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NICHOLAS FLOOD DAVIN:
POLITICIAN-POET OF THE PRAIRIES

IN THE EARLY MONTHS OF 1889 there was cast "on the stream" of Canadian literature a book of verse written by Nicholas Flood Davin and published by his own Leader Company in Regina "as the first purely literary work printed and published in the North-West Territories." This volume, entitled *An Epic of the Dawn and other Poems*, was produced because the author, as he expressed it in his preface, thought "the cultivation of taste and imagination as important as the raising of grain", and he hoped that his poems would prove to be "a step towards the creation of a Canadian literature", "a small beginning of great things", for he contended that "before a great poet can arise there must be a large number of writers to prepare, not merely the mind of the nation for him, but to accumulate material on which his more plastic hand shall work."

At the time of publication of this volume, the author, who had been born in Kilfinane, County Limerick, in 1843, and educated at Queen's College, Cork, and the Middle Temple, London, was the editor of the *Leader*, which he had founded in the settlement of Regina in 1883. His varied career had taken him to the press gallery in the House of Commons in Westminster as a reporter, to the Franco-Prussian War as a correspondent, to Toronto as an editorial writer on both the *Globe* and the *Mail*, and as a barrister, and to the constituency of Haldimand in Ontario as the unsuccessful Conservative candidate in the election of 1878.

This career was behind him by 1889. Ahead lay a political career as a Member of Parliament for the constituency of Assiniboia West, a career which had begun with his election in 1887 and was to end with his defeat in 1900. Ahead too lay a tragic death which came to him by his own hand in a Winnipeg hotel in October, 1901.

An Epic of the Dawn and other Poems was not his first published work. In addition to the regular activities of his newspaper career, he had published in Ottawa

in 1884 a thirty-six-page collection of poetry entitled *Eos — A Prairie Dream and other Poems*, the main item of which, "Eos", with revisions in both text and title, appeared again later in the Regina volume as "Eos: An Epic of the Dawn." Another small collection entitled *Album Verses and other Poems* had been privately printed in 1882, and a number of these are also included in *Epic of the Dawn*. In 1877 Davin had published his best-known literary venture, *The Irishman in Canada*, a genealogical history of leading Irish-Canadian families. In addition, being a gifted and popular orator, he had produced in pamphlet form a great many of his speeches delivered both in the House of Commons and on the public platform,¹ and he was a frequent contributor to such periodicals as *The Week*, *The Canadian Magazine*, *Rose Belford's Canadian Monthly and National Review*, and *The North American Review*.

The attraction of a man of Davin's character to the pioneer society of the Canadian North-West in the late nineteenth century suggests that that society was not so culturally degrading, so intellectually barren, as some proponents of the frontier thesis would attempt to maintain. To say that Davin was not typical of the North-West farmer, editor, or professional man in the extent of his culture, the breadth of his education, or the catholicity of his taste, is not to say that other settlers did not reflect, if to a lesser degree, the same respect for intellectual affairs, for *belles lettres*, for "the cultivation of taste and imagination."

This volume of poetry, then, while it has a certain intrinsic merit both as poetry and as a measure of the man, is, in addition, a document of some interest to those who would attempt to examine the relationship between frontier conditions and the emergence of a native literature. The author's regard for letters and learning, even on the Canadian prairies, which *Epic of the Dawn* both demonstrates and expresses, may not have been frequently articulated by North-West settlers generally, but it is difficult to believe that Davin, the editor of the leading territorial newspaper and a North-West resident for some seven years, could have been so out of touch with the intellectual temper of his society as to express views in which that society could not share.

The major work of the volume is the title piece, "Eos: An Epic of the Dawn", a dream-frame poem in which the author, dreaming, is swept up by the Goddess of the Dawn and carried in "her lambent car across the sky" as she heralds a new day to the sleeping earth. The choice of the dream vision is justified, if justified it need be, in the first few lines, where the character of this politician-poet of the prairies also begins to manifest itself:

Illusion makes the better part of life.
 Happy self-conjurors, deceived, we win
 Delight and ruled by fancy live in dreams.
 The mood, the hour, the standpoint, rules the scene;
 The past, the present, the to-be weave charms;
 White flashing memory's fleet footsteps fly,
 And all the borders of her way are pied
 With flowers full glad e'en when their roots touch quick
 With pain.

The author's faculty of description is displayed with pleasing effect in passages such as the following in which he describes the summer prairie whence he was in dreams borne aloft by Eos:

A sunny sky of blue arching
 A plain in verdure drowned, and floating thick
 Upon the emerald sea sweet wild flowers gay;
 Their stately queen the light-pink prairie rose.
 The whirr of insects loud on every side,
 And loud and clear the prairie lark, deep hid
 In those vast fragrant meadows, sang; the creek
 Sent thousand-voiced upon the sultry air
 The bull-frog's weary canticle.

