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Review Article
The Roberts Symposium

The Charles G.D. Roberts Symposium. Edited by Glenn Clever. Reappraisals: Canadian Writers 10. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1984. Pp. xiv, 249. \$12.95.

He stands in Canada, without a peer,
That is if we must credit all we hear.

... the world fails to weep when its august head, Mr. Roberts, succumbs to poetical hysterics at the sight of a *pumpkin*, which if calmly considered, can it nowise be asserted even by a Professor, to "*Rival the Unrisen Sun.*" A.C. Stewart, *The Poetical Review* (1896, 1977)

From poetic brilliance in youth to impressive, if naughty tricks with footwear in his declining years, the works and life of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts have received frequent appraisal. The proceedings of the 1983 University of Ottawa Symposium on Roberts, published in whole under the editorship of Glenn Clever, mark the most recent reappraisal. Perhaps more than ever these essays demonstrate that no full portrait of Roberts will be possible until, as D.M.R. Bentley notes in this volume's postscript, scholars have at their disposal trustworthy biographies as well as the much advertised and long overdue critical editions of collected poems and letters. In the meantime, Roberts's critics have produced a very uneven set of essays which, like preceding volumes from Ottawa symposia, satisfy and inspire, irritate and bemuse.

The six essays on poetry collectively represent wide-ranging claims from Roberts's responses to traditional and contemporary poetry. Fred Cogswell offers less a critical study than an appreciation of Roberts's classical verse. There is always room at a symposium for this sort of paper, but in a note-free ramble that is characterized by uncritical quotations of great swaths of verse, the essay remains

unconvincing. Moreover, in neglecting to consider previous work by Bentley, W.J. Keith, and L.R. Early on the classicism of various Roberts poems, Cogswell is abdicating his critical responsibility no less than the symposium's chore of reappraisal. Consultation of others' work would at least have saved him from the preposterous implication (35) that writing about nature directed Roberts away from classicism. It might also have rescued him from excursions into Pomeroyan fulsomeness: "As Roberts turned more and more from the vexing questions of his current obligations to his memories of the scenery and wild-life of the Tantramar region where animals and birds were free to follow their natural inclinations without shame or lies, he came to envy them and wish to be like them" (34).

Tracy Ware's essay on "Ave" as elegy or, more accurately, as Roberts's 1888 essay on the pastoral elegy understands the form, restores the critical balance. While perhaps overly zealous in its effort to point out the faithfully elegiac aspects of the poem and neglectful of an evaluation of it as an illustration or not of the "unity of artistic effect" so prized by Roberts the critic, Ware's study provides a valuable demonstration, not *that* (for this has been baldly asserted before), but *how* Roberts could synthesize poetic tradition and regional experience. Part of the value, it may be noted, comes from Ware's diligent consultation and reappraisal of earlier views of the poem.

More profit might have been garnered, as indeed Early's fine paper on Roberts the critic argues (179-82), from considering not only the Wordsworthian tonality that threatens to dominate an elegy for Shelley (would a true Shelleyan have *actually* transubstantiated the Romantic into "Thyself the wild west wind"?), but also Roberts's highly Wordsworthian critical misreading of Shelley as a devotee of "Pantheism which has ever been so attractive to the finest minds, which pervades Wordsworth, and which was as native to Shelley's sympathies as Atheism, in the strict sense, was abhorrent to them." Moreover, if going on to consider the desire of Roberts (and indeed of Scott in his ode on Keats) to ground the Romantic forbear in the Canadian landscape, an action that seems at odds with these Romantics' aetherial dispositions, Ware might also view Roberts's projection of Shelley onto Tantramar as *not* "entirely consistent" (46) with the English poet's practice of projecting *himself* onto Nature.

In D.M.R. Bentley's close reading of what another contributor calls "blind alleys" — the seventeen poems that comprise "New York Nocturnes" — one comes to see a strength of this symposium collection: its delineation of Roberts's effort to comprehend during different stages

of his career, and perhaps as a consequence of that essential "restlessness" that Pacey identifies in his make-up, a great variety of poetic practices and aesthetic viewpoints. Indeed, with classical, Romantic, low Victorian, and modern poetry seen by successive symposium contributors as impinging on the *oeuvre*, one is obliged to wonder if Roberts's poetic, in opposition to A.J.M. Smith's, ought not to be termed eclectic attachment.

