

# RUS IN URBE

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“**B**ACK to the woods, O Muse of Canada, back to the woods!” In a delightful jest of intent, which appeared last autumn, Mr. Sandwell hies the poets of the cafeteria and the traffic cop back to the Laurentian mountains and Alquonquin Park with the frogs croaking all over them and the loons emitting their lunacy, with the pretty girl of memory, hope or possession dangling her ankles in the foreground—her knees were covered then. He wants the fundamental things of life in what he reads,—soft earth, the smell of pine needles, ripples in the forest streams, not the brooks made by water carts flushing asphalt pavements; he would have tree and lake and open spaces, away from the Windsor Hotel and a basket of oranges in a window. For obviously tree and lake are of Canada and stay there, while the oranges are Californian, and the square of the Windsor is as the square of every other American city and its traffic only men and women.

Mr. Sandwell must be teasing us. Has his blood not sung to the sound of the first water wagon slushing the street after its long burden of winter? Has he not stood on the pavement a quick night in March with every nerve bounding to the rush of gutter water which has broken the ice and is tearing its way down the hill, pregnant as any forest rivulet with the fierce escape of spring? He knows the fundamental things are whatever the poet sees; and with all his love and promotion of writing he is surely asking for poetry, not “Canadian literature.” His would be the last word of protest if as he watched a policeman Jacob’s ladder were set up in Yonge Street, or by a more unlikely visitation the orange groves of California were caught bearing fruit in Vancouver as did once the Greek vine in Keats.

But maybe his whimsy is not concerned with such high hopes. He is chiding a lesser Muse, those who in verse and prose did write with ease of sunsets and are now restless under electric light. It would indeed be ungrateful to forget what they did, perhaps as ungrateful to recall too vividly. Pleasant things were written pleasantly; they put in words the likings of our people, adventures over snow lands, lonely rivers with canoes, turning maples—and the pretty girl. But would Mr. Sandwell read them if they appeared to-day? Does he read them even as they are?

What has happened to bring this change? What is it that has lured our Canadian poets from red leaves and forest pools? The theme is a dangerous one, too delicate for untrained speculation.

Personal remembrance colours any conception of our own age. But I wonder sometimes, questioningly, if ever there live a literature in Canada whether it will not be found that the war which ended ten years ago was not its turn of growth. We are rather amazed, in truth a little shocked, at how lacking in renascent power has been that cataclysm in English and French writers, how it is gradually sinking into the war of 1914-18. We forget that not for the first time Frenchmen then fought in Flanders and English soldiers went over to France. The Crusades always brought more to Europe than any of her civil wars. (It may be that something fresh has come out of Arabia). But it *was* a new thing for the youth of Canada to go on a Crusade out of their country, to leave their plains and "cities of naked trunks" and cross an ocean to fight beside a civilization from which they had sprung and been separated, and they brought back contact with the world of ancient youth. They heard the nightingale and remembered Thrace.

They did not know this. They only knew that they were a little uncomfortable when they went back to the familiar lonelinesses, that the new images in their minds would not fit in the niches of Ontario rocks, and that in some undefined way they were happier dancing in the cities. For then they were doing what their comrades were doing, in St. Louis and London and Rome. And when after a little the pen began to trouble their fingers, they wrote as their uneasiness and immediate environment dictated. They could not return to the past.

Yet even were this conjecture true, it might deepen, not lessen the critic's regret if his desire were really for the return of the older writing. Probably with a purpose, for we can never wholly trust either his seriousness or his absurdities, his own retrospect enfolds a doubt. And some, to whom the waste lands were a reserve and passion, felt always that this literature "full of atmospheric detail, forests running down to the water's edge. . . wild animals. . . and the pretty girl" was wholly and tormentingly unsatisfying. The crude advertisements in an outing magazine were better fare for our hunger and memory. The clear, isolated repeat of the whitethroat was lost when it became the Canada bird; November woods were robbed of their nakedness when human melancholy came in.

For this the pretty girl was partly to blame. We should be poor indeed without her: she has been in almost all lands and almost all literatures. She waited by the wine coloured seas of the Aegean and in the dark cabin of an Ulster glen: men are still storming Tintagel for her, and she is behind the two towers of Chartres.

But in the wild land of Hudson Bay and the great hunting grounds of the north she is not, for no race that we know has lived and loved and left record of her there. And when newcomers not finding her, in their need and ignorance, set up a reproduction of her from another country, the woods simply made a space around the stupid thing and left her there. Human affection and worship were alien in a waste untamed by axe or plow.

Maybe also, language fraught with rich memories, charged in each word with the gathering power of inherited imagery, is too difficult a medium by which to translate so virgin a land; that soil must wait to bear children before it can enter into song. And yet, though men have not been born in that country, they have lived across it; its cold spirit has drawn them from the ends of the earth and excited their vision, and what has touched human longings can be made incarnate. Not as elsewhere. An inviolate land cannot create writers . . . yet. An artist must come as a god to make it bring forth a living work.

