

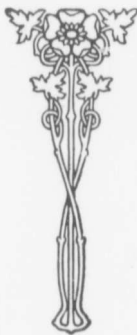
# POET AND PRIEST

A SKETCH OF

DR. ARTHUR WENTWORTH HAMILTON EATON

BY

JAMES B. WASSON, D.D.



REPRINTED FROM  
THE CANADIAN MAGAZINE  
OF AUGUST, 1907

0 909625

# Poet and Priest

By JAMES B. WASSON, D.D.

*Sketch of Arthur Wentworth Hamilton Eaton, a Canadian who has won much distinction abroad.*

IN the bachelor lodgings in the centre of the most socially conservative section of the City of New York, the region near Washington Square, for many years has lived one of Canada's most loyal and most gifted sons. Arthur Went-

worth Hamilton Eaton, M.A., D.C.L., priest, poet, historian, and general literary man, was born in Nova Scotia, educated in that province and in New England, for ten or eleven years had his home in Boston, and for more than twenty

years has been a resident of New York. Officially, Dr. Eaton is a priest of the Episcopal Church, in which he is a preacher of repute, by native aptitude and sympathy, as in habit of life he is essentially, and so has long been recognised, a devoted literary man. Born in a rarely beautiful town in Nova Scotia's famous central valley, with superb skies, divine fruit orchards, great drooping elms, green dykes, old gardens, mysterious brooks and pools, and a winding tide-river, to stimulate his youthful imagination, he early showed the tendency he has now followed so long. His father, William Eaton, Esquire, represented an important Puritan family who had settled in Nova Scotia after the expulsion of the Acadians in 1755. He was a man of education and the highest worth, at one time inspector of schools for his county, and when he died in 1893 an honoured official of



DR. ARTHUR WENTWORTH HAMILTON EATON

his town. Dr. Eaton's mother, from whom he undoubtedly inherited much of his keen sensitiveness to impressions, his passionate love of nature, his strong genius for friendship, was Anna Augusta Willoughby Hamilton, the youngest granddaughter of a Scottish gentleman who had emigrated to New England about the time of the Revolutionary War, her ancestry otherwise appearing in several of the best families of New England Puritan stock.\*

In 1873, Dr. Eaton left Nova Scotia to get his education, and in 1880, in a class, the most famous member of which now is President Roosevelt, was graduated B.A. at Harvard University. After a course of theological reading and study, during which he was also writing much, in 1884 he was ordained to the diaconate of the Protestant Episcopal Church, his advancement to the priesthood coming a little less than a year from that time. For a while he was nominally Rector's Assistant in the old Church of St. Mark's, in New York, but he soon assumed charge of the parish of Chestnut Hill, Boston.

Educated under the mutually antagonistic influences of Calvinistic and Anglican theology, with a naturally sensitive conscience and with a persistent impulse to examine all sides of things, before ordination the young clergyman went through extremely deep theological waters. Taking his final stand from conviction on Broad-Church ground, the ground of Maurice, Robertson, Stanley, Kingsley, Mulford, Allen and Brooks, it was not strange that his brief incumbency of the Chestnut Hill parish should have resulted in a volume called "The Heart of the Creeds, Historical Religion in the Light of Modern Thought." In this book, the first notable literary achievement of the writer, appeared not only evidences of keen spiritual insight, and clear comprehension of the historical development of

doctrinal truth, but as well the fine taste for literary expression that Dr. Eaton had inherited and had had stimulated in his cultured Nova Scotia home. Not only did the chief Broad-Church leaders in the United States give high praise to this book, cordially welcoming it as an important contribution to rational theological literature, but recognised masters of literary style gave its English the highest praise. If the author had never done any other work than this book, his place among thinkers and scholars, and writers of choice English, would be fully assured. "I am glad," wrote an eminent clergyman and scholar, since dead, when the book first appeared, "that the Episcopal Church has a man capable of writing such a book." Said the *New York Nation*: "Mr. Eaton is the exponent of theological tendencies which are very deep and wide, and which derive much of their volume and momentum from tributary streams as far apart as Schleiermacher and Matthew Arnold." "The Heart of the Creeds" appeared in 1888, and the next year Dr. Eaton made his first conspicuous essay in verse with his "Acadian Legends and Lyrics." In 1891, entering the historical field, he produced an interesting pioneer book, "The Church of England in Nova Scotia, and the Tory Clergy of the Revolution." As Nova Scotia is the oldest Colonial diocese of the British Empire, and as the author is intimately acquainted with the history of the Province, it is needless to say that he produced in this laborious work a permanently valuable and eminently readable book. In 1892, in collaboration with another Canadian, Mr. C. L. Betts, Dr. Eaton published a book of short stories which have had some recognition, "Tales of a Garrison Town." In 1901, he carefully edited and published an old Loyalist manuscript written by the mother of one of Nova Scotia's most famous statesmen, the late Judge James William Johnston. In the meantime, also, he compiled and edited several educational works, and by means of a number of valuable genealogical and family historical monographs made himself an authority in the American genealogical field.