While Bentley himself confronts the possibility that "New York Nocturnes" might not be larger than a single critical reading of them, he gives them their due in his typically precise fashion. Finding in them attempts to reconcile Roberts's own urges toward the sacred and the profane, he aligns the poems with the Pre-Raphaelite search for eternal beauty in the female physique. He discovers, thereby, an "audacious" configuration in Roberts's city-beloved of both Christian (rather than Marian) redemptrix and lover. This configuration is seen to work through the poems, developing a narrative continuity among them, a formal personality within each of them, and a stylistic and thematic integrity of them. This approach raises many questions. At what point did Roberts conceive of the poems integrally? J.C. Adams's helpful and needed "Preliminary Bibliography" at the end of the collection shows that one of the nocturnes, "At the Railway Station," had been published periodically in 1902; Pomeroy mentions the appearance of "A Nocturne of Consecration" in *The New York Independent* in 1897 (152); and what Bentley calls the sequence's hinge poem, "Twilight on Sixth Avenue," had appeared in Roberts's previous volume, *The Book of the Native* (1896), where, it might be noted, it follows "Ebb," a poem of love-longing, and precedes "Mothers," a poem addressed to Mary concerning the more sacred and profane aspects of childbirth. Another question might be whether or not Roberts had some more contemporary poetry than the Pre-Raphaelites in mind. Although Bentley's thesis argues that the poems reconcile sacred and profane urges, he does not clarify whether the analogy inferred between sacred/profane and pastoral/urban is resolved. Indeed, it seems not to be, for Roberts's beloved has the capacity, so to say, to insulate him from, not aid him in, understanding the crowd and roar of the street. Even with this escape, the reader senses an awareness in the poems that refuge in a beloved only escapes, does not meet, the problems of the city and merely profane love. That awareness might devolve from the pressure exerted on a poet of the nineties trying to picture Pre-Raphaelite visions in the face of such carpediematic celebrations of the urban profane as Lord Alfred Douglas's sonnet, "Impression de Nuit: London" (1894), whose sestet reads:

That's the great town at night: I see her breasts,
 Pricked out with lamps they stand like huge black towers.
 I think they move! I hear her panting breath.
 And that's her head where the tiara rests.
 And in her brain, through lanes as dark as death,
 Men creep like thought . . . The lamps are like pale flowers.

or, especially in view of Roberts's acquaintance with him at the time "New York Nocturnes" were published, Richard Le Gallienne's "Sunset in the City" (1892, 1895), in which buildings are explicitly seen as "temples" and "the street lamps of sin are flaring," rather than, as in Roberts's "The Street Lamps," keeping disapproving watch over "innocence undone." While he may call his poems nocturnes (whose strict musical meaning of serenade might further the profane aspects of the verses), Roberts really does seem to be writing vespers (the "Magnificat" and "Nunc Dimittis"?) in which he does not so much reconcile the sacred and the profane as sanctify the profane to which he had stooped. Had the love, at last, to be honourable in the poetry of a Victorian Canadian already burdened by such a large and virtuous national reputation? At any rate, Bentley's provocative contribution generates many questions the answers to which only a competent critical biography might supply.

A second noteless effort is offered by Don Conway's treatment of the modernism of Roberts's "The Squatter." After beginning promisingly with an historical survey, the essay degenerates badly into unsubstantiated and pompous claims that might incur wrath were they to come any nearer comprehensibility: "Because direct expression is not possible for Roberts, he must find strategies to allow subjectivity to subvert the distancing imposed through rigid traditional structure and psychological displacement if he is to articulate his heart's speech" (83). How did this verbiage get past an editor? Meanwhile, the squatter, perhaps Roberts's answer to Sigurdson, survives in hard-won obscurity.

In other essays on poetry, Les McLeod makes a solid essay at defending "The Iceberg" on the grounds of the poet's essential materialism, but only by skirting the logistical difficulties of the poem and by crediting Roberts with a modernist irony that future discussions of the poem might not countenance. R.A. Burns, in adapting Pacey's thesis, finds what might be termed a Tantramar mentality in Roberts's *oeuvre*, a failure to develop past the Romantic nostalgia so perfectly voiced early in his career. This argument gives rise to a glaring absence in this volume: except in passing, the maritime landscape poetry is not studied. Because previous appraisals have accorded high significance

and poetic merit to "The Tantramar Revisited" and, A.C. Stewart's denigration of "The Pumpkins in the Corn" notwithstanding, the sonnets of *Songs of the Common Day*, this reappraisal of Roberts the poet can achieve only partial success.

