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THE "POETRY" OF PARLIAMENT

ON FEBRUARY 2, 1881, Mr. G. W. Ross, member of Parliament for Middlesex West, Ontario, rose in his place to speak on the budget, and in passing to comment on the verse both manufactured and quoted in debate by one of his honourable opponents. Mr. J. B. Plumb, who had already been referred to in the House as "that sweet bard of Niagara" (which district he represented) was, Mr. Ross said, "illustrating again the old saying: 'Let me make the songs of a people and I care not who make their laws'." He added one of Mr. Plumb's couplets, used in the previous election campaign:

Protection for our coal, protection for our oats,
Protection from the ravages of those old Yankee bloats.

And when people are treated to such verses as this, Mr. Ross argued, "who is there that would not feel that the fate of the country was at stake, and that the man who could write such poetry as that must have been led on by some divine enthusiasm to rescue this country from the quagmire of degradation and destitution into which it was fast sinking through the mismanagement of the Liberal party?"

Whatever the merits of the Ross rhetoric or the Plumb "poetry", the careful reader will have already noticed that Mr. Ross had given one example of a songster and a lawmaker moulded into one. Such a combination today is exceedingly rare; but there was a time in the Canadian House of Commons when poetry and politics walked hand in hand, and members casually wrote, quoted, parodied, and paraphrased verses for an impressive variety of purposes. The great bulk of the poetry thus employed shared a common characteristic: it had to have some relevance, however vague, to something before the House. For that reason, because similar themes recur every year in Parliament, during the golden age of Commons poetry one finds the same strains appearing again and again. No great knowledge of parliamentary debates is needed for one to imagine circumstances in which the following examples, all of which were

quoted more than once before the turn of the century, would be pertinent. The text of each is as it appeared in *Hansard*:

He that fights and runs away
Will live to fight another day.

While the lamps hold out to burn
The vilest sinner may return.

In a crowd of rogues, the chief
Is he, who loudest cries, "Stop Thief".

More recently, the Leader of the Opposition used his own variant, which was printed as prose and without quotation marks, of the second of these quotations (see *Hansard*, September 1, 1966, p. 7940). The original is one of several from Isaac Watts, and—as might be expected—these and many others are readily accessible in Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*. Outside the Commons, in a still more recent and more crucial address to his followers at the national Conservative convention on November 16, Mr. Diefenbaker made use of the anonymous ballad of "Sir Andrew Barton". Referring to a Scottish freebooter of the early sixteenth century, Mr. Diefenbaker said that he would paraphrase the words attributed to a poet of the other Elizabethian [*sic*] era, Sir Richard Barton:

"Fight on, my men", said Sir Richard Barton,
"I am wounded but I am not yet slain.
I'll lay me down and rest a while
And then I'll rise and fight."

In reporting his speech, the Canadian Press supplied Sir Andrew's correct name, the obvious rhyming and clinching word "again" (which could have been used to advantage) and the essential word in the line "I'll but lie down and *bleed* a while" of which variants occur in the equally well-known ballad of "Johnny Armstrong", which celebrates the fighting spirit of a Scottish border raider (see, e.g., *DR*, 46, pp. 371-2). The Canadian Press also pointed out that the same quotation had been used in 1963 by Mr. T. C. Douglas, leader of the New Democratic Party, when he was defeated in Regina on first seeking election to parliament. Whatever his source, or his variations, it must be conceded that Mr. Diefenbaker had applied to himself a stanza far above the common level of political controversy, and that it would be unchivalrous and pedantic to

dwell upon errors made under the stress of the particular occasion. *Time* (November 25) quoted one of the early variants of the stanza, ending "I'le lay me downe and bleed a-while,/and then I'le rise and ffight again". *News-week* (November 28) did not follow exactly either the ballad or Mr. Diefenbaker, and went farther astray by attributing his "defiant paraphrase" to John Dryden.

Mr. John Charlton, member for Norfolk North, had such a fondness for likening the Conservative government to a stranded Mississippi steamer that when he produced his quatrain again in 1885 an opponent objected, "That is in *Hansard* three or four times already":

And she hove and sot, and hove and sot,
 And high her rudder flung,
 And every time she hove and sot,
 The wusser leak she sprung.

