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Forum
Aug 1899

RECENT CANADIAN FICTION.

AMONG many good influences which are shaping the course of the young Canadian Dominion—the sturdy Northland—toward a true and virile manhood, none is more significant and far-reaching than the growth of a strong and wholesome native literature. While it would, perhaps, be going too far to say that Canada can boast of any men of genius, in the true sense of the term, it cannot be denied that she has given birth to not a few writers of undoubted talent.

Such men as Sir James Le Moine, Sir John Bourinot, Benjamin Sulte, and the late Dr. Kingsford, among historians; Charles Heavysege, W. W. Campbell, C. G. D. Roberts, the late A. Lampman, Bliss Carnan, and the two Scotts, in verse; and Sir William Dawson, Dr. G. M. Dawson, Grant Allen, and the late J. G. Romanes, in the realm of science, would do credit to any country, and are certainly men of whom Canada has every reason to be proud. And Canadian men-of-letters are no less proud of their native land; for it is a notable fact that, however far abroad they may roam, they never forget the Northland, and never cease to speak and write of it with fondness and pride.

In the enumeration of those who are doing credit to the land of their birth, a very important class has so far been omitted—the novelists. As a matter of fact, until quite recently Canada could scarcely be said to have any novelists. Fiction has been in the past the most unfruitful branch of our intellectual tree. While every decade has produced scores of verse-writers and one or two genuine poets, and every period of the national history has had its more or less capable historians, the rich mines of Canadian history and national characteristics have remained almost untouched by novelists. There is in Canada the broadest possible field for the writer of fiction. The early days of the French occupation teem with incidents of dramatic and romantic interest, such as the interminable conflicts between the French and the English, and between each of these and the Indians; the expulsion of the Acadians, and the stirring incidents of the Jesuit Relations; later, the exodus of the United Empire Loyalists from New England to Canada, the War of 1812, etc. For the analytical novel-

ist and the novelist who makes the delineation of character his special field, there is also no lack of opportunity in the contrast and mingling of two races so different in character and mode of thought, and yet one in loyalty and mutual respect. Nor are definite types wanting: the picturesque habitant of Quebec and his brother, the simple-minded Acadian of the Lower Provinces; the sturdy and self-reliant farmer of Ontario; the breezy and unsophisticated son of the great Northwest; the free-and-easy miner and lumberman of the Pacific Slope; the trapper of the North; the coast fisherman; the Prince Edward Islander, who believes that the whole Dominion circles around his little island, and the degenerate aborigine,—these are all component parts of our mixed population.

It is true that from time to time in the past a solitary figure has arisen and made a half-hearted attempt to arouse the dormant interest of his countrymen. The late James De Mille, for many years Professor of English Literature at Dalhousie College, Halifax, published about forty novels and tales, chiefly through "Harper's." At the time, they were all popular in the United States; but very few of them had any lasting value. The best were "Helena's Household," "The Martyr of the Catacombs"; "The Dodge Club"; "Cord and Creese"; "The B. O. W. C. Papers"; and a posthumous novel, entitled "A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder." At a still earlier period De Gaspé published his historical novel, "Les Anciens Canadiens"; Mrs. Leprohon, "Antoinette de Mirecourt," and a number of other stories; Miss A. M. Machar and Mrs. Traill (the latter a member of the famous Strickland family) wrote tales of the pioneer days and the War of 1812; and William Kirby published his "Golden Dog," a historical romance of the days of the French occupation. Nearly all of these were published in the United States, and were only known there. Canadians had not yet thrown off the stern and eminently practical spirit of the pioneer, fresh from the battle with nature for a home; and they could not stoop to anything so trivial as the reading of novels, especially those of home production.

A few years ago Gilbert Parker's name became known through the publication of some clever sketches of life in the wild Northwest—"Pierre and His People" and "An Adventurer of the North." These were followed by several novels, based on the early romantic period of Canadian history, the best of which was "The Seats of the Mighty," which has since been dramatized. Sara Jeannette Duncan (Mrs. Cotes), Robert Barr, Grant Allen, and Miss Lily Dougall have

also each written a number of novels. But it is not until we come down to the autumn of 1898 that we at length see what promises to be the genuine and thorough awakening of the long dormant spirit of Canadian fiction.

It is as if the fire of Canadian fiction, after a prolonged period of smouldering, had at length been blown into a fairly respectable blaze which promised in time to develop into a permanent beacon.

