

# THE WESTERN MOVEMENT IN CANADIAN POETRY

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AS Canadians, we are just becoming aware of the fact that we are a nation, a separate people with a destiny of our own and a world task to perform which none other than ourselves can accomplish. We who are privileged to witness the birth of a national spirit in our Dominion must—if we are sensitive to such things—be deeply moved by the varied symptoms of this soul-awakening. In politics, in social and religious reform movements, may be traced some indications of the trend of national thought. Such institutions, however, are not so plastic as the art and literary forms through which we express our aspirations and ideals. Art and literature are the true interpreters of any historical period. In them we may find the best medium through which to judge our mental and spiritual status.

In any attempt to measure the growth of the soul of Canada to-day, we must bear in mind that we are not dealing with a matured or a clearly defined entity. Canada spiritually is still in swaddling clothes. But within the next decade general tendencies will be determined for good or ill, and even now we may gain some idea of the goal towards which our thought currents are carrying us.

There are those who do not believe that an individual note is being sounded in Canadian literature. There are those, too, who are doubtful as to whether a national consciousness has yet been born. We take no account of the many in orthodox academical circles who are indifferent to our contribution to English letters, or ignore its very existence. While it is true that our work may be so intimately blended with general movements affecting our day and age as to be almost indistinguishable from the main stream of literary production, we are quite certain that Canada has already laid the corner-stone of her own palace of art. The outlines of the superstructure of our building are still shadowy and chaotic, but we know that it will not be a mere addition to an American or an English pantheon.

In so far as we are partakers in the world movement, we find the Old and the New Age battling for supremacy here in Canada, as elsewhere. Traditional modes of thought and expression are

here leading their "forlorn hopes" against the creative urge of the spirit of man, which is demanding "new wine in new bottles." Moreover, within and distinct from the general tendency to participate in the new impulse towards a freedom of expression greater than that permitted by the classical English tradition, a portion of Western Canada is showing signs of a positive direction of its own in its literary efforts. Some writers who have endeavoured to measure the pulse of our times are uncertain as to whether the Western movement will bear fruit truly national in spirit. A few, like Ray Palmer Baker, suspect that there may be germinating here a literature transcending boundary lines. But the new product referred to is probably national in significance, although it must necessarily be related to the wider movements.

Before attempting a more minute examination of the causes for divergence between the thought of Eastern and that of Western Canada, let us limit our discussion to poetry, excluding other departments of literature less expressive of the ideal. Although in fiction and the drama some good work has been done by Western Canadians, it is not outstanding as compared with the writings of Eastern or American authors. But in the highest form of literary art, viz. poetry, there has been sounded on the Pacific coast a note deeper than any heard before in Canada,—a note unique, and yet in harmony with the forward movement of the New Age.

There are additional reasons why poetry should, in this instance, be chosen as representative of the spirit of the extreme West and also of our national literature. We are living in days when the public is interested chiefly in material achievements, scientific discoveries and inventions. Much attention is also being given to the explorations of psychologists and philosophers into the unexplored realms of man and Nature. We neglect the fact that we cannot know the truth about anything by means of our unaided intellect. From this fact arises the crying need for "the vision without which the nations perish." Now, in poetry we have the fullest expression of this faculty of mystic vision which the psychologists term intuitive. Poetry is not the product of unpractical idealists. No nation can achieve the splendid fulfilment of its appointed destiny without the leadership of its creative spirits, the poets, who in the cadence of song or trumpet tones of epic and ode arouse the soul of a people to a sense of inherent greatness.

Generalizing, we should say that this British Columbian school of poetry is marked by a tendency towards Oriental mysticism and a neo-pagan attitude towards life. The origin of the mystical note is found partly in the fact that in the ports of Vancouver

and Victoria contact has been made with the Orient to an extent little realized in Eastern Canada. Conceptions of life larger and more philosophical than those presented by the creeds of Ontario and Quebec have found fruitful soil among those who have migrated westward because of restrictions which limited them materially, besides stifling their secret desire for a wider intellectual freedom. Unconsciously perhaps, the "lure of the West" has often been the soul's aspiration disguised but, nevertheless, potent.

Another less local factor determining the spiritual outlook in British Columbian poetry is its relationship to the undercurrents affecting our present civilization. When an age has been wrecked upon the rocks of materialism, then—during the transitional period before the New Order appears—there is urgent need for a re-affirmation of the eternal verities. At such a time in the nations concerned there have always appeared poets, seers and prophets in revolt against the sordidness of life. They are the heralds of the "sunrise of the soul". These poets of the renaissance possess a direct perception of the divinity of man not consciously enjoyed by writers in other cycles. Fearlessly they blazon forth the old message of the mystic vision, declaring that God and Man are One—that a civilization, to be permanent, must be built upon a recognition of the divine. They affect the thought of their age with their pantheism and their affirmation of life, as opposed to the negation thereof contained in creeds and theologies.

