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THE CONDITIONS OF A COLONIAL LITERATURE.

BY WILLIAM DOUW LIGHTHALL, M.A., F.R.S.L.

THERE were two Oliver Goldsmiths. One all know well,—the friend of Samuel Johnson, and author of ‘The Vicar of Wakefield’ and ‘The Deserted Village.’ The other was so obscure that my belief that he is unknown to every Fellow but three of the Royal Society of Literature is not likely to be challenged.

The obscurer Goldsmith was a grand-nephew of the greater. He lived in Nova Scotia, where he was a Collector of Customs during the first quarter of this century; and in 1825, in humble imitation of his great-uncle’s ‘Deserted Village,’ he published a poem entitled ‘The *Rising* Village.’ In the beginning he thus addresses his brother Henry, grandson of Goldsmith’s brother Henry, to whom ‘The Traveller’ is dedicated :

“ If then adown your cheek a tear should flow
For Auburn’s village and its speechless woe ;
If while you weep you think the ‘lowly train’
Their early joys can never more regain ;
Come turn with me where happier prospects rise,
Beneath the sternness of Acadian skies.
*And thou, dear spirit, whose harmonious lay
Didst lovely Auburn’s piercing woes display,*

*Do thou to thy fond relative impart
Some portion of thy sweet poetic art ;
Like thine, oh ! let my verse as gently flow,
While truth and virtue in my numbers glow ;
And guide my pen with thy bewitching hand,
To paint the Rising Village of the land."*

He then depicts the rise of a colonial hamlet:

" Oh ! none can tell but they who sadly share
The bosom's anguish and its wild despair,
What dire distress awaits the hardy bands
That venture first on bleak and desert lands ;
How great the pain, the danger, and the toil
Which mark the first rude culture of the soil,
When looking round, the lonely settler sees
His home amid a wilderness of trees :
How sinks his heart in those deep solitudes,
Where not a voice upon his ear intrudes ;
Where solemn silence all the waste pervades,
Heightening the horror of its gloomy shades,
Save where the sturdy woodman's strokes resound,
That strew the fallen forest on the ground !"

At length—

" The golden corn triumphant waves its head."

Next, the settler escapes a band of attacking savages, and—

" Around his dwelling scattered huts extend,
Whilst every hut affords another friend."

And—

" His perils vanished and his fears o'ercome,
Sweet hope portrays a happy, peaceful home.
On every side fair prospects charm his eyes,
And future joys in every thought arise.
His rising crops, with rich-luxuriance crowned,
In waving softness shed their freshness round ;

By Nature nourished, by her bounty blest,
 He looks to Heaven, and lulls his cares to rest.

* * * * *

In some lone spot of consecrated ground,
 Whose silence spreads a holy gloom around,
 The village church, in unadorned array,
 Now lifts its turret to the opening day.
 How sweet to see the villagers repair
 In groups to pay their adoration there!"

After an invocation to "heaven-born Faith," the coming of the merchant and the doctor are described, and after them the chance schoolmaster,—

"Some poor wanderer of the human race,
 Whose greatest source of knowledge or of skill
 Consists in reading and in writing ill.

* * * * *

While time thus rolls his rapid years away,
 The Village rises gently into day.
 How sweet it is, at first approach of morn,
 Before the silvery dew has left the lawn,
 When warring winds are sleeping yet on high,
 Or breathe as softly as the bosom's sigh,
 To gain some easy hill's ascending height,
 Where all the landscape brightens with delight,
 And boundless prospects stretched on every side
 Proclaim the country's industry and pride!
 Here the broad marsh extends its open plain,
 Until its limits touch the distant main;
 There verdant meads along the uplands spring,
 And grateful odours to the breezes fling;
 Here crops of grain in rich luxuriance rise,
 And wave their golden riches to the skies;
 There smiling orchards interrupt the scene,
 Or gardens bounded by some fence of green;
 The farmer's cottage bosomed 'mong the trees,
 Whose spreading branches shelter from the breeze;

The winding stream that turns the busy mill,
Whose clacking echoes o'er the distant hill ;
The neat white church, beside whose walls are spread
The grass-clad hillocks of the sacred dead."

