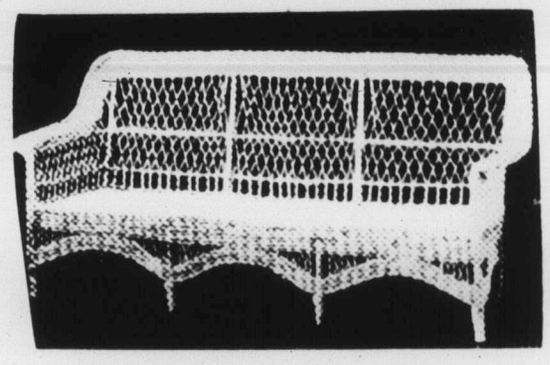
William Arthur Deacon, the well-known literary critic, had a lengthy article in a recent issue of the New York Times in which he refuted the assertion of those who deny that there is any authentic Canadian literature. This statement is sometimes made by certain teachers who have not seriously studied the work of Canadian writers. These persons seldom acquire a taste for that which makes intimate appeal to the Canadian native-born. They are not qualified. Mr. Deacon pointed out to his American readers that much of the best work of Canadian writers could have originated only in Canada; that it is colored and shaped and made alive by what is characteristic, in all its diversity, of the long stretch from Nova Scotia to the Klondike. It is in certain features more truly Canadian than a maple leaf. Mr. Deacon goes so far as to say: "No country, still in its pioneering stage, having so small a population made up of such different types, and embracing so vast a territory of the most diversified typography, has ever produced so large and significant a body of authentic literature."

If that be true then why should any special encouragement be given to Canadian writers? Let them sink or swim as best they can in competition with others. And if they go down like Villon and Chatterton and Francis Thompson and Ernest Dowson and Edgar Allan Poe, and such like of the impecunious immortals; well, serve them right for having had some rich thing out of life that money cannot buy. After they are dead then people may have editions de luxe on the parlor table of what they starved to produce. That has been the general attitude; whether in the cultured capitals of Europe, or the Main streets of America. Nevertheless, there may be another side of the question so far as Canada is concerned, because of the peculiar position in which she finds herself, and the influences to which she is subject from her giant neighbor to the south. It may be admitted that the strictly national feature is never the best feature of any literature. The greatest writers make equal appeal to all countries and races and times in their common humanity; the greatest literature evades the sectional clutch of any special patriotism or class-feeling. But if Canadians intend to remain Canadians it may be highly advisable to have a body of trained writers, who are Canadian in spirit, encouraged to live and write in Canada; writers who may win to a wide reach in the world of letters beyond Canada. This, if only on the very lowest patriotic grounds. Because in these days it is found that both in war and peace, in political and national and commercial strivings, propaganda pays. Canadian railways, ships, hotels, farms and trading companies want Canada to be favorably known abroad. It will bring them dollars; and that is the one great concern.

Believing, apart from any problematical benefit to be gained from encouraging art for art's sake in Canada, that there may yet be some sound financial use in keeping our writers in Canada, The Morning Star suggests that the Canadian Authors' Association, which is to hold its annual convention this summer in Vancouver, should give serious consideration to practical ways and means of helping Canadian writers who have proven their merit; helping them to position or opportunity for making at least a living in Canada. Once they give up and go to the United States they usually becme a total loss to Canada, however they may gain personally in a wider field.

One way might be to establish a Canadian University Union Press, which would serve somewhat as the Oxford University Press in England. The output of this institution is assured of a sale to all libraries in Great Brtain; quite independent of the risky chances of the booksellers' shelves. Now then, if Canadian college professors, headed say by some such man as Dr. Pelham Edgar of Toronto University, were to join hands with the Authors' Association they might induce every library in Canada in the national interests to agree to buy two copies of any book passed for publication by the Committee of such Canadian University Union. This would more than cover cost of publication; and it very likely would result in some works of great merit, including historical and scientific treatises of special interest to Canada, being given to the world which must otherwise be lost. Many such works might be held in high esteem by future Canadians; although at present there may appear to be no circle of readers wide enough to assure an ordinary publisher in venturing the cost of publication. The literature which becomes the glory of a nation is seldom the literature which pays. Walt Mason with his continual flow of rhymed banalities and Stephen Leacock with his weekly dose of forced humor are two Canadians who take fat cheques from the Americans for feeding them on pen products. The fatter the cheques the better. No right Canadian will object to the signal success of his countrymen. But pen products just the same—never literature?

Prior to the American Civil War the United States government recognized their literary men handsomely. Posts were provided for them at home and abroad. Tom Paine, Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne were among the first. As to Poe and Whitman it could hardly be expected that men so unconforming and so high above the mass in vision and literary expression would be encouraged by their contemporaries. But, as a rule, the Americans before the Civil War substantially assisted their literary men. After the Civil War it was no longer necessary. The United States then offered the greatest literary market ever known. But Canada is still in the position of the United States a hundred years ago from the standpoint of population. So if Canada wants Canadian writers, it might well follow the early example set by the United States; and encourage those who yet remain in the land.



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