

CARMAN BY THE SEA

M. M. Ross

THE reputation of Bliss Carman has suffered severely from recent literary criticism. Once regarded as the finest of Canadian poets, Carman has shrunk in stature with each new critical estimate of our poetic achievement.

In part, as Wilfred Eggleston has suggested, this change in critical opinion can be explained by new fads in thought and technique, and by the emergence of a sensibility too tortured and tense for an appreciation of Carman's melodic manner. To be sure, Carman's loose optimistic "philosophy"—compounded of notions taken almost at random from Emerson, the Platonic tradition, Buddhism, Christianity—has little meaning for the new poetic intelligence schooled in the sharp dialectic of T. S. Eliot. It is not difficult to see why a poet like Archibald Lampman, with few ideas but with a strong sense of descriptive detail, should suffer less than Carman from our current reaction to the poetry of the period. Carman attempted more than Lampman and for his pains appears now merely to have been more pretentious.

Bliss Carman has also fared ill at the hands of some of our more self-conscious nationalists who would be quick enough to forgive him his loose thinking and his romantic sensibility if only they could point to him and say, "There is a Canadian." Now it is, of course, true that Carman refers rather frequently to the Maple Tree. But the depressing discovery has, alas, been made by scholars that Carman's Maple Tree grew in a distant Connecticut garden and not in Canada at all. The man was an émigré, an exile. He came to Canada only for lecture recitals—and burial.

It must be admitted here that Carman's personality was not typically Canadian. He was not like either William Lyon MacKenzie or William Lyon MacKenzie King. What is worse, he never felt at home in either Ottawa or Toronto. It is this last failing that accounts to no small extent, I feel, for the neglect into which he has fallen. And who can say that this neglect is undeserved! When an eminent Canadian critic can scold Morley Callaghan for refusing in his novels to mention by name the city of Toronto and its historic streets, what are we, as Canadians, to say of a poet who never once mentions the Province of Ontario!

A careful reading of Carman confirms the patriot in his

suspicion that the landscape of the poetry is (a) transcendental and (b) foreign. It is not Canadian. Where is the Muskoka country! Where is Georgian Bay! Of course it is sometimes possible to extend the poetic boundaries of Canada beyond our central and proper paradise. We are not an intolerant people. For instance, Patrick Anderson, although born in England and resident in the dread province of Quebec, is acknowledged to be a Canadian poet because in his latest work one encounters *ice*—the Canadian universal. As a critic said only the other day, "He has succeeded in getting the sound of ice into his voice." Anderson is one of us? Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, although he has been tumbled with his cousin Carman from our topmost storey, has not fallen quite so low. The man, after all, wrote not only an ode on Confederation but also a poem about an iceberg; and at the last he made his peace, coming to languish among the lions by the lake . . . But in Carman there is no reconciliation with the centre, no death-bed conversion to the ways of the civilized, no ice. In Carman no one even falls off a homemade Canadian mountain—or joins the C.C.F.

Obviously, then, I cannot hope to rehabilitate Carman either by an exercise of pure reason or by playing beaver. When I read him, I read him with a bias. My critical faculties stand at ease, and I cannot pass judgment. This is because Carman's poetry was the first poetry I can remember reading and loving. I read it as a boy, and in Carman's country. A country circled by water that has salt in it. A landscape transcendentalized, if you like, by soft fog, where sounds foreign enough to some ears did not seem foreign at all—"the lonely hopeless calling of the bell buoy on the bar." A country—

Where the sea with his old secret
 Moves in sleep and cannot rest.

As a boy I felt vividly and immediately stanzas like these from "Arnold, Master of The Scud:"

And the father's older wisdom
 On the sea-line has described
 Like a stealthy cloud-bank making
 Up to windward with the tide,

Those tall navies of disaster
 The pale squadrons of the fog,
 That maraud this gray world border
 Without pilot, chart, or log

Ranging wanton as marooners
From Minudi to Manan . . .