Since their insistence calls for *life, life* and more *life*, these poets emphasize the value of human existence here and now. Looking upon man as a spirit possessing a body, they insist upon the glorification and enhancement of the temple of the soul. With Browning, they cry

...nor soul helps flesh more, now,  
than flesh helps soul!

They are, in this respect, pagans, working as did the Greeks of old for the harmonious development of body, mind and spirit. Yet they are not pagan in the sense in which decadent Greece and Rome were pagan. Lust and cruelty are foreign to their attitude. They draw their inspiration from heroic ages in which theological asceticism is unnecessary. They are also certain that Joy is of as much spiritual value as Pain. The exuberance of youth, its confidence, its wise recklessness, its disdain of worldly considerations, lend virility to their art forms and strength to their message. This affirmation of Life as opposed to Death, of Expression as contrasted with Repression, is neo-paganism.

And it is precisely this neo-pagan attitude which lends to British Columbian poetry its distinctive colouring. The mysticism, which has found its way into the poetry of the race during this transitional period, is incidental to the spiritual awakening, seeking a world-wide expression. In the United States of America the spiritual forces have become materialized, and have aroused emotional and psychic storms resulting in the turgid stream of free verse in which sex, the animal passions and decadent mentality are prominent features. In other parts of the western world the art movements have been so closely indented with the uprising of the proletariat class that they have suffered by contact with economic determinism and the materialistic view of history. But in Western Canada, where East meets West, the spiritual ideals of the Oriental philosophies are modified solely by the virile, red-blooded healthiness natural to a pioneer community. The other-worldliness of the mystical tendency is here tempered by the creed of the frontiersman, who believes that if he "plays the game like a white man", Life here and hereafter will deal justly with him. Because of this fact, the literature with which we are dealing is unique and national in its significance.

In approaching the poetry of the dean of the new movement in Western verse, one is moved to regret that more of it has not been widely published. Dr. E. P. Fewster is President of the Vancouver Poetry Society, and his home is the Mecca for poets who visit the city. Beloved by all who know him, he is so modest in regard to his own work that his friends have to coax him into print. It is a notable fact that, recently, his warm hospitality induced Bliss Carman to repatriate himself as Bliss Carman, Vancouver, B. C. Canada owes to Dr. Fewster, more than to any other, the return of our Poet Laureate to his native soil. His work is tinged throughout with the mystical philosophies, and a paganism which sees Nature as the garment of Beauty concealing, and yet partially revealing the "divine, dim power of the elements." In the following lines we have his conception of Deity. . . . a virile God, Who would have strength and beauty instead of the weakness and ugliness of our subjection to Mammon:

But, now, O God of glorious light,  
God of strong battle and the smiting arm,  
God of red-blooded women and their men,  
God of their singing children, love-begot,  
Master of Strength and Truth,  
Thou, God who makes us daring in our love,  
Stern in our war and splendid in our peace,

God of great laughter and of song,  
 Lord of the Overcomer, the Triumphant Heart,—  
 At last, we turn to Thee!

Turning to *The Collected Poems of Tom MacInnes*, we find another note in the Western symphony. Here we have a whimsical mysticism, together with a youthful love of the flesh. In his "Amber Lands," we have a complex in which the "sound of lutes" in "luminous valleys", "golden arabesqueries," "Paynim mysteries," "purple seas and yellow sands" are blent in a series of colourful poems. In "Lonesome Bar," we feel the virility of the Northlands of British Columbia, while in "Roundabout Rhymes," we find Tom MacInnes in communion with himself. The stern repression of a Puritan ancestry may be responsible for the lines:

Beauty to me hath been a name  
 Holier than all God's avatars.

or

To ease my soul I laid upon a heap  
 Of long, unopened Calvinistic books  
 The splendid contradiction of a rose.

And yet, by devious paths, he has reached the conclusion,

But God stays—tho' all else fail and fall!  
 He seems sometimes a Playfellow of mine  
 Who winks at me and laughs—sometimes a fine  
 Red flame to gloriously destroy; a call  
 To bring green worlds again. . . . .

.....  
 A dim, enamoured Silence under all.

