

WILLIAM E. MARSHALL:

His Verse and Some Letters

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CONTEMPORARY criticism is often faulty and is usually no criterion from which to judge the staying power of a writer. The critic is usually too close to his subject and troubled too much by the same problems. As Van Wyck Brooks puts it, "an age is a chaos while one is living in it, and the past would be a chaos also if it were not interpreted for us." One has only to think of Stephen Phillips, who was once hailed as a second Shakespeare and whose poetic dramas were the rage and fashion before the First Great War. Who reads him now? Or of Canada's Charles Sangster, who was referred to by the critics at home and abroad as "The Father of Canadian Poetry." Aside from being present in a few anthologies, his work is largely unread. And lastly take the subject of this sketch, William E. Marshall, who was heralded by the late J. D. Logan as the great Nova Scotian poet the Maritimes had long awaited. His poem *Brookfield* was acclaimed by Sir Andrew Macphail and Archibald MacMechan and other leading critics of Canada and the United States. To-day it is practically impossible to obtain a copy of the book. There is none in the Parliamentary Library, The Dominion Archives or The Ottawa Public Library or The University of Toronto Library. A copy was eventually found in the Library of Kings College, Halifax. His work is not even mentioned in E. K. Brown's *On Canadian Poetry*, nor are any of his poems included in Smith's or Gustafson's anthologies. Some of them appear in *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* and Garvin's *Anthology* but Ritchie's *Songs of the Maritimes* (1931) printed only three stanzas from *Brookfield*.

William E. Marshall was born in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, on 1 April, 1859, the youngest of three children born to James Noble Shannon Marshall and Adelaide Amelia Allison. His life was uneventful and can be set down in a few sentences. He received his education at the County Academy and at Mount Allison Collegiate Academy, Sackville, New Brunswick. He was articled as a law student in his father's law office and was admitted to the Bar in January, 1881. He practiced law at Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, and in March, 1898, was appointed Registrar of Deeds for Lunenburg District, which position he held until his death in May, 1923. He wrote and published three small volumes of verse: *A Legend of Venice* (1907) *A Book of Verse* (1908) and

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Brookfield and Other Verse (1919); the last is the one by which he is best known. *A Legend of Venice* is a small, paper-covered brochure of thirty pages, and its contents a single narrative poem of fifty-five stanzas. A prefatory note gives an explanation of its origin. "The following legend is beautifully told in the March number of *The Ladies Home Journal* for this year. Since reading it there, as a prose poem, I have had additional enjoyment in arranging it in the rhymed stanzas of Keats (*Isabella*); and I hope the air, or narrative of the song may sound pleasantly clear and distinct, and the variations of excursions of my fancy appear in keeping with the theme." The poem appears again in his second volume, and also his last. It is a narrative in the vein of the romantic school, and the influence of Keats, referred to in the prefatory note, is only too evident. The theme is similar to Keats "*Isabella*" and equally tragic and while pleasant to read, lacks the beauty and intellectual imagery of the English poet's work. He is indeed a brave man who submits his work so openly to such a comparison.

His second volume *A Book of Verse*, is a collection of his work up to January, 1909. In his Preface, the author says: "This book of verse is issued to the public in the hope that it will not be considered an unworthy offering. Each piece in the following pages being to me the symbol of a helpful gleam of light on rising ground, I confess to a grateful glow of heart in having them set up in book form, and I thank my friends who encouraged me to make the venture." The feelings expressed in these words are not uncommon in writers, but not usually so frankly and freely expressed. The book contains a portrait of the poet. J. W. Garvin in a biographical note, states the book was put on the local market only and that "it contains some fine poetry." He did not, however include any selections from it in his anthology. *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* contains the poems "To a Mayflower.", "It seems but Yesterday" and "Sunrise in Summer". Ritchie's *Songs of the Maritimes* (1931) includes no selection from it.