The painters and Louis Hémon have done it. And in *Maria Chapdelaine* is a text for our musing. Louis Hémon was not a Canadian, he cared nothing for making local literature. He was a young, full fledged writer from France, irresistibly lured by a beauty he found unbroken. And even he did not try to write of the woods from within the woods, or interpret them by his own desires. By an unerring instinct he chose the thin line of settlement at their edge, one of the very few parts of Canada where is planted a tradition and Mary is enshrined. He saw the wilds only as they were reflected in the eyes of Maria and Francois Paradis, alien, remote, unfriendly, an unforgettable and immovable frieze to their daily lives. And because of his triumph the northern seasons have been snatched into immortality, and Peribonka is on our tongues as a name in our heritage. But while blueberries now grow on Parnassus, Louis Hémon out of Paris is no help to those who would have our poets taught by the hermit thrush.

A painter paints what is paintable, a writer what can be written of. A painter *can* paint Alquonquin Park. Tom Thompson has done it, fisherman and guide. And no pretty girl sits under his jack pines, no mist of romantic memory films the bareness of his rivers. Yet those who came after him, those painters who at first sight of their paintings made us take three leaps in the air like the salmon touching salt water in *Water Babies*, from sheer joy at finding what we did not know we had been waiting for all our lives, they did not altogether learn their trade beneath a yellow birch. They went to Paris and Rome, Chicago and Toronto, wherever there was teaching of paint, and as they drank and studied

and rebelled against their elders they tasted the fellowship of all youth and art and experimented with their material. Their age quickened them (Sir Andrew Macphail once said that a desert might make a saint, but never an artist) and then when they went back into the wilds, happily before the schools had entrapped them, they saw with awakened eyes that this hard land was more paintable than any land they had ever seen, and their medium became subject to their sight. So they scattered, to Georgian Bay and Baffin Land, to the villages of Totem poles and French farm-houses, and their work has gone out of Canada and won tribute from their peers. Already we see a difference in it from the simple out doors of Thompson. It is curious how thought comes to brood over a landscape that artists keep painting. These later pictures have a new mentality and consciousness; their barrens are lonely as they never were in Thompson, their rivers becoming haunted. A tradition is rapidly growing.

And with a tradition, a danger. If we begin to be sentimental over them, to make a cult of their discoveries and use their works for homilies on "made in Canada" (have care of the Christmas card!) their followers may gradually feel a virtue in painting their native hills and grow contemptuous of any new commandment coming from centres not their own. There is a scorn of the rivers of Damascus as hardening as that of Jordan. Our prayers will then be to drive them back into the cities to learn humility again from the traffic cop and curiosity from incoming ships. That time is distant yet.

Musing is all so hazardous: the flare of contradiction always dies as one ponders. The seed of genius may be blown on many winds, and strange soils nourish it. For all that, gazing around more and more wistfully, can we really feel that Canadian writers are ready for solitude and the open spaces? It is a very difficult and taciturn land. Hardy could take a clod of English earth and every palmful told him the rich and long impact of human lives. Most of this country has hardly learnt a language; two generations ago it was pre-historic. And there is no Hardy among us. One doubts if there will be.

Nor is there need. "The house of art has many mansions" still to be unlocked and taken possession of, if only we do not push those toward them who have not the key—they may injure the entrance. A few attempts lately have made us afraid. We want poets, not manufacturers who take puppets copied from Scandinavia and move them painfully against the northwest, not real puppets which have an art of their own with a background conven-

tionalized for them, but lay figures stuffed by their makers and nature banged on the head to support them. Workable stories often, but not living writing evoked from the foothills.

There is a possibility that the Canadian wilds will never enter literature, that they will remain like the Russian steppes, a great inarticulate background shadowing a poetry and prose different from anything we have looked for, a literature that if of people and foreign with dark power and concept, built rather than sung. If that comes it will be on the praires, a separate land, from men of middle Europe or the States. It is more unlikely in the east, for we of Ontario to the Gulf seem of a different lineage. We love our northern woods with a familiarity people like the Russian never show toward their plains; they hold challenge and bright fear for us, not dark dread. We have played as well as worked in them, concrete images and ecstasies of childhood belong to them: a lumber hut at the end of a trail, islands punched toward the west, hot rocks beside cool moss and pigeon berries, the first snow on the revealed November woods. And if our ears will never forget how a tall tree sounds as it crashed through the undergrowth, how ice breaks against the shore and bush burns under stars, I doubt if our Canadian writers will.

So we beg Mr. Sandwell to leave the poets in the city. They are for the moment filled with new impulses kindled by their contemporaries which they must work out: probably they feel that experiments and failures are less irrevocable under roofs. They know their old portrayal of wild things was not adequate. So let them chant of wet pavements under an arc light, the yellow jumper in the telephone exchange, the eager face against the pane. . . maybe they will make good verse of it. And perchance when they have lived through it as Synge lived through Paris, they will be called away as he was called to County Mayo, and out of Labrador will come a new rhythm to our speech. We cannot tell what trains a poet. Wordsworth wrote mechanically of Europe, but the gleams of magic which light his walks in the Lake Country may be his debt to France. Possibly a skyscraper can teach a style better than brooding under a maple tree with Lampman. It is all beyond our prophecy and keening.

If our bookmen will only not harass them into being Canadian, and we do not preach the painters at them which is a temptation. Then, if Mr. Sandwell will have patience and forget all about them for a while (they owe *him* remembrance) it might happen—who can tell?—that one day while he is gazing at a down-town orange trying to repeat a line of cubic verse, a waking note of music will arrest him. Beside him the whitethroat, singing in Phillips Place.