John Povey

POOR WAIFS UPON CREATION'S SKIRTS

When the settlers began to occupy the new colonial territories of England in the nineteenth century they came up against indigenous populations. Except, perhaps, for South Africa, the settlers in the other three dominions-to-be —Canada, Australia and New Zealand—did not find the natives a particularly dangerous or profound problem. Gratifyingly enough, there was little of the wholesale extirpation that was one of the most disagreeable aspects of the American movement to the West. But the natives were there on every side and their presence insisted there be constant observation, sometimes even conscience-stricken debate. Often the debate was only a casual and passing thought —a comment on the regrettably unfortunate situation of the indigenous inhabitants. At other times the reaction was more strong and more morally challenging.

The attitudes and opinions of the settlers moved between two extremes. On the one hand was the concept of the noble savage—roughly derived from Rousseau and the eighteenth-century concept of the perfection of nature uncorrupted by the taint of civilization. This led to the idea of the noble Red Indian—those gross pictures of the feathered-headdressed warrior praying to the great universal god are a later vulgarization of this idea. On the other hand, at a more practical level, such creatures were occasionally dangerous and always a nuisance. Under the impact of white settlers who brought social disintegration and personal disease to these indigenous peoples they became a degraded class. Occasionally their poverty and their wretchedness would attract the notice of the settler, to be answered with transient and casual sympathy or even disgust and scorn. Their failure to "get ahead" was often seen as evidence only of indolence, an inherent shiftlessness, an inbred and irredeemable savagery.

The early immigrants to these new settler colonies had their bards. Few of these early writers can properly be dignified with the name of poet, yet perhaps, in their rather heavyhanded verse they reflect the crude sentiments of the early pioneers more accurately than subtler poets. Reading through the rhymes of these writers, one gains a strangely vivid perception of early colonial life, probably in a way unanticipated and unintended by the writer himself. Approached from the omniscience of our present viewpoint they expose more of the poets' society than was realized by the unquestioning contemporary attitudes they describe. Because of their lack of intellectual subtlety they act as mirrors, but mirrors without the conscious distortion that comes from aware self concealment. The directness with which they record the feelings of their contemporaries makes them a revealing mouthpiece for their countries and their times. A burgeoning sense of patriotism, of national consciousness, began to pervade the attitudes of the residents of these distant colonies of Mother England.

Few of these early poets gained the prominence created by the publication of individual collections—or if they did it was only on local presses—and their works are largely lost because of the smallness of those printings. Now their poems are to be found aging amongst the yellowing pages of collections of poetry, small books with such engagingly fanciful titles as the South African *Gold Dust from South African Poetry*. Now that dominion nationality is traced in literature and that new standards enforce a judgment on the past, many of these early verses will be forgotten. New editors, reading through the mass of older poetry in the desire to find a national tradition, seek those poems which expose one single line of tradition towards a significant conclusion, the theme of developing nationhood. I have gathered twenty or so of these books, brown-edged pages roughly cut and covers handsomely designed with gold embossed pictures. Occasionally they are decorated with steel engravings and the usual fulsome introductory doggerel of the editor. These collections, despite their crudeness, have more than a quaint effect, can teach one more than to smile in supposed superiority over the naïveté of the early writers. Their lines reveal the embryonic emotions that still are reflected in our colonial attitudes, our extreme sense of apology and self-justification as we come upon the remnants of once significant indigenous tribes of our dominions.

Perhaps the most charitable place to begin this examination of attitude is in the most humane and idealistic theme: the assertion of the natural nobility of these conquered and dispossessed peoples. It is a mood that seems to be expressed most readily for the Red Indian and therefore by the Canadian poets. It begins as a commonplace glorification of the ideal of the freedom of the Indian. This was easier for the Canadian because it was undoubtedly true that the indigenous populations of Australia and South Africa were considerably more primitive in their social order and therefore less available for this idealizing and this glamorization. The Canadian mood can be seen in a poem by Charles Mair:

> And in the congealed north where silence self
> Ached with intensity of stubborn frost
> There lived a soul more wild than barbarous:
> A tameless soul—the sunburnt savage free—
> Free and untainted by the greed of gain
> Great Nature's man, content with Nature's food . . . .