From the first appearance of Dr. Eaton's volume, "Acadian Legends and

\*It may be mentioned here that Frank H. Eaton, M.A., D.C.L. (also a graduate of Harvard University), Superintendent of Schools for Victoria, B.C., and a governor of Victoria College, is Dr. Eaton's brother. Of his first-cousins the best known is Benjamin Rand, M.A., Ph.D., a sketch of whose life lately appeared in the pages of this magazine.

Lyrics," his place among American poets has been secure. In the years that have elapsed since, not a single anthology of note has appeared in Canada or the United States in which he has not been well represented. Stedman's "American Anthology," "The World's Best Poetry," "Younger American Poets," "Songs of the Great Dominion," "A Treasury of Canadian Verse," "Poems of Wild Life," "Canadian Poems and Lays," and other collections, English and American, contain much of his verse. For sixteen years, however, after his first book of verse, he produced no other, but in 1905 there came simultaneously from the press of Thomas Whittaker, New York, two attractive volumes entitled, respectively, "Acadian Ballads," and "Poems of the Christian Year." Inspection of the author's newly published poems at once revealed the fact that he had steadily grown in his command of the poetic art. "Acadian Legends and Lyrics" was flatteringly received by the press, but though it showed wide sympathy with life, keen love of natural beauty, a rare gift for reproducing events and scenes of the past, and the fine rhythmical sense that must be part of every true poet's endowment, it must be frankly confessed that some of the work in it was crude. In the more recently published "Acadian Ballads," we have a few of the best poems which appeared in the earlier volume, but even these, finely conceived and truthfully coloured as they were, are generally not a little, and for the better, changed. Improvements are to be found, for example, in the well-known musical ballads, *The Naming of the Gaspereau*, *Puritan Planters* (in the earlier volume called *The Resettlement of Acadia*), *L'Ordre de Bon Temps*, and *De Soto's Last Dream*. In this volume we see more than ever how the striking events of Acadian history, in both French and English times, have stirred the poet's imagination, how real the men and women that figured in them have become to his mind. The departure of Howe's fleet from Boston in 1776, the sailing of the New York Tories for Nova Scotia in 1784, the achievement of that remarkable Acadian heroine, Madame La Tour, the devoted friendship of La Tour and Biencourt, the grace of

Lady Frances Wentworth, the friendliness of Lady Falkland—these are some of the inspiring subjects that the author has selected from the rich field of Acadian history, and has once more given life to in his musical, artistic verse.

The mere enumeration of subjects, however, fails to give any true impression of the vivid colour of Dr. Eaton's poetry. Whatever is beautiful in the crisp skies, luxuriant landscape, rich forests, and sparkling seas of his Acadian country, he has reproduced—the white mists of the Atlantic rolling up to the Basin of Minas and wreathing the low mountains that shut in the winding Fundy shore, the rugged face of Blomidon, "grim guardsman of the gateway of the tide," the old gray wharves that line the harbour of Halifax; and, as well, the world-famed apple orchards of the Annapolis valley in their marvellously rich pink-petalled bloom; fields of red clover and white daisies, maple forests in their flaming autumn-crimson dress, old-fashioned gardens, magnificent with spring crocuses, midsummer pinks and bluebells, autumn phloxes and dahlias.—all these contribute to the beautiful setting of Eaton's Acadian verse.

In his "Poems of the Christian Year," the author has shown his power in another special department of poetry. Arranged in the familiar order of the church seasons, with groups of several beautiful poems each for the great feasts of Christmas and Easter, the poems in this volume have all the qualities that make religious verse live. No one can read, for example,

I know a vast cathedral,  
With sculptured walls and high,  
And windows dight with every light  
That decks the sunset sky.

