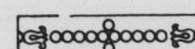


BRITISH COLUMBIA POETS



(By Lionel Stevenson)

The third week in November is to be "Canadian Literature Week" all the way across the country; and according to present arrangements, this period will coincide with a visit to the coast from Bliss Carman, the greatest Canadian poet. There could be no better opportunity for the reading public of this province to take stock of our literary assets, which are very much finer than most of us realize.

The form of literature in which British Columbians express themselves with incomparably the greatest perfection is the lyric poem; and this is the more noteworthy because the lyric is the supreme expression of the poetic muse. It is the lyric that really reaches to the great heart of humanity and becomes an element in the spiritual heritage of the race, fulfilling the highest function of poetry by bringing the pure thrill of a fresh conception of beauty. The average man speaks reverently of the "Divina Commedia" and "Paradise Lost," but he does not read them. He gets in touch with Dante's tender love story through the lyrics of the "Vita Nuova" and with Milton's sublime patience through the sonnets, and these things really influence the development of his inner life.

During the past four or five years British Columbia has bulked largely in the annual production of Canadian novels, and is for that reason gaining a reputation as a literary centre. But it seems to me that the poetry of these same writers is definitely superior to their achievements in the field of fiction. While enjoying the novels, I find lots of points to criticize, but some of the lyrics reach that level of perfection where a single change would destroy the whole work of art. These poems are characterized by a mastery of musical cadence, and unfailing choice of appropriate words, and a genuine emotional quality which are the essentials of the true lyric.

I shall select for special consideration a dozen verse writers of British Columbia, and by brief quotations shall seek to prove the high standard of their productions.

Mrs. Isabel Ecclestone Mackay is a past mistress of lyric expression, most of her best work having appeared in the "Canadian Magazine," and it is welcome news that it will soon be available in volume form. Of those which I have read, I choose two which are absolutely perfect, possessing that additional and intangible effect of utter fitness, which is the result of entire accord between idea and expression, mood and form, which no technique can teach. These are "In an Autumn Garden" and "Always."

"Love is never an alien thing;
Love set the gay world spinning;
Love sat light on the first bird's wing,
Sang in the chorus of earth's first spring,
Danced in the first green fairy ring—
For love has no beginning.

Love is never an alien thing—
When the last stars are sending
Their paling beams through an empty sky
And the mad earth reels and the sweet winds
die—
Chaos and darkness! But you and I
And love that has no ending!"

A thorough poet in temperament is Tom MacInnes, and a thorough British Columbian too, in career, being the son of a former Lieutenant-governor, though the tone of his poetry is cosmopolitan. I should need too much space if I tried to analyse his fascinating philosophy of mystical

hedonism, and even to choose a passage for quotation is difficult enough. His work abounds in original conceptions and felicitous expressions. "Lonesome Bar" is a vivid picture of life in the Klondyke; "In Amber Lands" is a good example of his bizarre Oriental themes; "The Fool of Joy" is a collection of the difficult old French forms, which in his hands are not artificial exercises, but have all the gay abandon of Villon himself.

"Pardon if I ravel rhyme
Out of my head disorderly!
Forgetting how the rats of time
Are nibbling at the bones of me!
But while upon my legs I'm free
Out in the sunlight I intend
To dine with God prodigiously:
Youth is a splendid thing to spend!

Here's to the man who travels still
In the light of young discoveries!
Here's to the fellow of lusty will,
Who drives along and hardly sees
For glamour of great realities
The doom of age! This line I send
To all who sing hot litanies:
Youth is a splendid thing to spend!

Fellows, come and ride with me
Swiftly now to the edge of the end!
Holding the Stars of Joy in fee!—
Youth is a splendid thing to spend!"

He is the only troubadour who has survived merrily in this cold-blooded twentieth century.

Something of the same fantastic and Oriental flavor distinguishes the work of Lionel Haweis. His published works include weird ballads on myths of the B. C. Indians and Esquimaux, and a colourful Persian drama. He is a specialist on Hindu literature and religion, and has written dramas on that theme; but he is equally expert in delicate lyrical passages, exquisitely polished:

"And now the Fisher of the Night
Was trolling in the Sky;
His cloudy Craft was lapped in Light
Who sailed and fished on high.

There where no earthly Aspect mars
The heavenly Seas, whose Tides
Are flecked and decked with cresting Stars,
The crafty Fisher rides.

And as he rides he softly sings
The magic Song of Sleep,
The while he deftly baits and flings
His Tackle in the Deep.

Not every Bait the same to him,
Nor every Line as thin—
Oh! he had Baits for every Whim
And Lines for every Sin;
For many are the Fish that swim
The Seas he fishes in!"

(From "Tsoqalem")

In these lines we see what a poet can make out of the picturesque legends of the aborigines of this coast.