In the work of Oliver Goldsmith, jun., we have an exact exemplification of the earliest colonial writing. Amid the rude conditions of an incipient community literature, is an exotic, its representatives are handicapped by a thousand difficulties, their performances are puerile, and the marked quality in those performances is servile imitation of whatever masters chance to be to hand. The year 1825 is, in a colony, a long time ago. Seriously, it has the actual flavour of antiquity ; for antiquity is a relative matter, depending on historical changes and not on simple lapse of time, and in the colonies changes come swiftly. The relativity of the sentiment of antiquity was once brought home to me during a trip on one of the Rhine steamboats, when I happened to remark to a friend that the Gothic cathedrals of the region ceased to impress me with their age, because I had just come from the ruins and monuments of Rome. "That," said he, "is what I felt about Rome ; I had just come from Egypt."

The intellectual changes which have taken place in Nova Scotia since 1825 render the work of its literary men of to-day a great contrast to that of Oliver Goldsmith, jun. The object of this paper is to give some account of the usual stages of development of a colonial literature.

Before we reach the younger Goldsmith, however, there was a time when things were even cruder,

and when no attempts at anything akin to literary writing were made except by an occasional tarrier from some older centre of culture. Some makers of jingles on local subjects there were, but they were unworthy of record and have perished with their generation. The clearing of bushland with the axe, the building of a log home, the cultivation of scanty crops under difficulties, were too arduous to leave room for a love of books, even had the books been procurable; while the official, professional, and military classes, or rather class, to whom such tasks were not appointed, was too small to be of account. Add the almost total lack of high-class schools, the solitariness of the stray lover of books, the bad roads and slow mails, and one easily understands how only an occasional clergyman, retired officer, or the spouse of, say, some chaplain in a garrison town, can be found paying court to the pen. Thus Mrs. Frances Brooke, wife of such a chaplain at Quebec about 1766, wrote the first Canadian novel, 'The History of Emily Montague.' A remarkably trashy novel it is. Its form is that of a series of letters between several highly affected society persons, and the point of the book is that Emily cannot possibly marry Colonel Rivers because he has only his half-pay and the prospect of an estate of about £400 a year; so she swoons and languishes to the extent of three volumes! In feeling and every other quality it is but a ridiculous imitation of Richardson's 'Pamela,' first published in 1741, twenty-five years before.

Such was the stage which preceded 'The Rising Village.' With works such as the latter there was

one striking advance; there was at least an attempt to treat subjects taken directly from surroundings in the new land. Here is found the first faint spark of the divine fire of originality. The ideas of 'The Rising Village' would never have suggested themselves in England; they aim at creating a picture of the hopes and struggles of a new country. But there is this limited originality in choice of subject only, the treatment and the diction remaining slavishly imitative. In reading through a number of the small, crude, badly printed volumes which form the output of a period of the kind—such as the Canadian verse collection in the Toronto Public Library—whose value is solely historical as illustrating the origins of thought, it is wonderful how rare even so slight a spark of originality is. It is through such a perusal that one realises the extreme difficulty of thinking absolutely fresh thought, unaided by any kind of pioneer or model. If the Hugos, Tennysons, and Goethes seem to us to have creative powers, we may ask ourselves what they would have been without the hints and impulses given them by precursors; and we learn to value the work of those who first made studies of the beauty of the new world of objects around them, and began to divine the special sphere of colonial art—the development of that new world's native store of the beautiful. Let one go with an Indian for guide far along some primeval chain of lakes and streams, and he will learn of a majesty and a loveliness which have not been touched by the literature of Europe. Let him become a reader of the quaint French chronicles of the early pio-

neers of New France, and he will find there a field of chivalry full of tempting subjects for the pen. Let him put his ear to the heart of a new nation, and he will discover a fountain of emotions ready for the poem and the novel.

Besides those commonplace themes which will be found in all volumes of fifth-rate verse, we meet in the output of the period mentioned a certain proportion upon 'The Canadian Maple Leaf;' upon 'October,' with its crystalline air and wondrous forest colours; or upon some lake or river near the writer's home; and almost always something on the Indian, full of false, half old-world sentiment. In, for example, 'The Huron Chief and other Poems,' a volume published at Montreal in 1830 by Adam Kidd, take the lines—

"I'm the chieftain of this mountain—
Times and seasons found me here;
My drink has been the crystal fountain,
My food the wild moose or the deer.