Each time Mr. Charlton quoted those lines, a different version of them appeared in the record. Whether we are to blame the shorthand reporters who took down the speeches, or the members themselves, we must face the fact that even when verse was enjoying its heyday in the House, misquotation was about as common as quotation. (It is possible, of course, that the works of the poets in the 1880s and 1890s were circulating in a splendid multiplicity of editions, but the rather parochial nature of Canadian society at the time makes this seem improbable.) Many arresting examples of misquotation appear in the debates, but a few can represent the rest. Commenting in 1879 on the Liberals' gloomy view of the impact of the National Policy on farmers, Sir John A. Macdonald uttered this verse:

Alas! unconscious of their doom,
 The little victims play;
 Careless they are of ills to come,
 They think but of to-day.

Thomas Gray is generally believed to have written

Alas! regardless of their doom,
 The little victims play;
 No sense have they of ills to come,
 Nor care beyond to-day. . . .

Again, Tennyson wrote

That a lie which is all a lie may be met and fought with outright;
But a lie which is part a truth is a harder matter to fight.

Sir Richard Cartwright, referring in 1900 to things of which George Foster irresistibly reminded him, said:

A lie that is all a lie, can be met with and fought outright,
But a lie that is half the truth is a harder battle to fight.

Sir Charles Tupper, interestingly enough, in citing Cartwright's appraisal of Foster two days later, took a line between the poet and the politician:

A lie that is all a lie can be met and fought out right,
But a lie that is half a truth is a harder battle to fight.

Additional instances (and there are many, one of the most attractive being the attribution of a familiar passage from *Hamlet* to the Bible) would perhaps serve only to obscure the more important point that what matters is not that members of Parliament, speaking in the heat of debate, sometimes quoted poetry badly, but that they quoted it at all. They quoted freely from English, American, French, and Canadian poets, and more rarely from Latin and Greek. Sometimes a member paid the House the compliment of not giving a modern version of a line or two from the ancient classics, while the House translators, striking an early blow for biculturalism, except for the simplest lines never rendered French lyrics into English even for the English edition of *Hansard*. Sometimes the members discussed their poets: the establishment of the Royal Society in 1883 provided an occasion when two members, though deploring a Canadian shortage, spoke knowledgeably and well, and in French and English, of writers including poets, while in 1890 Nicholas Flood Davin, M.P. for the North West Territories seat of Assiniboia (see *DR*, 44, pp. 64-74) went out of his way to laud the work of Archibald Lampman.

Generally, however, members who quoted verse confined themselves to the poet's written word, or some approximation to it, commonly without citing the source. No necessary relation existed between the nature of the subject under scrutiny in the House and the poetry employed in the debates, for members always showed a striking ingenuity in finding couplets and quatrains to fit every conceivable argument. The annual consideration of the budget, sur-

prisingly enough, often saw the emergence of a strong chorus; and so unlikely a topic as the classification of railway material once resulted in nineteen lines, among them the following:

We follow ever on and on—
O'er hill and hollow, brake and lawn;
Thro gruesome vale and dread ravine—
Where light of day is never seen.

In the midst of another railway debate Mr. D. B. Woodworth, a Nova Scotian member, spoke pertinently for several minutes before suddenly announcing, "I will quote the lines of the old dead poet, Longfellow, on the building of the Ship of State"; and he did—twenty-one lines—amid "Hear, Hear's".

The indiscriminate quoting of verse was rarely indulged in to this extent for, as noted above, all the excerpts had to have some relevance, and the majority of the quotations were short and to the point. A closer examination of the relevance of quotations reveals several fairly clear categories into which parliamentary poetry fell. The first among them, in terms of sheer quantity, can be labelled "Patriotic". Legislatures are peculiarly prone to celebrate occasions of public sentimentality, and the House of Commons in its formative years found excellent scope for its talents. The colonial tie, the imperial flag, the slain in the North West Rebellions, Queen Victoria's Jubilee, the Boer War, and the Queen's death severally found members moving from prose into verse, and they sang of these affairs with the assistance of a durable handful of minstrels among whom, by the turn of the century, Kipling had arisen as the undisputed champion. The only blot on his record was that he encountered an unforeseen bit of trouble over "Our Lady of the Snows", which was read into the record in 1897 as part of a debate on the tariff. Several people took umbrage at the poem's reiteration of the snow theme, as a libel on the Canadian fact, and a parody in rebuttal, as long as the original poem, was issued two days later on a standard motion to adjourn the House. Sir Wilfrid Laurier objected in turn, and after reminding his audience that "we are all accustomed to poetical exaggeration", concluded: "I earnestly hope that we shall have less poetry and more business."

Kipling did not stand alone as the imperial poet, but year after year he stood out consistently as the best, and on the whole the least bloodcurdling. Members (the English-speaking among them, that is) were all but unanimous in their approval of his views, but rarely went so far as to endorse such senti-

ments as are expressed in these lines which a member used to close a speech on the naval service:

There is no flag in all the world save Britain's blood-red cross
That guards pure justice, honour, truth; and keeps the weak from loss.

