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CANADIAN POETRY.

A Criticism.

A GLANCE at the shelves of any collector's library shows that the number of persons in Canada who publish verses is very large. A further glance at the uneven row of thin volumes shows that the poetic impulse does not last. Many a writer who has in his few timid pages given promise of good work is heard of no more. There are, doubtless, many causes for this lack of sustained enthusiasm. It may be that, taken up with a great material development, we have no appreciation of the fine arts, or that we lack historic associations, or that our culture is still provincial. Open, however, volume after volume of these abandoned ambitions, and one will be convinced that these writers are servile imitators; there is no sense of unconscious effort, no evidence of a free hand. A closer study of later publications discloses the fact that poetic inspiration runs fairly in the narrow channels made by a small coterie of writers, the chief among whom are Campbell, Carman, Lampman and Roberts. These poets, having won the ear of a generous and patriotic, though uncritical press, have been raised to an imposing authority, which restrains all originality and all determined devotion to poetry as a fine art.

It is, therefore, important that these writers should be critically examined. If they be found to be not true poets,

but blind leaders of the blind, they should be deposed, and the hope of a distinctively Canadian literature may be made one step nearer its realization than it now seems to be.

How, then, shall we know if Canadian verse deserves the name of poetry, or even estimate its merit? Every reader, of course, settles for himself the worth of a volume of poems when he throws it aside as uninteresting or unproductive of pleasure. If he be a reader of no refinement, his uncritical judgment may be of no value. If, however, most readers do not cast a volume aside, but peruse it with pleasure, it is strong evidence that the poet has produced good poetry. Whatever the purpose of the poet may be, we may assume the purpose of poetry to be the production of pleasure, and it would seem to be proper in order that we may criticise poetry, to enquire what subjects give pleasure when dealt with in poetry—whether some subjects are in their nature productive of more pleasure than others, and then to enquire whether the poet has used the most effective means to the end which he has in view.

The subjects with which poetry may deal are human action, ideas of universal human interest and scenery, using scenery broadly to include objects animate and inanimate, as well as outdoor effects. Of these, human action is by