Here is his impression of Paris at dawn, an impression, we are told in the preface, "founded on careful observation", for the author observed a Parisian sunrise from the Arc de Triomphe, and "in order to correct and guide the imagination [had] read the accounts of their impressions published by balloonists."²

More silvery grey the clouds
 Above and around the city of the Seine.
 Clear did it show in regular beauty fair.
 Clear showed its long straight streets with boskage lined;
 Its boulevards, and palaces and towers
 And domes, and thro' the wilderness of art,
 Beneath its many pons, between its wealth
 Of trees umbrageous, the river moved;

To the observer riding the car of the Dawn Goddess over London, the Thames "seemed to slumber on its way," and

St. Paul's great dome, St. Stephen's ornate tower,
 Were mirrored in its calm but murky tide.
 Huge barges lay, like monsters of the deep
 Asleep. Ten thousand masts were tipp'd with gold.

While it is through description such as this that the poet attempts with considerable success to achieve the illusion upon which his poem is based, the core of the work is to be found in the conversation of Eos and her passenger. Inspired by the passing parade below, the two discuss God, man, the world, and time, and from the discussion emerges the political and social philosophy of Nicholas Flood Davin.

We see the author essentially as a humanist attempting to reconcile the conflicting elements in man, to whom God has given the goodness of the earth. "How fair this world", cries the dreamer, and Eos replies:

Aye fair, . . .
 Fair the bright flowers whose eyes are fair for mine;
 Fair snowy falls and stream and fell and vale;
 The farmer faring nimbly to his fields,
 His bucksome wife loud-chucking for her hens;
 * * * * *
 The maiden in her lover's pure embrace,
 Their trysting place the dewy fields of dawn;

But Eos goes on to enumerate the evils which exist side by side with this beauty and fairness—murder, lust, drunkenness, sloth, greed—and she concludes by saying,

Aye fair the world! but did I make you see
 The ceaseless, measureless flow of heart-wrung tears,
 And hear the chorus of vast woeful sighs!
 Fair were this world, were but men's actions fair.

As the mythical journey continues, the Goddess contrasts tyranny, liberty, and that liberty which becomes tyranny through licence. Paris, for example, stands as a monument to freedom.

Yet more inspiring are the monuments
 Which speak of death to tyrants and of hope
 For men, of aspirations after good,
 The love of liberty, the love of man,
 The love of art, of song.

Eos goes on to note that the cause of freedom was furthered by the heroic voyage of Columbus, whose discoveries opened the gates

Not only of new lands with wealth untold,
But of an era new for down-crush'd man.
For liberty required a virgin soil.

And she continues:

What has Columbus done for Europe's slaves!
Not only for the homeless happy homes;
With the small leaven of great pioneers,
It made and makes from Europe's ooze and scum,
The foremost nation in fair freedom's ranks.
Its citizens—they walk the earth like kings.

* * * * *

There is the field of victory over kings
And tyrants, aye, and o'er the passions wild
Of the impulsive throng.

She contends that Britain, on the other hand, has fallen victim of these wild passions; her successful statesmen seek but the base approval of the mob:

What they are, what next
They'll do, no man can say. They'll summersault,
Or jump through all their principles. They'll fall,
They'll tumble, then up smiling come, and bow
For cheers, that Burke had rather die than hear.

Many dawns ago Eos had seen this same appeal to the mob make a hollow mockery of Athenian democracy:

That form of civic life
Which liberty and government by the sage
Secures, nowhere in that round world is seen.
Democracy puts apes in power, and howls
Hosannas praising not humility
Divine an ass bestriding, but the ass
Himself, . . .

And there exists in the Ireland over which the dawn car passes the ever-present danger that, tyranny having at last been overthrown,

men may mistake the cry
Of blinding Vengeance for the voice of Justice.

As good is blotted out by evil, liberty blinded by licence, and justice muted by vengeance, so too is man's wisdom dulled by ignorance. Eos recalls that the Roman citizens gathered in their amphitheatre

Then white with togas, splendid, beauty crown'd,
Rank above rank, to watch the naked faith
Engage the world, nor dream'd that the poor slave
They doom'd had conquer'd death, and smote their rule
With truth's all deadly touch.

Again, it is in ignorance that man succumbs to ambition:

The people *will* be made ambition's pawns,
Ten thousand bleed to make one leader great,
Perhaps to make a tyrant; such is man;
Of all his follies war's red glory worst.
If wisdom ruled, the peoples of the world
Might be as one.

And it is in ignorance that he turns away from God:

Debased
Their pur-blind hearts conceive he'll come at call
Of spells in dim-lit holes, and that he loves
Oppressive smells, who makes wild trees and shrubs
To load the wind with perfume.