Apart from their patriotic motif, the lines illustrate a second major purpose of poetry in Parliament: to sharpen a point, either during, or at the end of, an argument. A number of examples suggest that members had access to a remarkably diversified supply. In a debate on a bill to tidy up prizefighting in 1881, a member who rarely resorted to verse came up with a critical stanza:

The belt which once the champion graced,
When boxing honor reigned,
In modern time has been disgraced,
And all its glory stained.

Two years later, during a discussion of lifesaving stations on inland waters, a member ended a cogent plea with

The voices of the rescued,
Whose numbers will be read;
The tears of speechless meaning
Their wives and children shed;

The memory of mercies
In man's extremest need;
All for the dear old life-boat,
In unison will plead.

Yet another M. P. capped a controversy over a motion to close canals, railways, and other public works on Sundays:

One Sunday well-spent
Brings a week's content.

Frequently the point made in a snatch of poetry referred to some characteristic of honourable gentlemen on the other side of the House, and members who knew their Shakespeare, or Milton on Satan, were often in a strong tactical position to make their beliefs clear beyond doubt. A third and more subtle

use of poetry was, indeed, to express sentiments in terms that would certainly have been ruled unparliamentary by Mr. Speaker had they been expressed in prose. Not all poetry with a personal application was of this nature, to be sure, and no member could take offence when some one quoted at him:

How doth the little busy bee
Improve each shining hour.

or:

Birds in their little nests agree,
And 'tis a shameful sight
When children of one family
Fall out, and chide, and fight.

On the other hand, it has always been unparliamentary to reflect on a member's honour, and such reflections are not difficult to make with a little skill in the art of quotation. There was no malice in the heart of the M.P. who in 1882 remarked that the opposition reminded him that

Things look thunderin' dark, there's no denyin';
We are clean out of hope, and almost out of lyin'.

But lying cannot ordinarily be attributed to a member, as in this passage:

MR. DAVIN. In fact, Mr. Speaker, I may say . . . the whole speech bristled with such statements as proved him to be a true poet. You know, the poet is essentially a creator. Byron says of poets, especially of great poets—and if my hon. friend were a poet, he would be a great one—that

They are such liars,
And take all colours, like the hands of dyers.

Lying is of course not the only habit that can be alluded to in poetry. These lines were quoted in 1883, with pointed reference to a member who himself quoted generously:

With all his conscience and one eye askew
So false he partly took himself for true,
Whose pious talk, when most his heart was dry,
Made wet the crafty crow's foot round his eye.
Nor deeds of gift, but gifts of grace he forged,

And, snake-like, slimed his victim e're he gorged,
 Who never took god's name except for gain,
 So never took that useful name in vain,
 Made him his cat's paw, and the cross his tool,
 And Christ the bait to trap his dupe and fool.

The dying gladiator also made several effective entrances, particularly in debates in which the government sought to mow up the opposition by adjustments in the electoral laws:

I loathe you petty tyrants,
 I scorn you with mine eye,
 I'll curse you with my latest breath,
 And fight you till I die.

In none of these and similar instances was the quoting member called to order.

The same is true of another major use to which poetry has been put in the House of Commons, the dilatory quotation of verse after verse in a filibuster. In most debates involving poetry, members generally confined themselves to stanzas of one to eight lines, for any of the purposes cited above. But in a filibuster long poems become desirable for their own sake, regardless of their other qualities. Thus in 1885, as part of the Liberals' ferocious opposition to Macdonald's franchise bill, Edward Blake (who was usually able to say all he wanted to say in incisive prose) favoured the House with thirty-eight lines on women, about whose right to vote there was some difference of opinion. On the same day one of his supporters offered the House an additional eighteen lines on the same general subject, and a little later yet another member introduced forty-five lines. Unfortunately, as far as the public record is concerned, the poetic filibuster of 1885 came to an untimely end, not because members stopped quoting but because the *Hansard* reporters, under the combined pressures of an extended session and long daily sittings of the House, rebelled. "The greater part of the extracts which were read," George Casey, an erratic troubadour himself, asserted, "were quoted in the night sessions or during the early hours of morning, when the speeches were necessarily rather rambling, and I would point out that, at such times the *Hansard* was not burdened with the extracts read, because scarcely any of them were put in *Hansard*." The reporters' revolt is at least understandable if, as one Conservative alleged, the Leader of the Opposition did "come here with Tennyson in his arms and recite for half an hour from that poet's works".