The late J. D. Logan, in an obituary notice in the *Bridgewater Bulletin* of May 29, 1923, says of the work: "In 1909, when I was editor of the *Toronto Sunday World*, I happened on a copy of Marshall's *A Book of Verse*. I had been doing a great deal of constructive literary criticism towards promoting the systematic study and appreciation of Canadian literature; that is to say, a Nova Scotian was devoting his time to boosting the poetry and prose of the authors in Ontario, though I had said much about Roberts and Carman, who were New Brunswickers. All the while

my thought and hope was that Nova Scotia would produce an outstanding poet. Then, on my discovering Marshall's *A Book of Verse*—I knew that Nova Scotia had come into her own at last. Here was a poet, from the land that ought to be the natural home of poets, and my pride in him and in my homeland rose to an ecstasy of spirit as I reviewed for publication, and did publish under a bold two column heading my critical appreciation of the poetry and genius of William E. Marshall—It was the artistry of Marshall's verse and the sweet tender, spiritualizing beauty of verbal imagery and music in it that made me acclaim him as a 'New Star' in the firmament of Canadian Poetry. I was right for in another decade he literally startled the literary critics of Canada and the United States with his *Brookfield*. All hailed it as a magnificent performance and ranked it with the 'Thyrsis' of Arnold, The 'Threnody' of Emerson, the 'Mother' of Wilfred Campbell and the 'Ave' of Sir Charles Roberts." Dr. Logan is slightly rhapsodic, letting his devotion and enthusiasm run away with his critical sense but, then, the occasion justified it.

The poem "Brookfield" first appeared in the April, 1914 issue of *The University Magazine*, edited by Sir Andrew Macphail. The volume entitled *Brookfield* was published in 1919. Marshall's friend, Mr. Frank Huntington, has this to say of the poem's first appearance: "It was my privilege from time to time to see his poems proceed from primal thought to consummation and when he wrote 'Brookfield' it was by my advice that he sent it to the *University Magazine*. With his customary modesty he had underrated it and it was with actual surprise that he received the plaudits that its publication called forth."

Garvin, in his anthology, writes thus of its subject and origin: "It is unquestionably a threnody of rare excellence—beautiful, noble, sweet. It was inspired by Marshall's love of his friend, Robert MacLeod, a Nova Scotian graduate of Harvard University in Divinity, who died in 1909. Logan, in his *Highways of Canadian Literature*, rates the poem high.—"It is a poem of forty stanzas in the Spenserian form. (Actually it has twenty-five stanzas.) Structurally viewed it is an achievement in that form. Its theme is the heart and mind of a simple man, a friend of the poet's who taught him to love communion with the simple creatures and the life of nature—but the loveliest strands running through the warp and woof of the poem are those of love and the heavenly vision."

The late Archibald MacMechan, in the *Montreal Standard*, was generous in his appraisal. "No such poem has appeared in

Canada since Robert's 'Ave'. In dignity and depth of feeling 'Ave', De Mille's 'Behind the Veil' and "Brookfield" stand together—a noble trio—That in these noisy self-advertising days there should be men like Marshall quietly doing their duty in their narrow spheres but reaching our to the stars through literature and art, makes for the nation's moral health. Perhaps the technique of the poem is not flawless but the heart is right—these rare qualities make 'Brookfield' an event in Canadian literature." After this eulogy it seems strange that there is no mention of it in *Headwaters of Canadian Literature*, published in 1924! But neither was there any reference to the poetry of D. C. Scott!

The volume *Brookfield and Other Verse* was published in 1919 in Montreal by John Lovell and Son Ltd. It contained one hundred and twelve poems, including "Brookfield". The Legend of Venice," various sonnets to friends and famous men and poets, a section devoted to *Miscellanea* and some translations from Horace. There are an excellent portrait of the poet, an appendix giving notes to some of the verses, and a biographical note of R. R. MacLeod, the subject of Brookfield. In a modest preface the writer says: "I am, of course, quite conscious of the defects in my verse; still, for the sake of their preservation for a while longer—it is a pleasure to have them in this form."

The poem "Brookfield" is undoubtedly Marshall's finest work. It has many echoes, of Arnold's "Thyrsis", but in spite of this it is appealing in its simplicity, sincerity and beauty. Both editions of Garvin's *Anthology* print the poem in full; *Songs of the Maritimes* gives the first three stanzas. The following is a sample of the work.

And yet they were not sad—these pioneers.
 (Tales have been told of humour all their own,
 And of their wit that crackled unawares,
 And of their sturdy way, and look, and tone,
 And high assurance when their work was done.)
 Surely, for them, the Thrush at evening sang,
 The Pleiades and great Orion shone,
 And the life giving sun in splendour sprang,
 And the glad harvest moon her golden lamp did haug.