or

Who does not love the tranquil mystery  
Of twilight, when the day is almost spent

or

They speak deep truths, those lilies dumb,  
Whose waxen forms our altars hide,  
Fresh from Bermudian gardens come  
To help us keep our Easter-tide,

without being moved as men are always moved by tender, musical religious verse. In January, 1907, Dr. Eaton published a

fourth volume of poems, this time again of a general character. In the "Lotus of the Nile and Other Poems," we have vivid flashes of light on the inner nature of the man. Some of the poems in this new volume, also, in an incomplete form, are to be found in the author's first book of verse. But everywhere here we discover nature, poetical feeling and finished poetical form. The themes are as varied as the author's life has been fruitful and wide. Travel abroad has given us his fine descriptive poem, "Fountains Abbey," a poem rich in imagination and in delicate poetic thought; the study of historic religions has made possible the strong stanzas on "The Egyptian Lotus," "Foundry Fires" has evidently been suggested by the sound of ringing anvils and the gleam of the glowing forge. But by far the great part of the poetry in this volume may properly be classed as "Nature Poetry." It is nature poetry, however, of the truest sort. One or two poems, like *The Lady of the Flowers* in "Acadian Ballads," are purely descriptive, but there is in most of the verse an intense subjectivity, the subjectivity of Wordsworth and Shelley. The poet feels always the oneness of earth with "the deep heart of man," he perceives in nature

A motion and a spirit which impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

He finds in earth's ordinary processes the changing moods of humanity's immortal mind. The poems are usually not long, most of them contain not more than a dozen stanzas, but one turns from them, as a rule, with the satisfaction one finds only in the finished productions of those who have followed long and faithfully the lyric art.

The range of subjects treated in these poems is wide, the poet is a man whose experience of life has gone deep, he has had strong friendships and ardent loves, he has profound sympathy with children and with the poor, he has threaded the intricate passages of theological speculation, he has suffered disappointment and undergone severe mental pain, but he has had also the most beatific visions and has stood on the loftiest heights. In his verse

there is a certain transparency, by means of which we can learn much of the visions that have inspired and the sorrows that have chastened the writer's inner soul.

The "Acadian Ballads" are not all ballads, some of them, like *Impressions*, *Atlantic Mists*, and *Orchards in Bloom*, are highly-coloured bits of descriptive verse. What a fine picture the poet gives us of the June orchards:

Banks of bloom on a billowy plain,  
Odours of orient in the air,  
Pink-tipped petals that fall, that rain,  
Allah's garden everywhere.

Infinite depths in the blue above,  
Glint of gold on the hill-tops gray,  
Orioles trilling songs of love  
With tireless throats, the long June day.

Fields of emerald, tufted white,  
Yellow, and azure, far outspread—  
O the measureless delight  
In the scent of the clover blossoms red!

Or of the dreamy mists that rise from the  
"mighty Atlantic," and move like wreaths  
along the steep sides of the "North Mountain":

Up from the sea the white mists roll,  
Soft as the robes a dancer sways,  
Pure as the dreams that swathe the soul  
Of a laughing child, at peace always.

The blue-veined hills at the north they hide  
With a veil that hangs like filmy gauze,  
And they lower and lift and fling aside  
Their matchless drapery, without pause.

Grange and meadow and dyke below  
Lie in the sun in calm content,  
Hither and thither like wraiths they go,  
But their shadowy grace on the cliffs is spent.

No poet was ever more emphatically the child of his early environment than this one. For many years he has lived in the heart of a great metropolis, but in every bit of descriptive nature-verse he writes, we see that the scenery of his native Nova Scotia holds his imagination captive still. "Eaton, I think," said an English reviewer once, "has been the most happy of the Canadians in treating their national legends. There are few writers in the United States who equal him in this respect," and the recently published volume adds much force to this judgment, uttered twenty years ago. Nova Scotia, at least, of the Canadian provinces, ought

to hold Dr. Eaton closely to her heart, for there is scarcely an epoch in her romantic history that his pen has not commemorated, and with peculiar grace. *The Legend of Glooslap, Peutrincourt's Return to Port Royal, L'Ordre de Bon Temps, The Baptism of Membertou, La Tour and Biencourt, Puritan Planters, The Arrival of Howe's Fleet, A Ballad of the Tories, Lady Wentworth*—all these are poems of high merit in the realm of verses celebrating historical places and characters and events. Long after their gifted author has gone from the world, they will be read with interest and will be gathered into collections of notable poems of places, and anthologies of historical verse.

In the field of subjective verse few modern poems, at least, are better than *Purple Asters*, in "Acadian Ballads"; *God's Manifoldness*, in "Poems of the Christian Year"; and *Lombardy Poplars, The Prophecy of Beauty, Once again the Summer Dies*, and *I Plucked a Daisy*, in "The Lotus of the Nile."