While this outburst of fiction is largely spontaneous, it would also seem to be due, to some extent at least, to the encouraging growth of interest among Canadians generally, created, after a mighty struggle, by Gilbert Parker and one or two other pioneers in the field. The scales have been gradually dropping from the eyes of the intelligent Canadian reader; and he is beginning to realize that something of literary merit may really come out of Canada. In no other country has the literary aspirant been compelled to struggle against such heavy odds: but, happily, the dawn of a brighter day is breaking; and as the prospect of appreciation in his native country grows more encouraging, he is entering with enthusiasm into the wide field of fiction.

During the autumn of 1898 there were published—some in Canada, some in England, and several in the United States—at least a score of novels by Canadian authors, most of whom were new to the reading public. These books are of varying merit; but, taken as a whole, they give promise of strong and wholesome quality, and show a finished style of workmanship.

Besides new romances and stories by such well-known writers as Gilbert Parker, Mrs. Cotes, Robert Barr, Grant Allen, and E. W. Thomson (Editor of the "Youth's Companion"), others have been published by such new novelists as Mrs. S. Frances Harrison, of Toronto, Rev. C. W. Gordon, who writes under the *nom-de-plume* of "Ralph Connor," William D. Lighthall, William McLennan, Miss Macdonell of Montreal, Edgar M. Smith (Editor of the "Metropolitan"), Mrs. Joanna E. Wood, Mrs. Henshaw, of Vancouver (whose pen-name is "Julian Durham"), Miss Marshall Saunders, W. A. Fraser, F. Clifford Smith, and several others. These latter we are chiefly concerned with, as they constitute the new blood which has been infused into the Canadian spirit of fiction. Although this is their first appearance as full-fledged novelists, they have nearly all done some previous literary work. Mrs. Harrison, under the pen-name of "Seranus," published some years ago a small volume of dainty verse, "Pine, Rose, and Fleur-de-Lys," consisting chiefly of *villanelles* and other old French

forms applied to the picturesque legends and tales of French Canada. Stedman embodied five pages from Mrs. Harrison's book in his "Victorian Anthology." She also published a volume of short stories, or sketches, "Crowded Out," which were praised very highly both in London and in New York. Mrs. Harrison possesses, to quote the words of Prof. Clark, of Trinity College, "a quick and ready wit, a profoundly sympathetic nature, an unusual power of entering into the thoughts and sentiments of others, besides a very high poetic endowment." In 1887 she issued a "Canadian Birthday Book," consisting wholly of selections from English- and French-Canadian poets. Mr. Lighthall has published "The Young Seigneur," a short story of fair merit, and a volume of verse. He has also edited "Songs of the Great Dominion," the best existing anthology of Canadian poetry. William McLennan is well known as the translator of Ernest Gagnon's "Chansons Populaires." He has also written a number of short stories of Quebec life for "Harper's," at different times. Miss Macdonell, "Ralph Connor," and Edgar M. Smith have each published short stories in the magazines. Miss Marshall Saunders is the author of "Beautiful Joe," a story of a dog, written in the interests of the dumb creation, which has reached a circulation of two hundred thousand.

It will be observed that in fiction, as in verse, Canadian women are marching apace with the members of the opposite sex; and this applies as well to the quality as to the quantity of their productions.

Gilbert Parker easily takes first place with his "Battle of the Strong." This splendid novel has been greeted with a storm of applause by reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic. It is not simply the best and strongest Canadian novel of the past year, or of any year, but, running over the whole output of fiction during 1898, it is difficult, if not impossible, to pick out a novel that stands higher in lucid and harmonious style, keen analysis, dramatic interest, and human insight.

Robert Barr possesses a clear and pleasing style of narrative; and his work is ever wholesome and sincere. "Tekla," his last book, is no unworthy successor to his earlier productions, "The Mutable Many," "A Woman Intervenes," "In the Midst of Alarms," and others.

In Mrs. Cotes we have a novelist of quite a different style. Her work is light and vivacious; and through it runs a vein of gentle humor which is her own, and yet has much in common with Anthony Hope's "Dolly Dialogues" and Mr. Howells' charming little "Farces."

Last year Mrs. Cotes published "A Voyage of Consolation," in which she continues the amusing adventures of "An American Girl in London." While her latest work has many of the distinctive qualities which have made her books so popular, especially to the jaded traveller, I was more favorably impressed with some of her earlier books, notably "A Social Departure" and "His Honour and a Lady."

Grant Allen is more generally known as a scientist than as a novelist; and as a writer on scientific subjects he has the happy faculty of presenting the dry facts in a most entertaining style. His latest novel, "Linnet," though perhaps no high literary quality can be claimed for it, will, nevertheless, serve admirably to while away a lazy afternoon. "Miss Cayley's Adventures," which have been recently told in "The Strand Magazine," have also been issued in book form.