* * * * *

But though I've shared the worst of ills
The Christian foeman could devise,
Yet on those wild untravelled hills
Of him I'd make no sacrifice."

The true Indian never spoke nor thought like that! Here is the true Indian, from a poem by Pauline Johnson, the Mohawk poetess of to-day:

"He turned like a hunted lion. 'I know not fear!' said he.

And the words outleapt from his shrunken lips in the language of the Cree:

'I'll fight you white-skins one by one till I kill you
all'"

And these are the words of his wife :

“ ‘Stand back! stand back, you white-skins, touch that
 dead man to your shame;
 You have stolen my father’s spirit, but his body I only can
 claim.
 You have killed him; but you shall not dare to touch him
 now he’s dead;
 You have cursed him, called him a cattle thief, though
you robbed him first of bread;
 Robbed him and robbed my people: look there at that
 shrunken face,
 Starved with a hollow hunger we owe to you and your
 race.’ ”

This is the Canadian verse of to-day, however.
 To return to the earlier period, here is ‘The Maple
 Leaf’ subject in about its common form :

“ All hail to the broad-leaved maple,
 With its fair and changeful dress—
 A type of our youthful country
 In its pride and loveliness.
 ’Mid the dark-browed firs and cedars
 Her livelier colours shine
 Like the dawn of a brighter future
 On the settler’s hut of pine.’ ”

It is needless to illustrate the echoes of Byron,
 Moore, and Wordsworth in these productions; they
 are much the same as the corresponding class of
 poetasters in Britain.

It will be remarked that nearly all the foregoing
 references have been to verse, not prose. The
 reason is that verse, not prose, is the usual early
 form of attempt at literary expression. It is a
 curious fact that colonial literatures tend to begin
 with poetry.

At length a third period arrives. The country becomes settled, roads improve, men prosper, towns grow, good schools and libraries multiply, and books are imported largely. The thought and art of the colony then commence to march with those of the great world, and a true colonial literature takes root, the evolution of which, roughly speaking, proceeds as follows :

First.—Historical sketches.

Second.—Poetry.

Third.—Natural science.

Fourth.—Fiction.

Fifth. — Philosophy, moral and political, and thence to psychology and the more difficult and complex flights.

We can easily understand why historical sketches come first, as they are a necessity to certain controversies, and to some public and private interests. But why does poetry come next?—that is to say, earliest in point of spontaneity?

There seem to be two reasons: one, that verse does not in its lyrical and simpler forms demand as severe an effort as a long work of fiction; another, that it is the natural medium of incoherent feelings and thoughts, owing to its greater element of music. The motives now in question are incipient local patriotism and incipient perception of the local materials of art. I shall not burden the listener with the crude steps by which these sources of inspiration have developed, but shall exemplify their possibilities by passages from present writers.

William Wilfred Campbell's 'To the Lakes' will illustrate local beauty :

“With purple glow at even,
 With crimson waves at dawn,
 Cool bending blue of heaven,
 O blue lakes pulsing on ;
 Lone haunts of wilding creatures dead to wrong,
 Your trance of mystic beauty
 Is wove into my song.

“I know no gladder dreaming
 In all the haunts of men,
 I know no silent seeming
 Like to your shore and fen ;
 No world of restless beauty like your world
 Of curvèd shores and waters
 In sunlight vapours furlèd.

“I pass and repass under
 Your depths of peaceful blue ;
 You dream your wild, hushed wonder
 Mine aching heart unto ;
 And all the care and unrest pass away
 Like night’s grey haunted shadows
 At the red birth of day.

“You lie in moon-white splendour
 Beneath the northern sky ;
 Your voices soft and tender
 In dream-worlds fade and die,
 In whispering beaches, haunted bays and capes,
 Where mists of dawn and midnight
 Drift past in spectral shapes.”