Marshall was a close friend of the late Dr. Charles Morse, of Ottawa, and corresponded with him for many years. Fortunately Dr. Morse valued his letters and kept them, and they recently became available by sale and are now lodged in the Library of the University of Kings College, Halifax.* Although Marshall

*Through the generosity of Mr. Arthur S. Bourinot.—Editor's Note.

was a lawyer by profession there is very little law in them. What there is of law is the result of legal articles received from Dr. Morse, and the related text is a sparse comment and acknowledgement. The main themes are literature and life and, above all, contemporary Canadian verse and Canadian criticism. A few extracts from the letters will give a sample of their interest.

Writing on February 5th, 1897, he gives the only personal reference to his legal difficulties. "Depressed by circumstances and hard times," he writes, "Necessity is truly a hard law and invention is paralysed with want. Law business is so fitful and so unservably poor, when it does come that it takes from me even that which I have not.—A fellow for whom I had four law suits got into me for four hundred dollars costs and left me to pay other fees besides. Is it any wonder, therefore, I find it difficult to exert myself sufficiently to answer your cheery letter. Pardon my despondency of mind."

In December 1896, *The Canadian Magazine* published an article by Gordon Waldron, "Canadian Poetry: A Criticism," which caused a flurry and flutter in Canadian literary dovecots. The purpose of the article was well set out by the author in a few introductory phrases. He is speaking of the four poets, Carman, Lampman, Campbell and Roberts: "These poets, having won the ear of a generous and patriotic though uncritical press, have been raised to an imposing authority, which restrains all originality and all determined devotion to poetry as a fine art. It is therefore important that these writers should be critically examined. If they be found to be not true poets, but blind leaders of the blind, they should be deposed, and the hope of a distinctively Canadian Literature may be one step nearer its realization than it now seems to be."

A. J. M. Smith, in a footnote to his introduction to *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, says: "Literary criticism in Canada which is firmly rooted in romanticism has not often presented this point of view. (He is speaking of James Cappon's article in *The Canadian Magazine* for 1904-1905, on Roberts and the Influences of his time)—They were anticipated in some respects by Gordon Waldron a disciple of Goldwin Smith, who published a forceful attack on the school of Roberts as poets of mere scenery."

Here are a few samples culled at random from Waldron's article: "Campbell, Roberts, Lampman and Carman can hardly be said by the most generous to have written anything of lasting merit. The reader who can twice strain his imagination to the contemplation of the painfully wrought minatures would indeed

be a curiosity; they are not without virtues, and it may fairly be said that they are all men of great talent. They have mastered the mechanics of versification—their works are singularly barren of human interest, although there is a constant recurrence to Wordsworth's idea of kind mother earth. . . . He (Lampman) has the habit of broadly suggesting themes which is very effective and of going on to treat them in a way that is very tiresome. He does not know when to stop."

How did Waldron's article strike a contemporary, himself a poet, and an admirer of the four poets who were so scathingly criticised? Marshall's reaction is set out in the following extract from a letter dated 5, February, 1897:

This latter (*Canadian Magazine*) aroused my ire not long ago by an article on the four Canadian poets, Lampman, Roberts, Carman and Campbell. Of course, I have not read much of Lampman's poetry; his occasional contributions to Harpers and other magazines and some half dozen or so in a book called, I think, *Songs of the Dominion* but what I did read was enough to justify me in the thought that Waldron, (Whoever he is) wanted to show how deep he could dip his pen in gall. I don't think his article a criticism at all. It is fault finding without knowing just the reason for doing so—merely an exhibition of his disposition. The true poet is one who inspires you with a sense of harmony that, (though it may only be in common every day objects) you did not only not feel before but could not have felt but for him. Really, however, I don't think Lampman's reputation as a poet will suffer at all on account of Waldron's article—usually such articles cause a revived demand for the books of the poets thus endeavoured to be belittled.

Time, the great healer, has borne our Marshall's statement not only about Lampman but also concerning the other three. One has only to read modern criticism in the pages of Brown, Smith, Collin, Pierce and Garvin to see how well the poet's reputation has outlasted the critic's. Marshall had a realistic sense of the indestructibility of true poetry. His letter is characteristic and almost prophetic.

Living in a small town where literary contacts were necessarily meagre and books few, Marshall must have been irked at times by the limitations of his environment. Here is a letter written 20 December, 1902, which gives vent to such feelings.

My wits need sharpening—Living here an introspective life as far as the endeavour to cultivate the mind is concerned, I must of necessity be crude and out of shape—In fact, I'm afraid there is a danger of my going to seed too early for my years—no public library available—Cramped for means to buy books and

periodicals and peradventure two or three like myself to gather together in the name of literature. But full surely I ought not to unduly repine. Some profit has come to me in the last twenty years. I have not invested wholly in vain with the Spirit of Light.