One notices two conventional ideas—the simple equation of savage and free, and the lack of taint of gain which reflects the motivation of the European. The native dweller can resist this corruption of Western ways of change by retreating into the less desirable interior—in this case the unsatisfactory economic potential of the "congealed north!" Then the nobility can be retained albeit in somewhat frigid conditions.

Other poets are content to record the passing evidence of the Red Man. Since they are now driven off and there are no problems of dealing with them, an affection of memory can be allowed to develop conveniently:

> The memory of the Red Man,
> How can it pass away
> While his names of music linger
> On each mount and stream and bay?

All of which may well be true, though I wonder how often Bay Street businessmen stop to consider the Indian origin of their Toronto. Somewhat accidentally, I imagine, the poet has slipped in that word "memory", which has the significant terminal aspect that it is only in these landmarks that the memory now exists, for the red men themselves have been dispersed out of eye's range.

For many poets, by the time they were in a position to write their verse, this destruction was already complete and so their sense of what nobility these people once had is a memory that, in spite of place names, had very nearly passed away. Occasional and unexpected moments of confrontation then suddenly acted as a reminder of what had so sadly changed. This feeling is again most apparent in Canada, where—because to glamourize the nobility of the red man had been a more extreme response in the first place—the sense of decline was recognized as the more obvious and the more dramatic, much as Aristotle had once insisted that the hero's tragic fall moved an audience partly because of the high "flourishing prosperity" of his original status.

Sometimes this emotion is discovered in its purest form in introspection. Some scene, particularly of the primeval bush untouched by the settler's axe, will act as the trigger to a flood of sentiments. Charles Sangster records such a feeling:

> My footsteps press wherein centuries ago
> The Red Men fought and conquered; lost and won.
> Whose tribes and races, gone like last year's snow,
> Have found the Eternal Hunting Grounds.

The braves were helped on their way, of course, by the encroaching farms of the settlers.

The degree of sadness felt in the decline of such people is partly controlled by the estimation of the degree of significance of their native soul. South African settlers may be concerned, and properly so, with the dispersal of the Bushman, but their reaction is partly coloured by the extreme primitivism of that aboriginal society. It is easy to be sympathetic, but difficult to admire the backward existence of the bushman. Nevertheless the feeling has a similar origin to the Canadian sentiment above. These are lines from the South African W. C. Scully:

> Poor waifs upon creation's skirts,
> Your melancholy history
> To men of earnest mind asserts
> A problem and a mystery:
> Whence came ye? Wherefore did ye live
> To wither from the sphere of being—
> And why did nature to ye give
> No ears to hear, nor eyes for seeing?

To Scully the mere existence of these unfortunates raises the sort of questions that stir profound metaphysical speculation, as one might wonder mildly why God made kangaroos or centipedes.

Others expose that more ardent missionary fervour which lay deep in the nineteenth-century consciousness and was so influential in African colonization. They take a more charitable Christian view. They allow that although these creatures are indubitably wretched and beneath comprehension they are, by some perhaps unfortunate Christian ethic, human souls capable of redemption. Their present heathen position, then, is partly a reflection on the inadequate attention of the occupying settlers. Blame begins, at least in a theoretical way, to be shared for the savages' misfortune. Sternly from Africa Pringle admonishes us:

A savage? Yes; though loth to aim at life
Evil for evil fierce he doth requite.
A heathen? Teach him, then, thy better creed,
Christian! if thou deserv'st that name indeed.