And even now this little tale of the schooner—

Snoring down the Bay of Fundy
With a norther on her beam—

causes a curious nostalgia that quite obliterates my conscience as a critic.

Carman's poetry is full of the sea, or rather of the sea-shore, the sea caught and held in the trap of the New Brunswick coast, swinging in the long tide, shambling with its dulse and kelp against the rock of Saint John, squeelching through the long fingers of the Tantramar.

This "murmur of the rolling sea
Cradling the land where I was born"

can be heard in every cranny of Carman's verse. The Maritimer's extra sense—the sense of the sea—never deserts Carman, and granted that he wrote as an *émigré* one imagines that he must have written with a sea-shell to his ear.

Even the vagabonds of Carman, his famous Bohemian tramps of the dry land, turn their backs at last on lake and mountain and

. . . somewhere on the iron coast
Learn the oblivion of the sea.

His lovers are often as lonely

As the sea, whose cadence
Haunts the world forever.

His hero, Shelley, becomes the White Gull, a symbol of search soaring above the dark and restless water:

The gray sea-horses troop and roam
The shadows fly
Along the wind-floor at their heels;
A white gull searches the blue dome
With keening cry.

And Carman's intuition of death comes, too, in a sea-symbol:

It is the world-ghost, the time spirit come
None knows wherefrom,
The viewless draughty tide
And mask of being. I hear it yaw and glide
And then subside . . .

I am anxious however not to leave an impression that Carman's sea images are scattered and incidental. I have been trying to qualify the notion that Carman's manner is "cloying," his fancy rootless and unlocalized, his imagery lost namelessly in the "eerie Ardise hills." It is true however, that Carman wrote too much in a single monotonous key. There is a core of striking and original work to be salvaged by a sympathetic criticism from the wastage of the poet's own lapses. The unique magic of Carman's style is often tucked away in a single stanza or phrase, obscured and sometimes destroyed by a context of flimsy improvisation. This has been admitted by the detractors who insist, and reasonably enough, that lost magic is lost indeed. I do not quarrel with this. One should, however, in fairness, be aware, too, of many whole and, in their way, nearly perfect poems to be found in *Ballads and Lyrics*, *The Pipes of Pan* and *The Lyrics of Sappho*—poems that have been missed by the anthologists—and by naughty critics intent on demonstrating the blunders and blemishes.

"A Sea-Child" is a good example of a skill in Carman that has been utterly ignored. In this poem the sea not only provides a backdrop, but also is transformed into image, into symbol, and into a pressure that fuses into relation the felt elements of the lyric.

The lover of Child Marjory,
Had one white hour of life brim full;
Now the old nurse, the rocking sea,
Hath him to lull.

The daughter of Child Marjory
Hath in her veins to beat and run,
The glad indomitable sea,
The strong white sun.

Notice now the "white hour" of the opening stanza carries within it the germ of that "strong white sun" from the sea that will annul the death of the father. The image of the "old nurse, the rocking sea" not only suggests death (and death hushed to allow the rush of bright life in the next stanza) but also, by hint of cradle and lullaby, prepares us for the opposite suggestion of birth. The promise of "life brim full," pregnant behind the slow rhythm and gray sea-tone of the last two lines of the first stanza, is thereby lifted through associations of birth and delivery into the final affirmation of "the glad indomitable sea," which triumphantly beats and runs against defeated death.

I would not claim too much for this poem, or for other poems of the same order in Carman. I submit, however, that such a poem is not the work of a "cloying," loose-jointed imitator of the late romantics. It is, surely, the work of an artist who can spin a valid shaping symbolism from out of his own salt-fed marrow.

I submit, too (and I still confess my bias, mind you!) that no matter what its meaning for your flat-water inlander, such symbolism carries and discharges its freight to Maritimers of all sorts and conditions—whether they be Maritimers out of Halifax or Saint John, Boston or Frisco, Pernambuco, Yokohama, or Murmansk.