A few words of comment on Lampman and Campbell are set out in a letter dated February 3rd, 1905:

I must also thank you for the autographed copy of Mr. W. Wilfred Campbell's poem, *The Discoverers*. I will put it away with Lampman's two letters and poetry issued to his friends, which I value as sacred to the memory of the dead poet. You asked Lampman to write me, Charles, and because he did so, I say a sweet poet has confided to me a part of his immortality—What a man has done well in literature ought not to be left to the perishable care of periodicals, even if first class.

The *Oxford Book of Canadian Verses* appeared in 1914. It was compiled, to judge by its title page, entirely by the poet Wilfred Campbell. But there is a story behind it. The proposed contents of the collection aroused considerable criticism and heart burning both as to omissions and inclusions. The late Dr. Logan gave me the story himself some years ago. It appears that when Mr. S. B. Gundy, Canadian representative of The Oxford Press, received the manuscript of selections as approved by Mr. Campbell, he felt that it was not complete. He accordingly called in Dr. Logan and they went over the manuscript and added forty poems chosen by Dr. Logan, and poems by Arthur Stringer and R. W. Service chosen by Mr. Gundy.

Dr. Carl F. Klinck in his *Wilfred Campbell* (1942) writes of the anthology as follows: "It was inevitable that Campbell's personal feeling should enter into his work as an editor. An anthology, as Emerson said of an institution, is often the lengthened shadow of one man, and the Oxford Book is no exception—It shows (in a few additions by Dr. J. D. Logan with Mr. Campbell's entire approval) what the younger poets were doing." More than forty poems and twenty-five additional writers cannot, it is suggested, be looked upon as a "few additions."

Writing on 2 April, 1914, Marshall refers to his inclusion in the anthology:

Dr. Campbell has not yet replied to my note of thanks—
—I am sorry there was any dissatisfaction with his selection.—
From what you say I am inclined now to think my friend Logan responsible (Indeed I pitched on him from the first, but thought

it the correct thing to thank the Editor) for my appearance in that book. But, however, that may be, perhaps it may be considered that Dr. Logan's judgment was not altogether arbitrary. There are many fine writers left out and I would judge Lighthall's anthology as the more comprehensive of the two.

In the same letter there are some comments on contemporary writers.—Referring to E. W. Thompson, he writes

I read *Old Man Savarin &c* when the book came out—I was very much taken with the stories and the charm of his style. Certainly his prose in them far surpasses his verse—Last University (the February number) has a splendid article by Macphail on Patriotism and Politics. But it almost seems like the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Still it is such voices that save the world—Do please get me on Mr. Ewart's list for the Kingdom Papers—I think I am a disciple of his.

In May, 1914, there appeared in *The Canadian Magazine* an article on the poetry and prose of Duncan Campbell Scott by Bernard Muddiman. It is of particular interest as it treats of his short stories as well as his poetry and expresses the opinion that it is by his short stories that Dr. Scott will live. (It is worthy of comment in this connection that *The Village of Viger*, a collection of short stories by Dr. Scott, was reissued by Ryerson Press in 1945.) Marshall read the article and the following are his comments written under date of 23 June, 1914.

The Canadian Magazine article on Mr. Duncan Campbell Scott I read with lively interest. I'm sorry I've not any of his books. I cannot get them from any bookseller it seems. The photogravure in the magazine I have had framed and hung on my office wall between Carman and Lampman and underneath Tennyson and Arnold. I've quite a poet's gallery here.

When war broke out in 1914, he wrote in a letter dated December 5, 1914:

I am not enamoured of that military glory which Gibbon speaks of as the "vice of the most exalted of the earth" and do not think that in these days man is made any better physically or intellectually or morally or spiritually by taking part in wholesale killing. But as a nation of glorified animals has attacked our liberty of souls and bodies we must kill them off if we can. And so, success!

In December, 1920, in a pensive mood, he wrote of his life and work:

But I've gotten over the idea that I am forgotten because my friends don't write. I am myself about tired of pen and ink—forty-five years of such personal labour at the desk doing the drudgery of office work, for a living, which I have satisfied myself with, entitles me to a withdrawal card.

He received his "withdrawal card" in May, 1923. It is perhaps fitting to close with the words of his friend, Dr. J. D. Logan: "He has achieved the only immortality worth while. He has left behind him an honorable memory and a world made happier by his life and poetry—Now he is at rest and sleeps well."