There are five essays about Roberts's fictional prose including competent treatments of Roberts as a romancer by Elizabeth Waterston, and of Roberts as a fictional interpreter of Acadian history by William Owen. R.D. Mathews contributes a lamentably wandering polemic about too many literary matters but, at last, about why *The Heart of the Ancient Wood* cannot be either a fable or the English-Canadian equivalent of the *roman de la terre* but must be something else. Mathews supplies no substantiation for his view that Roberts knew or cared what tradition he was following. Alas, a my-Father-drunk-or-sober complex, as A.J.M. Smith echoing Chesterton noted in 1928, does not a sound critical procedure make. Michael Hornyansky provides a much-needed and too-brief humorous look at Roberts' skill as a writer of literature for children.

Terry Whalen's essay, the most nicely written in the collection, is the strongest of the essays on prose. Although one might have wished him to consider (as James Doyle did in 1979 for the poetry) how writing for the American periodical market influenced Roberts's fiction, the essay, by distinguishing the Canadian's nature fiction from Jack London's, implicitly throws up the possibility that Roberts will ultimately be seen as a greater innovator in prose than in poetry. More detached in his view of nature than London, Roberts creates a wilderness fiction, suggests Whalen, in which "a balanced perspective on reality is encouraged, one which is neither uncritical in its sensation of mystery, nor despairing in its attention to the ironies of fate and the carnage created by ostensibly wasteful natural laws. His is an art which attempts to accommodate the mind to reality, adjust the spirit to natural existence and its ambiguities" (136-37). If Whalen is right, can this portrait of Roberts accommodate the "Tantramar mentality" of the poetry or is a bifurcated (eclectic?) author a possibility? Finally, it ought to be added that the distinction of Roberts's work that is found by a Roberts-London comparison ought to be tested against a similar comparison with the work of Ernest Thompson Seton, Roberts's exact contemporary and fellow labourer in the animal story genre.

Two final essays treat Roberts as critic and the criticism on Roberts. L.R. Early draws a welcome, if in the context of one paper undeservedly strict, alignment of Roberts's literary criticism and his contemporary critical output, and find Roberts a problematical thinker:

capable of championing transcendental and aetherial poetic doctrines in the name of beauty, he nevertheless practised, still in the name of beauty, a markedly terrestrial, even snug, poetics himself. In reviewing a selection of critical views of Roberts — by Pomeroy, Smith, Keith, Pacey, and Mathews — E. Jewinski cautions critics who would fit Roberts into their own preclusive and restrictive moulds. Unfortunately a rather flat-footed reading of early Foucault onto Roberts studies, his essay nevertheless points out helpfully and persuasively some prejudices against Roberts, including the view that a patchy, disunified *oeuvre* is the effort of a flawed author. But in citing the impurities of critical approaches, Jewinski labours under the delusion that literature somewhere exists in pure, uncontaminated isolation from the reader. One might choose to concentrate on the needs of critics that issued in restrictive interpretations of texts and authors, but let us get quickly past the notion that a Roberts existed apart from the critical community for whom he wrote/writes. If one does not grant this, one cannot know, but only guess with Jewinski, that “Possibly Canadian literature exists only in the very discourse which creates it” (203). That it does is nowhere more clearly recognized than in A.J.M. Smith’s call in 1928 not, as he thought, for Canadian criticism, but for a critical community that would hospitably receive the kind of poetry that he wanted to write. Perhaps Jewinski’s own efforts as an author compel him to imagine the myth of autonomous critical production; at any rate, this highly romantic and un-Foucauldian myth underpins his seductive, if misguided, essay at liberating Roberts from the various identities — Father of Canadian poetry to “Pocket Hercules” — that critical discourse/reappraisal has been and is in the process of ascribing to him. What needs to be remembered is that since Roberts no more occupies today what Foucault would see as the prison of a critical norm than he did in 1896 when A.C. Stewart both sentenced him to and bathetically paroled him from a peerless life sentence, Jewinski’s appeal for his liberation has been filed a trifle prematurely.

A word in closing on the editing of this collection. Surely after ten such volumes the editors could agree to standardize authors’ references to the same work (the six citations of Pomeroy’s biography and the seven of Keith’s selection, for example), to cross-reference or even index the several remarks on the same poem or story that are bound to occur in such a volume, and certainly to alert the reader to similar arguments (as in the symbol that “Two Rivers” offers for Roberts’s duality of temperament [17, 58, 99, and all depending, presumably, from Pomeroy, 153]). And while the editing has caught many more

errors than in previous symposia volumes, one still cringes to find the editor himself spelling Moodie as Moody (209). Does Emily Dickson still rear her ugly head in American volumes, or Shelly his in English texts?