This catalogue of the pragmatic exploitation of poetry would be incom-

plete without reference to two other of its elements: the making of parodies or paraphrases, and the quoting of "local" poetry, including some by members. On none of these scores can the quality of the lines be said to be high, as a few samples will attest. Mr. J. C. Rykert, who in 1891 was allowed to resign from the House under an extensive shadow, once said of the Leader of the Opposition:

How doth the little busy bee,
Improve each shining hour,
Gathering Buncombe all the day,
From everything that's sour.

To Rykert himself, it should be added, another member subsequently applied Tom Moore:

There was a little man,
And he had a little soul,
And he said, "Little soul, let us try, try, try,
If it's not within our reach
To make up a little speech,
Just between you and little I, I, I".

Yet another said of the Opposition:

Theirs not to reason why;
Theirs but to vote and sigh,—
Silent one hundred!

The quality of the home-made poetry, though its point is always clear, is measurably lower, as the following examples demonstrate; all were either written by members, or attributed to their constituents:

There were scandalous jobs in the East and the West,
In which men in high place were chief actors;
Corruption whose current no check could arrest
In a Parliament packed with contractors.

The despot's heel is on thy shore,
Ontario, Ontario.
Her torch is at thy temple door,
Ontario, Ontario.

He cannot make the old speech
He made so long ago,
For cheek and voice would fail him
And self-possession go;

For broken pledges come in mind
 With each remembered phrase,
 He cannot speak of "purity"
 As in by-gone days.

Come, Tilley, stop your puffing and blowing,
 And tell us where the railroad is going.

Except for an occasional unexpected flare-up, such as the sixty lines that Mackenzie King delivered during the short wartime session of 1939, verse of any type, whether domestic or imported, is comparatively rare in the Commons nowadays. Some of the reasons for the decline of verse in political debate are **easy** to find. Even when verse was freely quoted, for instance, it was noteworthy that in the later weeks of the annual parliamentary sittings, as the House bore down on the estimates, it all but disappeared from *Hansard*. Members got their poetry out of the way early, during the more leisurely consideration of the Speech from the Throne and the first pieces of legislation introduced. The increasing pressure of parliamentary business, accompanied by increasing restrictions on the length of speeches and the parliamentary timetable generally, inevitably lessened the members' inclination to cut into their own time with verses, however apposite. A noticeable tightening of the informal rules of parliamentary decorum has also occurred and members, to put it bluntly, used to call each other all sorts of names, both openly and obliquely, which would not be permitted today, and which they would probably not even attempt.

Combined with these institutional changes has come a different type of member, from a different educational background. For many years after Confederation, members of the House of Commons included a series of virtuoso performers who could produce a line or two to suit any occasion, and in addition frequently sparked each other into a minor tournament of poetic gamesmanship. Probably the most gifted of these minnesingers was Nicholas Flood Davin, who was in the House from 1887 to 1900, and who was once described by a critic as "a man who is only capable of getting off some lines of poetry and of stringing phrases together without one particle of logic behind them." Davin could, and did, quote apt lines from Byron, Molière, Virgil, and Shakespeare in impromptu speeches, and even boast, in one debate when he tripped over a verse, "It is not often I miss a quotation, so take what comfort you can out of it when I do." More than once his quotations were comments on other members' quotations, and the same was true of the other members. Generalization

is dangerous when one cannot claim to have read every page of the debates of the Canadian House of Commons, but it nonetheless appears to be true that modern M.P.s are not nearly as well grounded in poetry as were the Davins, the Rosses, and the Plumbs cited above.

Finally, poetry, together with some of fashions surrounding it, has changed. Most parliamentarians of the 1880s and 1890s were familiar with *Grip*, for example, and *Grip* published a good deal of verse (including some familiar parody), much of it directly relevant to contemporary politics. One example is "The Silent Members' Soliloquy":

. . . To rise;—to speak;—
 Ha! Ha!—perchance break down;—aye, there's the rub:
 . . . For who could bear the quips and scorn of fools,
 Constituents' disappointment, neighbours' jeers,
 Opponents' scoffing, proud wife's contumely,
 The fading hopes of office

No journal took the place of *Grip* when it died in 1894.

What is equally important is that few poets succeeded Kipling and the others who wrote on such sound political themes as the Empire and the flag, in terms that M.P.s understood and approved. The flag debate of 1964 included little poetry; it would have been liberally seeded with it in 1900. To use an old device that many former members of Parliament would have liked, we have in politics attained that euphoric state

When the Rudyards cease from Kipling
 And the Haggards ride no more.