Yet, oppressive as this Hobbesian view of man may be, the Goddess does not despair of the salvation of mankind. Eos reminds her passenger that man has the will to bring his soul in touch with God's:

If man would reach the highest possible
He must, like Enoch, walk with God; . . .

We minor gods our end subserv'd, but fail'd
To strike the master note of love, . . .

Its simple notes in purest accents heard,
 And ancient crowns and creeds antique dissolve;
 The world for man new-born was made anew;
 Life throbb'd beneath the ribs of death; new life
 And full of joy in charnel hearts; and o'er
 Dominions of despair hope's shining star
 Was seen, and sin was spurn'd. Christ rais'd man high,
 His own vain dreams have sunk him low.

Moreover, the only law of the universe is change; men live out their petty, brutal lives "always in death's shadow"; "whatever house [man] builds, his destined lodging is the tomb." Men die, yet man lives on, and in him lives "hope's shining star," so that

sink he ne'er so low, the hog
 In him may overgrow the soul, and lust
 And drunkenness drive far the graceful forms
 Which wait on the pure life, still must he rise
 Again, redeemed, . . .

Man, therefore, can attain salvation through his will, the divine image, and the universal law of change.

But still things onward move;
 And though the curve that's near will seem depraved,
 And is, in time's large circles progress lives;
 And 'tis permitted generous hope to keep,
 That in a far off day the dull will honour
 Worth with other meed than hate. The heart
 Of mediocrity will sweetened be
 By sweet benevolences born of time
 And sad experience. Benefactors wise
 Of men will then not have to wait till death
 For their reward; but many a lapsing year
 Must pass, before the harp from which the Fates
 Will strike this music has been made, and oh!
 How many thousand times my burning wheels
 Will lighten o'er this earth before I can
 Announce that happy morn.

"Eos" is not great poetry: it is neither original nor profound in its philosophical insights; on the other hand, however, it is not a casual bit of rhyme and metre.

The poet has drawn freely on the thought of Burke, Hobbes, Hegel, Condorcet, and indeed on many of the great thinkers of Western civilization; he has, quite naturally, been influenced by the whole intellectual climate of his age and circumstance; and he has created here, in the discipline of poetry which reflects the blank-verse tradition of Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth, the personal philosophy of a nineteenth-century Canadian *homme du monde*.

The unique quality of "Eos", however, is not to be found in the poetry alone, although poetically Davin has risen well above the mediocre in both the conception and execution of his theme. Neither does the poem stand on the originality of its philosophy, even though such a synthesis of philosophical thought is not commonly expressed by working journalists and politicians. Rather, the poem stands apart because it sets forth very competently, in a carefully integrated poetical illusion, the terms of reference of the life of its author, whose main field of endeavour was politics, not poetry.

The remainder of the volume consists of some two score poems of varying quality. Some, such as "The Charitable Nightshirt" and "The Landlady's Daughter", are humorous stories a step or two removed from doggerel. A few appear to be simply rhymed accounts of personal experiences somewhat overworked with sentiment. Others are dedications—to Sir John Macdonald, to Lady Macdonald, to a dinner, to Young Canada. Many demonstrate flashes of the author's gift, but fail to maintain a consistent standard throughout. In most of these shorter poems, however, love is the predominant theme. It appears in "Parted":

There's a night in my heart past fate's scorning,
 Since above it no morrow shall rise,
 For the flush of thy cheek was my morning,
 My day star the light in thine eyes.

It is the subject of "Absent":

The chains of love are round me; I must love;
 I cannot if I would, I would not free
 Myself from this delightful slavery.
 Affection rears a prison round, above
 My thought, and on the boundless, trackless sea,
 Thy bondsman still, I'd still be thrall to thee.

It is suggested again in these lines of "The Canadian Year":

But you were by the cliff-barred white-crested sea,
 And I where the delicate pink of the prairie rose
 Amid rich coarse grasses hides,
 Where the sunset's a boisterous pageantry,
 And the mornings the tenderest tints disclose,
 Where far from the shade and shelter of wood,
 The prairie hen rears her speckled brood,
 And the prairie wolf abides,
 And lonely memory searching through
 Found no such stars in the orbèd past
 As the first glad greeting 'twixt me and you,
 And the sad, mad meeting which was our last.

While *Epic of the Dawn* undoubtedly reflects the education and background of an older civilization, there are also significant indications of the impact on Davin's thought and work of his adopted prairie home. The most pertinent example is "Eos" itself, which was conceived by the author under its original title of "A Prairie Dream." Davin's familiarity with the "vast expanse of level land" in all its moods and seasons is readily apparent in this reply to Eos' comment on the ocean-like monotony of the plains:

Its beauty must be seen from earth,
 Its dazzling, glowing skies all clear of cloud
 And fervent with the sun-god's strongest beams,
 Or strewn with soft white pillows tier on tier;
 Like swans at rest upon a sea of blue,

* * * * *

Or when the Storm broods and his wide wings glower
 O'er all the vast expanse of level land,
 Which cowers, grows darker, flatter under the black
 Terror of dread thunder quivering pinions,

* * * * *

Or in the clear bright days of Autumn's glow,
 The gracious bracing time, spirit and balm
 In every breath and breeze, when even the blast
 Has some soft touch of sweetness, and every pulse
 Glows with a thrill of rapture, and to live
 Is joy; . . .