Yet MacInnes, at maturity, has gone no further than the youngest of the British Columbia singers, Lionel Stevenson, whose work is familiar through being often seen in our best Canadian periodicals. Mr. Stevenson, having completed a brilliant university course at the University of British Columbia and Toronto, is now teaching English Literature at Berkeley, California. We have his expression of the "credo" of his school, in his own verse form:

For one brief moment comes the thrill  
 Granting a vision of the heart of life  
 Free from the strife  
 Of Passion's war with will;  
 The changeless beauty I behold  
 That underlies  
 The sight of unperceiving eyes. . . . .

The vivid colouring incidental to the coast scenery finds its way into the work of Alice M. Winlow,—an accomplished musician, painter, novelist, short-story writer, who has contributed much to the new impulse animating art in her community. Her delicate perception of the psychic relationship of sound and colour is apparent in such lines as these:

Is it the grail I see? Or is it but  
 A morning-glory opening to the light  
 Until the fingers of the dawn have stained  
 Her radiant cup with dust of amethyst?  
 Or is it heavenly sound made visible?

A more positive note rings through the "Flame and Adventure" poem of Annie C. Dalton, recently published by Macmillans. Frail in body—a dear little old lady, almost Victorian in type—she has astonished her friends agreeably by her volumes of verse which possess qualities of rare strength, vision, and passionate faith in Beauty and Joy. Two stanzas from "Flame and Adventure" will give only a faint idea of the trend of it all:

We build our little life by hour, by day;  
 God wakes—and winks a million years away;  
 He will have patience though ten thousand years  
 Have brought us still no further than our fears.

.....

We ask Thee not for quietness and rest,  
 But for the ecstasy of endless quest,  
 That Chief Adventure, questing for the truth,  
 That radiant wholesomeness, immortal youth.

As concluding quotations from the work of those who constitute the Western movement in Canadian poetry, take "The Broom," a poem by the writer of this article, and "My Creed" by Carroll Aikin, poet and playwright, whose Little Theatre in the sunny Okanagan Valley is justly famous throughout America:

I saw God in a golden cloud  
 Of broom upon the green  
 Of hills, whereon His breath awoke  
 Music of choirs unseen.

Then robed in green and gold, the earth  
 Is vocal. Symphonies outswell  
 From every wayside hedge. The rock's  
 Scarred lips intone a canticle.

"Awake!" the voice of Beauty cries  
 In words of rippling fire.  
 A million fragrant blossoms bend  
 In answer to her lyre.

And we, who see the writing traced,  
 Know that a hand is there  
 Which clasping, we may be akin  
 To earth and fire and air.

A true son of the West, the Okanagan poet voices his faith in  
 "My Creed":

I believe in God and fairies,  
 Hell and heaven, heart's desire.  
 I believe in lover's fancies,  
 Morning star and sunset fire.

I believe in work and leisure,  
 Idle wine and bleeding hands,  
 I believe in pain and pleasure,  
 Mountains of the shifting sands.

I believe in good and evil,  
 Secret gift and open ill.  
 I believe in truth and caviar,  
 Aconite and daffodil.

I believe in woman's honour  
 Be it chaste or otherwise,  
 I believe in man's endeavour  
 Though it wing in barren skies.

I believe in soul and spirit,  
 Sensitive and gossamer,  
 I believe in luck and merit,  
 Wage-slave and adventurer.

I believe in peace and conquest,  
 Orchard-close and field of strife;  
 For in mocking mood or earnest,  
 I have great belief in life.

From the foregoing one may see that, in departing from classical forms, these Westerners have not indulged in the extravagant vagaries of the Spoon River Anthology. Where they have used or adapted traditional moulds, they have not been slavish imitators of English models. While it remains part of the body of literature expressive of our age of unrest, their work is distinctly national in spirit. The commercialism which threatens to submerge

the art impulses in the United States has not affected our writers to any extent. In the symphony of nations we are sounding the note of spirituality, in the widest and finest sense of the term. Nor has the Labour movement, subversive of all except the socialistic-democratic ideal, made any appreciable progress here. Consequently, while others are preparing the world for the rule of "isms" branded as democracy, we are here laying stress upon the individual.

The westward progress of culture, having been halted upon the last rim of Empire, seems likely to become retroactive. As industrial enterprises are forced to remove to the Pacific coast to take full advantage of the unexploited world markets in the Orient, we may expect a shifting of cultural centres. But the present tendencies in Western Canadian thought will remain fixed. British Columbian poets have caught the gleam of the world vision of the New Age, and are singing in tune with the rhythm of humanity's advance. In the land of singing mountain streams, by the shores of the blue Pacific, they have formed the nucleus of a new Canadian literature virile with promise for the future.