Interest in strong, human occupations is also a characteristic of this poet. The activities of fields, gardens, foundries, whale-ships, wharves, the sea, and city streets, are all signalised in his verse. For gardens and the sea-shore he has a peculiar fondness, the love of flowers is evidently a passion with him, and he seems almost colour-mad.

In such a poem as *The Prophecy of Beauty*, one feels the same sense of beauty that inspired Keats:

Sometimes I think the source of souls must be  
The Primal Beauty, we so quick respond  
To loveliness in earth and sky and sea—  
Green in the majestic oak and fine fern-  
frond.

Free in sunsets, undulate lines of hills,  
Ships spreading white wings on the west-  
ern wave,  
Turbulent currents that turn mossy mills,  
The dim cathedral's arch and spire and  
nave;

The moon's reflection on the limpid lake,  
The plash of oars, the rowers' voices there;  
The enrapturing scent that follows in the  
wake  
Of spring's first movement in the forests  
bare

Who has not often felt a sovereign power  
To lift his spirit to majestic pose

In these, or mountain peak, or vine-clad  
bower;

In violet blue, and crimson-petalled rose.

Such stanzas strikingly remind one of lines in "Endymion," or indeed, in their choice of epithets, of Milton's "L'Allegro."

When Eaton's first book of verse appeared, the New York *Outlook* said: "In his individual criticism of life, the author's special significance lies. We hope that we may not seem anxious for a pretentious phrase when we term this poetry the cry of the heart of the age. . . . With all its fierce struggle, disease, and damning sins, we do not believe that the heart of the age is pessimistic. On the edge of the gloom is the glimmer of a dawn. This Mr. Eaton discerns, and utters our modern life's varied emotions; and it seems to us that his utterance is as true in its own way as the message of Browning or Tennyson." "Flood-Tide," said another reviewer, "has something of the pathos of Kingsley's 'Three Fishers,' without being in the least indebted to it. . . . *Sometime* is an exquisite lyric, worthy of comparison with Stedman's 'Undiscovered Country.'"

In his later verse Eaton shows the same characteristics of thought and feeling that critics found in his earlier work, but in the meantime he has grown much, if not in poetic feeling, certainly in the art of perfect poetic form. Such exquisite lyrics as *The East and the West, Thoughts My Guiding Star, Where Are Ye Now*, the new version of *The Roots of the Roses*, and *The Still Hour* amply attest this. Take these delicate stanzas as an example:

When the still hour draws near that I must die  
I ask that in some western-windowed room  
Where I can see the sunset, I may lie.

I love so well the blue and green and gold  
That fuse in liquid splendour, ere the gloom  
Of evening settles and the day grows cold.

A single rose I crave beside my bed,  
For I had once a bush of roses white,  
Whose fragrance through my deepest soul  
was shed

Let some one skilled in friendship hold my  
hand  
For all my life my peace has suffered blight  
If none were near me who could understand.

I want no weeping, but I ask a prayer  
That God would rob the evil I have done

Of harmful power, and make my influence fair.

Then as my breath grows fainter, and my eyes

Dim to the last trace of the kindly sun,  
Kissing my forehead, say your last good-byes.

In the earlier part of this article, Dr. Eaton's incumbency of the parish of Chestnut Hill, Boston, has been mentioned. This incumbency did not last long, for finding literary occupations on the whole more congenial, in a little over a year he withdrew from it and went to Europe, when he returned settling permanently in New York, in the part of the city where he still lives. For many years he has given part of his time to the special teaching of English literature, this occupation being more congenial to him than parochial work. He has, however, continually exercised the functions of the ministry, and during the last year has been one of the Cathedral Preachers of the New York Cathedral of St. John-the-Divine.

Dr. Eaton is a man of varied social

experience. Thoroughly identified with the old exclusive community about Washington Square, he is yet widely known and warmly welcomed the city through, and for many years his summers, completely or in part, have been spent as the guest of well-known cottagers at New York's magnificent watering place, rich Newport-by-the-Sea.

In June, 1905, in recognition of his high scholastic attainments and literary achievements, King's College, Nova Scotia, the oldest Colonial College of the British Empire, conferred on Dr. Eaton the honour of a Doctorate of Civil Law.

Canadian literature is now slowly growing in volume and strength, and the time approaches when the country, great in material prosperity, will have also a worthy national literature. When that time comes, though like others of his Canadian contemporaries he has been obliged, for the most part, to work out of his native land, the name of Arthur Wentworth Hamilton Eaton, it may safely be prophesied, will occupy a truly distinguished place.