Among the new writers, Rev. Mr. Gordon has done the best work, in his "Black Rock: a Tale of the Selkirks." Mr. Gordon has put into this story of the free and vigorous life of the Pacific Slope his own strong personality. He is intensely in earnest, and frankly acknowledges that he would point a moral, in drawing attention to the crying evil of intemperance; but he never degenerates into the sickly sentimentality which turns so many away from the Temperance Movement. He is as sincere a believer in the advantages of total abstinence as the most lachrymose of Temperance lecturers, but is at the same time essentially manly, and looks at the question from a broad-minded standpoint.

The *raison d'être* of the book is thus given by the author in his preface: "Because a man's life is all he has, and because the only hope of the brave young West lies in its men, this story is told." While most "books with a purpose" are an abomination, this one is the exception which proves the rule. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of "Black Rock" is the bracing optimism it teaches. The author has a splendid faith in the power which makes for good in every one; and he has the rare gift of forcing his reader, at least temporarily, into sympathy with his own point of view.

The book is fine in literary quality, strong in ethical insight, and admirable in the manner in which the author has caught and embodied in living characters the rough but sincere and manly spirit of the West.

In point of numbers, the historical novel takes first place in the output of contemporary Canadian writers. From Montreal alone have come, quite recently, half a dozen works of this class. Here, as else-

where, our women are well to the fore. Miss Blanche Lucile Macdonell and Miss Lily Dougall have both made contributions to this branch of fiction, as have also W. D. Lighthall, Edgar Maurice Smith, and William McLennan.

Miss Macdonell's book is called "Diary of Ville Marie," and is her first serious attempt in fiction. It is a romance of French Canada in the days when Frontenac was Governor, and the burly Dollier de Casson ruled over the Seminary at Ville Marie. Though the plot is rather slim, the sketches of the men and women who made up the curious little community of Ville Marie are particularly vivid; and the author gives the reader an excellent picture of one of the most picturesque periods of Canadian history.

Another romance of old French Canada is Mr. Lighthall's "False Chevalier." This story is founded on a "packet of worm-eaten letters and documents found in an old French-Canadian house on the banks of the St. Lawrence." With these as a foundation, Mr. Lighthall has built up a well-constructed and fascinating story.

Miss Dougall needs no introduction. She is already on terms of easy familiarity with most general readers, as the author of "Zeit Geist" and a number of other stories. Her last book, "The Mormon Prophet," is a curious composition. Miss Dougall believes that there exists a great deal of misapprehension as to the real origin of Mormonism; and as to the character and aims of its first prophet, Joseph Smith. In her novel she endeavors to dissipate this cloud, and, at the same time, to give a faithful and interesting picture of the period.

Edgar M. Smith's "Aneroestes the Gaul" first appeared as a serial in "The Canadian Magazine." It is a story of the Second Punic War, and is perhaps of even greater interest to the student of the period than to the mere novel-reader. The descriptions of the manners and customs of the time show deep research; and the account of Hannibal's famous march across the Alps, and the subsequent campaign in Italy, is altogether excellent.

William McLennan has lately published two historical novels, one, "Spanish John," written by himself, and the second, "The Span o' Life," in collaboration with J. N. McIlwraith, another Canadian. Both books have appeared as serials in "Harper's." "Spanish John" is a record of the stirring adventures of Col. John Macdonell, while a lieutenant in the Company of St. James of the Regiment Irlandia, in the service of the King of Spain. This story, like "The False Chevalier," is founded on family records; but it strikes me that the ma-

terial has not been as successfully turned into readable fiction as in Mr. Lighthall's romance.

"The Span o' Life" is a marked improvement over the former book. Whether the high quality is due to Mr. McLennan himself, or to his collaborator, it would be hard to say; but the improvement is undoubtedly there. Although the story opens in England, the major portion is laid in New France at the time of the Conquest. The stirring incidents of the siege of Louisburg and the capture of Quebec are well told; and the chief characters are sympathetically drawn.

Still another tale, of an even earlier period of Canadian history, is Mr. Marquis's "Marguerite de Roberval." Mr. Marquis has chosen probably the saddest incident in the history of the continent as his theme. The principal points of Marguerite's history are generally believed to be true,—at least they are so given by all the old French historians. Parkman refers, rather cynically, to the story, in "Pioneers of France in the New World": he evidently had but little respect for the credulity of the French writers. Whether the original account be true or not, Mr. Marquis has turned it into a most delightful romance.