Next take a specimen of the impressionism of Charles G. D. Roberts, a sonnet entitled ‘Burnt Lands,’ treating a common sight in a country of forest fires :

“On other fields and other scenes the morn
 Laughs from her blue,—but not such scenes as these,
 Where comes no cheer of summer leaves and bees,
 And no shade mitigates the day’s white scorn.
 These serious acres vast no groves adorn ;
 But giant trunks, bleak shapes that once were trees,
 Tow’r naked, unassuaged of rain or breeze,
 Their stern grey isolation grimly borne.

“The months roll over them and mark no change ;
 But when spring stirs, or autumn stills, the year,
 Perchance some phantom leafage rustles faint
 Through their parched dreams—some old-time notes ring
 strange,
 When, in his slender treble, far and clear,
 Reiterates the rain-bird his complaint.”

Here is the late Isabella Valancey Crawford on
 an experience in the sportsman’s life :

“They hung the slaughtered fish like swords
 On saplings slender ; like scimitars
 Bright and ruddied from new-dead wars,
 Blazed in the light the scaly hordes.

“They piled up boughs beneath the trees
 Of cedar web and green fir tassel ;
 Low did the pointed pine-tops rustle,
 The camp fire blushed to the tender breeze.

“The hounds laid dewlaps on the ground,
 With needles of pine, sweet, soft, and rusty,
 Dreamed of the dead stag stout and lusty ;
 A bat by the red flames wove its round.

“The darkness built its wigwam walls
 Close round the camp, and at its curtain
 Pressed shapes, thin woven and uncertain,
 As white locks of tall waterfalls.”

Charles Mair of the North-west thus describes the buffalo herds a generation ago :

“ What charming solitudes ! And life was there ?
 Yes, life was there—inexplicable life,
 Till wasted by inexorable death.
 There had the stately stag his battle-field,
 Dying for mastery among his hinds.
 There vainly sprung the affrighted antelope,
 Beset by glittering eyes and hurrying feet.

* * * * *

At length we heard a deep and solemn sound,
 Erupted moanings of the troubled earth
 Trembling beneath innumerable feet,
 A growing uproar blending in our ears
 With noise tumultuous as ocean's surge,
 Of bellowings, fierce breath, and battle shock
 And ardour of unconquerable herds,
 A multitude whose trampling shook the plains,
 With discord of harsh sound and rumblings deep,
 As if the swift revolving earth had struck
 And from some adamantine peak recoiled,
 Jarring. At length we topped a high-browed hill—
 The last and loftiest of a file of such—
 And lo ! before us lay the tameless stock,
 Slow wending to the northward like a cloud—
 A multitude in motion, dark and dense,
 Far as the eye could reach and farther still
 In countless myriads stretched for many a league.”

To illustrate folk-lore I should have liked to add Shanly's ' Walker of the Snow,' and for historical subjects to have quoted Murray's ringing ' Heroes of Ville-Marie,' how—

“ Beside the dark Utàwa's stream two hundred years ago
 A wondrous feat of arms was wrought, which all the
 world should know ;”

but space fails, and the former of these pieces can be read in the 'Victorian Anthology' of Edmund Clarence Stedman, and the latter in my 'Songs of the Great Dominion' (sometimes published under the title of 'Canadian Poems'), in the Canterbury Poets and Windsor series. In the same collections the hopes and emotions of the new patriotism are illustrated, and it is only necessary to explain that the national sentiment now formed in the great Dominion is not antagonistic, but complementary, to the imperial.

The new Canadian literature is thus chiefly a school of poetry. Into the same fields writers of fiction are, however, following, and of them more is perhaps to be expected than of the poets, for their schemes of treatment and choice of subjects, especially of characters, must necessarily be freer. The artistic phases of that immense and highly distinctive land have been hitherto but scratched upon the surface like the ploughing of the settler on its great prairies, which goes but a couple of inches deep. There is room for a school like the Russian, and it will yet come.

One has but to read Sladen's 'Australian Ballads' to see that Australasia is evidently going through an analogous process.

Mankind wants whatever will sincerely add to its knowledge or delight, and the native writers of these regions have in each case a large and rich special vein in which to mine treasure which the world, and especially their part of it, needs, and which no one else can supply.

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