At other times, although the native seems totally despicable, sympathy is at first aroused because there is a sudden hint of an earlier grandeur, because it is seen that his present degraded and humiliated condition was once very different. It is the revelation of this past difference that creates the emotion. Cullen Gouldsbury sets the scene in the ordinary way—the kingly prowess is exposed for a tattered and filthy thing. Then there is a flash that hints at something else and the poet's mood is changed. The title "The Chief" has at first a certain irony, and then later takes on its own validity:

Monarch perhaps of half a hundred huts,
One of the relics of a vanished day
Hedged in with all the mockery that shuts
The king with feet of clay.

I turned and caught the pride that lit his face,
The sudden majesty that fired his brain—
Old and forgotten stories of his race
Glowed in his eyes again.

The present condition and the old majesty are juxtaposed; savagery and grandeur brought together. It is an emotion also recorded from Canada by D. C. Scott, who brings this dual reaction together at once in his poem's title, *The Onondaga Madonna.* Scott sees the eternal elements of motherhood at the same time as he perceives "the wildness in her veins."

She stands full-throated and with careless pose,
This woman of a weird and waning race,
The tragic savage lurking in her face,
Where all her pagan passion burns and glows.

"Weird and waning" covers both the attitude of the settler and its results.

From Australia Henry Kendall records a similar reaction with all the added emotion of the ultimate: *The Last of His Tribe.* Here the sense of regret at this dismal extinction affects the poet so strongly that he does not attempt to evaluate the moral quality of the individual or assert his savagery, his potential heroism or his past nobility. Little is left now save this elagiac sympathy.

> He crouches and buries his face on his knees,
> And hides in the dark of his hair,
> For he cannot look up to the storm-smitten trees
> Or think of the loneliness there:
> Of the loss and the loneliness there.

Other poets perhaps a little more imaginative than those quoted so far begin to see that the situation could be looked at from the point of view of the native rather than the settler. They saw that if his emotional sense of involvement, of concerned regret, was properly appropriate—if a little passive in its effect—such sadness would be nothing to what could be felt by the natives themselves. They after all had better reason than humane sympathy to lament their state. So they invented native characters as "persona" for their poems. They gave them very different though complementary sentiments and made them spokesmen in their poems for the conditions in which the indigenous peoples found themselves. Sometimes they were remarkably successful in this identification. From Canada, F. G. Scott writes of the Indian's emotions. The Indian brave declares:

> Great mother! We have wondered that thy sons,
> Thy pale sons, should have left thy side and come
> To these wild plains and sought the haunts of bears
> And red men. Why this battle with the woods?
> Whither go they upon the gods of iron?

The attitude of this poem starts with enquiry, mere wonder at this inexplicable intervention of these outsiders. But Scott cannot in honesty stop with merely the observation of this inexplicable plague—rather he indicates very clearly where it leaves the Indian. Speculation about cause has its own healthy potential but it does not alter the particular experience of the immediate disaster. If this poem stops at this point of amazement it is W. D. Lighthall, in "The Caughnawaga Beadwork Seller", who takes things a stage further. Whatever the cause, the resulting decline is clearly and undoubtedly suffering for the Indian. It is not enough merely to assert the curious colour difference of the first line; it is only too painfully clear where this difference brings the two in the social structure: whites approach success; reds approach extinction. Here is the true significance of the colour difference between native and immigrant. It is more than a pigment, it is the alternatives of death or survival.

> They are white men; we are Indians:
> What a gulf their stares proclaim.
> They are mounting, we are dying.
> All our heritage they claim
> We are dying, dwindling, dying.

The words in these lines perhaps deliberately echo Antony's last sad farewell, and plaintively lament the destruction of the Indian race. Some poets saw the situation less in this tone of plaintive lament than in a more healthy and openly expressed anger. They give their native spokesman words of open defiance.

Pringle's African is proud of his state, for all it lacks those qualities of civilization we are taught to respect:

> This I am, Lord of the desert land,
> And I will not leave my bounds
> To crouch beneath the Christian's hand
> And kennel with his hounds
> To be a hound and watch the flocks
> For the cruel white man's gain.