Or in mid winter, all the sky clear, glad,
 The purple-hollowed crust of wide white plain
 O'er which and thwart the trail of dazzling light,

The powder'd snow, in forms fantastic, skips
 Away and never turns in that wild waltz,
 Not for a thousand miles.

This same familiarity can be detected in the final stanza of "The Canadian Year", quoted in part above, and in these lines from "A Prairie Dawn—in Summer":

The clouds grew brighter, shone more pearly-white;
 The horses stood but half awake, nor fed;
 Lazily, languidly they switched their tails.

Nor should one overlook in this connection the poem entitled "Regina", which a footnote indicates was an impromptu piece written as a poetical and half-humorous defence of the year-old settlement against the taunts of a sophisticated Winnipeg. It is not representative of the quality of Davin's work, but it does represent his unbounded confidence in the future of the new land:

A pleasant city on a boundless plain,
 Around rich land where peace and plenty reign;
 A legal camp, the province wisdom's home,
 A rich cathedral, learning's splendid dome;
 A teeming mart, wide streets, broad squares, bright flowers,
 A marble figure whence a fountain showers—
 What city's this? A gentle princess, famed
 For happy genius, it Regina named.

Thus it is apparent that rather than being overwhelmed by the harsh realities of frontier life, Davin was stimulated by them. To what some might have considered the coarse brutalities of the wilderness, he responded neither in surrender nor withdrawal, but in poetry; and his poetry, although traditional in style and European in origin, manifests in certain of its elements the author's intimate identification with his frontier environment.

This, then, is a selection of the work of Nicholas Flood Davin who in his time was known as a statesman, an orator, a poet, and a journalist. These are but a few of the works by which Davin hoped to "have done something in [his] humble way for literature." He did not apologize for the imperfections in his poems or for their many defects "in mechanical workmanship alone", for they were simply the products of "stray moments in a busy, and, for some twelve years, a turbulent life." Indeed, he offered the volume with this rather casual comment: "Let them sink or swim. If they sink, they will find themselves in very good company; and if they swim a little day, it is about as much as most modern works can hope for."

Davin has not achieved a great place in Canadian letters; rather, as he expected, his little star has been lost in the blaze of others. Many of his poems deserve nothing better than to sink to the bottom of the stream of Canadian literature and to join that "very good company" of which he spoke in his preface. But if he failed to impart to any of his poems that quality of timelessness which would ensure them eternal life, the best of them yet deserve at least a buoy to mark their resting place.

Moreover, even while failing to achieve greatness as a poet, Davin still stands somewhat as a sentinel against an uncritical application of the frontier thesis to the Canadian North-West of his day. Wilfrid Eggleston conducted a reconnaissance of this thesis in *The Frontier and Canadian Letters* (1957) and concluded that "neither the environment nor the migrating stock" held much promise of "an early flowering of prairie writers."³ It is submitted, however, that the presence on the frontier of a man of Davin's stature and the publication there of a volume of the nature of *Epic of the Dawn* both suggest that, as applied to the North-West Territories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the thesis might be somewhat modified after further careful examination.

It would be foolish, of course, to accept the single instance of Davin as sufficient evidence to refute or support any theory, but there is in *Epic of the Dawn* the implicit suggestion that Davin was not alone as a territorial devotee of *belles lettres*. One suspects that at least he was no less typical of a substantial and influential segment of the population than were the Alberta cow hands cited by Eggleston. It is submitted, then, that the circumstances of the emergence of a native literature on the prairies of the Canadian North-West remain an open issue, and any theory or thesis regarding these circumstances must explain or explain away Nicholas Flood Davin.

NOTES

1. For more extensive lists of Davin's publications, see Bruce Peel, *A Bibliography of the Prairie Provinces to 1953* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956), and *The British Museum General Catalogue of Printed Books*, Vol. XLIX (London, 1952).
2. Davin himself is reported to have escaped by balloon from besieged Paris during the Franco-Prussian War: see J. R. C. Honeyman, "The Regina Leader", *The Story of the Press*, Canadian North-West Historical Society Publications, Vol. I, No. 4, Pt. 1 (Battleford, Saskatchewan, 1928).
3. Wilfrid Eggleston, *The Frontier and Canadian Letters* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1957), pp. 137-138.