

Canadian Literature.—VI.

BY ELEANOR ROBINSON.

George Frederick Cameron.

There is nothing distinctively Canadian, in any sense, in the writings of George Frederick Cameron. He neither seeks his subjects in the history of our past, nor presents pictures of Canadian life of our own day, nor sings of the possibilities of our future. The lyrics which make up his one volume of published verse are, for the most part, the expression of his own moods, and his direct comment upon life as he finds it. The events which attract him are those which call for protest against injustice and tyranny, and encouragement to all who struggle for freedom. For he is one of those poets whose utterance is forced from them by their instinct of rebellion against the wrongs and oppression which they see in the existing order of things.

Accordingly, we find him, in his very early years, pouring forth his hot, boyish indignation against Spain, for her sins in Cuba; against the tyranny of the Czar, and against the oppressors of Ireland; and prophesying boldly the ultimate success of those who fight for freedom. The poems on Cuba, we are told, were written when he was between fourteen and nineteen years old. Later on, naturally, his view widened; but he never changed his standpoint. In the poem called "In After Days," he explains how far he has modified his opinions.

I will accomplish that, and this,
And make myself a thorn to things—
Lords, councillors and tyrant kings—
Who sit upon their thrones and kiss

The rod of Fortune; and are crowned
The sovereign masters of the earth,
To scatter blight and death and dearth
Wherever mortal man is found.

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So sang I in my earlier days,
Ere I had learned to look abroad
And see that more than monarchs trod
Upon the form I fain would raise.

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Since then, I temper so my song
That it may never speak for blood;
May never say that ill is good;
Or say that right may spring from wrong.

Yet am what I have ever been—
A friend of freedom, staunch and true,
Who hate a tyrant, be he—you—
A people—sultan, czar, or queen!

His conception of the mission of a poet is made plain in the following lines:

A singer, I admit, but hath his song
E'er eased the sad, sick soul, e'er dried the eye
Of secret sorrow, bruised the head of wrong,
Or woke the heart to listen to the cry
Of right down-trodden by the despot-throng?
No? then, so please you, we will put him by.
He is a poet? Never! I deny
He hath a portion of the sacred rage.
All flowers of speech may bloom upon his page—
His soft words on my senses idly fall;
Not having any utterance for his age,
He hath no power to stir my blood at all.

The same ideal is held up in one of his latest songs, the "Envoi" to the poets of the past and of the future, and it was that towards which he always worked.

A few facts about Cameron's short and uneventful life will be of interest. He was a Nova Scotian, born in New Glasgow on September 24th, 1854, and educated in the New Glasgow schools. When he was about fifteen, his family removed to Boston, where he studied law. His chief attention was, however, always given to writing, and, as we have said, he began to write verses when a mere boy. He contributed to some of the best known newspapers of Boston, the *Transcript* among them. In 1882 he entered Queen's University, Kingston, and in 1883 was the prize poet. Upon leaving the university, he became editor of the *Kington News*, and held this position until a few weeks before his death. He died in September, 1885, of heart disease, and left a wife and an infant daughter.

His early death was doubtless a great loss to Canadian literature. In comparing his later poems with those of his boyhood, we see that without losing in force or sincerity, he has gained very greatly in calmness of tone and power of expression, and such steady increase of skill gives a promise which his too short life left unfulfilled. There is much that is sad, sometimes even despairing, in some of his verses, but they always sound genuine. There is no affectation of cynicism or pessimism, only the apparently sincere expression of one who at times found life bitter, almost unbearable, and rest the