In a similar tone George Martin records the moment when he looked at an Indian as the native gazes at the change that settlement has brought to areas that were once the free property of his tribe. It begins as straight description.

> He ceased and strode away; no tear he shed,
> A weakness which the Indian holds in scorn,
> But sorrows' moonless midnight bowed his head,
> And once he looked around—Oh so forlorn.

But at this point Martin moves beyond description to a taking of sides and he shares the Indian's assumed attitude, stands with him against what the settler has done. To some extent the whole tone of this poem with its very sentimentalized picture of the noble savage, impressive in his stark courage of feeling, spreads a sense of mere picturesqueness across the whole scene. This sentimentality prevents our even taking his proper sentiments as more than a kind of pose. Nevertheless the lines do make an appropriate statement for all the earlier heroics.

I hated for his sake the reckless tread
Of human progress;—on his race no morn
No noon of happiness shall ever beam;
They fade as from our waking pales a dream.

From New Zealand, the poet's persona is an old Maori Chief. With an admirable firmness he refuses to see the specific virtues of the Christian tradition after what the interlopers have done to his tribal rights:

Old Tangi roared with laughter long and loud
That Hell of theirs he said, might be a place
Wholesome and fitting for the white man's race,
    No Maori was half bad enough to be
Doomed to so horrible a destiny.

This mood, recorded inadequately in verse, required of the poet a generous act of imaginative identification, but it was not very common. If ever these tribes in each of the continents had gained access to the language of their conquerors, we know the kind of burning poetry they might choose to write. They would no doubt equal the poems still being written now by the oppressed Africans in South Africa—the bitter cry of the poems of Denis Brutus, the harsh prose of Alex La Guma. Yet for these early people there were no words except those granted by the passingly sympathetic and generous heart of the local poet when he realized for a brief moment what his race had done in these new territories. But many were neither willing nor able to undertake this moment of emotional identification. For many there was only a belief in the savagery and the inferiority of the native. The mood, as might be expected, is most common in Southern Africa.

Cullen Gouldsbury's poem entitled *My Nigger* brings together every unlovable aspect of this attitude. There is the vicious race superiority cloaked within a mocking humour that supposedly draws us all within the good fellowship of despising someone. The fact that it is deliberately facetious is a further evidence of the poet's insulation from humane feeling.

In brief he rides beside me—on the whole
This nigger I would gladly smother,
And yet, they say he has a soul,
And is—my Brother!

May God preserve me all the same
From such a family connection,
I've no desire to press the claim
In this direction.

Perhaps we should hope that this mood would not occur too often. It is a theme that is not often the subject for poetry. Those who have such sentiments are hardly likely to indulge repeatedly in such epic efforts. But even those who would not hold with such total condemnation do not always differ much from this feeling. There is John E. Logan in Canada who writes cheerful and very bad doggerel. It is almost as if such views of that question, the inevitable rightness of settlers, can best be expressed in apologetically degenerate diction, part Cockney, part Texas. It lends a note of engaging homeliness to the sentiments without setting up the heresy to the point where it has to be considered very seriously as an intellectual social speculation.

Ye say the Injuns all alike
A bad an' sneaking lot;
An aint no use for nuthin'
So the cusses should be shot?

Thaar's good and bad in Injun,
And thar's good an bad in white;
But somehow they is always wrong
And we is allus right.

Appropriate enough in thought, but the heavy tripping of those iambics do not allow us either to discover any great profundity, or to share its wisdom.

The defence of the indigenous tribes has never really been written. The most one receives is occasional news of rather economical government programs on their behalf and, along with them, desperate appeals from humanitarian organizations that, in being made, tell us how much the subject is being neglected. This essay is not meant, however, to be a political tract and it should not conclude on a note of exhortation; but a passing hour with the poems of our colonial ancestors cannot fail to cause us a moment's hesitation as we consider on what foundations our societies are laid.