Mrs. Joanna E. Wood is the Miss Wilkins of rural Ontario life, and is doing for the Banner Province what Miss Wilkins has done for New England. Two books of hers were published not long ago, "The Untempered Wind" and "Judith Moore"; and a third has just been completed as a serial in "The Canadian Magazine,"—"A Daughter of Witches." Miss Wood brings to the treatment of her subject more than average talent. She has lived among the people, and understands them thoroughly. The characters in her book, while they are not always attractive, are invariably life-like: and the descriptions of village life in Ontario are excellent.

Miss Marshall Saunders, of Halifax, Nova Scotia, is the author of an Acadian romance of the present day, entitled "Rose à Charlitte." The story is rather interesting, although perhaps unnecessarily long-drawn-out. The author takes occasion, through the mouth of one of her characters, to air her views on the much controverted question of the Acadian expulsion: "Only the poets and story-tellers have been true to Acadia. It is the historians who lie." However, the strength of the book lies in the admirable pictures which it presents of life in modern Acadia, along the Bay of Fundy coast of Nova Scotia.

"The Forest of Bourg-Marie," Mrs. Harrison's delightful tale of habitant life, is unquestionably one of the most suggestive and thoughtful studies which have been made of the French-Canadian and his

habits and customs. Here we find embodied the very spirit of the habitant, his quaint picturesqueness, superstitions, ignorance of the outside world, and withal his *naïveté*. The plot is very simple. It is not a love story : in fact, although written by a woman, the book does not contain a single female character of any importance. Yet Mrs. Harrison has invested her characters with a subtle human charm which at once brings the reader into intimate sympathy with them. The single weak point seems to be *one* which is common to nearly all the Canadian novels ; viz., too much padding. Our writers have not yet learned to use the pruning-knife freely and judiciously.

Mrs. Henshaw, of British Columbia, shares with Mr. Phillips-Woolley the honor of being the first novelist of the Pacific province. Her book, entitled "Hypnotized," is a study of what may be called unconscious hypnotism. It deserves to be classed with the general run of novels of the mild psychological class ; but Mrs. Henshaw can do better work, and doubtless will.

That indefatigable literary workman, Charles G. D. Roberts, who has produced books of verse, of history, novels, and guide-books in rapid succession, has now added another novel to the existing literature of the Acadians. This book is in the nature of a sequel to "The Forge in the Forest" ; and a third book to complete the trilogy is said to be in preparation. The new story is called "A Sister of Evangeline," and is told with that graphic power and dramatic interest which Mr. Roberts so well knows how to infuse into his work.

As we have a Canadian Miss Wilkins, so, in Mr. W. A. Fraser, have we also a Canadian Kipling. Mr. Fraser is a young civil engineer who, in the pursuit of his profession, has wandered far and wide, not only in his native land, but in British India and Burma. He is an intimate friend of the author of "Tales from the Hills" ; and the influence of the elder writer is seen distinctly in the work of the younger. Yet it is no slavish imitation ; for Mr. Fraser is developing a style of his own, graphic, vivid, and forceful. So far, he has written short stories only ; and in this form of fiction his strength seems to lie. His first volume of tales is called "The Eye of a God." It is made up of sketches of Western Canadian life and life in Burma, and shows close study of both.

Another writer of short stories is Mr. Walsh, of Montreal. His book of short sketches of French-Canadian life, "Bonhomie," has received a good deal of praise in Canada. What Dr. Drummond has so successfully accomplished in verse for the habitant, Mr. Walsh has at-

tempted in prose. Perhaps his work suffers somewhat from the fact that Mr. E. W. Thomson had already exploited the same field in "Old Man Savarin"; but there is ample room for both.

As has already been mentioned, the preponderating form of fiction in Canada at the present day is the historical novel. Considerably more than half the books above referred to belong to this class. It is but natural that in a new country, endowed with an unusually romantic past, and where the complex influences of social life have not yet taken deep root, the mind of the novelist should turn to the promising and fruitful field of history. It is unnecessary here to discuss the relative merits of historical and other forms of fiction; but, if we compare the historical stories of Canadian writers with those from the pens of English and American novelists in recent years, the result will be found to be not at all unfavorable to the young writers of the Dominion. That they can do equally good work in other fields of fiction is shown by at least two of the books mentioned in this article, "Black Rock" and "The Forest of Bourg-Marie." Having in view the distinctive characteristics of each, it may be safely said that, after "The Battle of the Strong," these two stand highest among recent Canadian novels, both by reason of their excellent substance and their equally excellent workmanship, and also because they are, each in its own way, most typical of the soil.

LAWRENCE J. BURPEE.