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THE AWAKENING IN CANADIAN POETRY

HENRY W. WELLS

THAT an emergence of noteworthy poetry has recently occurred in Canada may be inferred from a few bare facts. Within the space of two years—1942 and 1943—appeared three excellent anthologies largely or exclusively devoted to contemporary writers.¹ In April, 1941, *Poetry* published a number devoted entirely to recent Canadian poets and the criticism of their work. Two other useful anthologies devoted solely to living poets were published in 1936 and 1938.² And between 1936 and 1943 appeared at least three anthologies not thus far mentioned because of their comparatively unimportant contribution, but illustrating an interest in the general field, if not a particularly enlightened view of the new developments. Meanwhile, in 1936 was published W. E. Collin's *The White Savanahs*, a sympathetic and informative volume, criticizing the contemporary poets, and in 1943 a too brief but helpful sum-

¹ A. J. M. Smith, *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (Chicago, 1943); R. Gustafson, *An Anthology of Canadian Poetry* (London, 1942); and *A Little Anthology of Canadian Poets* (Norwalk, Connecticut, 1943).

² E. H. Bennett, *New Hampshire* (Toronto, 1938); and, *New Provinces, Poems by Several Authors* (Toronto, 1936), anonymously selected.

mary, *On Canadian Poetry*, by E. K. Brown, likewise stressing new authors.

This spate of publication has, nevertheless, made only a modest ripple on critical opinion in the United States. About half the Canadian poets of merit are occasionally to be met in magazines in the United States, where most of their readers probably remain unaware of the poets' nationality. The true meaning of the awakening in Canada has apparently escaped our critics and been somewhat imperfectly grasped in the Dominion itself. There a wise and an especially commendable modesty has prevented a chauvinistic attitude: work of the merit actually achieved could not possibly have been created under a narrow nationalism. Although a fair number of essays on individual poets has appeared in Canada, Canadians have made little serious effort to appraise the native poetry as a whole, to account for its recent advances, or to define its distinguishing qualities. In the United States critics have on the whole remained magnificently oblivious to the entire subject. The almost countless anthologies in England and America rarely if ever acknowledge any Canadian poet since the somewhat dubious figure of Bliss Carman. The view seems to be that a virtual parody of Kipling was achieved by that savage Canadian gunman, Robert Service, author of "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," and that one should scarcely look for true or delicate poetry from a bleak and northern land. American critics commonly regard literary Canada much as Chaucer viewed the Scotch, and with no greater justice.

Nobody, one presumes, would even in his most sanguine moments care to maintain that Canada has as yet produced a great poetical literature. Neither in the nineteenth nor in the twentieth century do her poets constitute a large and impressive phalanx of names. But it is hardly too much to hold that in proportion to its size no unit of the English-speaking world is today contributing more, or perhaps even as much. That considerable good poetry has very recently been written in Canada will become obvious to anyone who, with the chart of the

most cursory criticism for a guide, devotes a few hours to a fair-minded exploration of this Northwest Passage of poetical English. Thumbnail sketches of a score of figures will be given later. First, however, the impersonal contour of the movement demands sketching, together with its genesis, background, special intellectual and spiritual climate, and prevailing characteristics.

Since the First World War, then, a new wave of poetical activity has swept the Dominion. That war, whether as a cause or as an arbitrary line in history, clearly affords the most decisive mark in the growth of Canadian verse. Although many of the writers who flourished before 1918 continued to write for several years thereafter, a new generation arose conscious of its newness and confidently prepared to take the leadership from their predecessors. Few of the older men made the adjustments dictated by the changing times. Somewhat the same development, it may be urged, occurred in almost all lands, but nowhere more markedly than in this hitherto retarded area. Canada had already produced a school of poets especially conspicuous for their romantic fondness for nature, of which the Dominion has God's plenty, and for a rather shallow grasp of society, of which she enjoyed in the last century relatively less to arrest attention. Lampman, a provincial Keats, wrote some genuinely charming nature poetry, and similar verse was composed by Wilfred Campbell, Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, Theodore Goodrich Roberts, and Duncan Campbell Scott. Indeed there were other Robertses and Scotts who as literary chieftains came near to winning Canadian literature as fief to their clans. Their work was sound, though hardly of high inspiration; and while it lasts well even today as somewhat minor verse, even in Canada it was obviously outmoded by 1920. With uncommon grace the survivors of the old regime yielded to youth; indeed in the case of Frederick Scott the deference was paternal, since his son, F. R. Scott, is among the chief leaders of the new effort.

The present movement is emphatically young. Its chronological outlines may be sketched most readily in somewhat graphic

form. Of the score of leading and representative writers specifically considered in this article, the average age is considerably less than forty. With the sole exception of the juvenilia of Mr. Bourinot, all their books date from at least five years after the First World War. No writer to be mentioned here is under twenty-five, and the youngest to publish a book is over thirty. To judge from this survey, the craft of poetry does not come to an especially early fruition in twentieth-century Canada; it matures gradually, but reaches ripe development before the poet himself has passed middle age. The world at large might possibly have recognized — though it failed to do so — that by 1925 or 1930 at least one poet of considerable stature had appeared, namely Edwin J. Pratt. Not until the somewhat epochal anthology, *New Provinces*, in 1936, which collected at least a handful of lyrics by Edwin J. Pratt, F. R. Scott, Robert Finch, A. J. M. Smith, A. M. Klein, and Leo Kennedy, could the critical world outside Canada have been expected even to surmise the new forces at work. The real force of the movement is less than a decade old.

That Canadian writers should have been sensitive to virtually contemporary developments in the literatures of the United States and Europe is of interest, though hardly of primary interest. The important considerations are not so much the modernity or urbanity of recent Canadian verse as its relatively high merit and certain perceptible qualities peculiar to itself. Yet it is notable that Canada, which as a literary field was lagging well behind the more populous countries before the First World War, should by the time of the Second have forged so well abreast with the larger world. The earlier war helped to shake Canada from provincialism and intellectual lethargy, and to arouse within leading minds new depths of feeling and of spiritual insight. The outstanding Canadian poets were prompt to shake off the facile forms, sentimental idealizations, and cloying nature imagery typical of their immediate predecessors. A vision forceful in Keats had long become in turn an evasion and an affectation. A new emotional and spiritual sin-

cerity, on the contrary, invigorates even the first volume by Edwin J. Pratt, his *Newfoundland Verse*, published in 1923. Shortly thereafter Canadian poets began to feel the influence of T. S. Eliot and of the French Symbolists. The social outlooks of Sandburg and MacLeish and, a few years later, of Auden and Spender, as well as the sharper diction and increasingly intellectual content in the work of William Butler Yeats, Robert Frost, and Wallace Stevens, have a distinctly perceptible if by no means enslaving influence on the Canadian authors. Canada won her independence in poetry later than a dominion status in affairs of state.

The chief peculiarity of the newer Canadian work is due to a peculiar compromise between her unique position and a reflective cosmopolitanism. After 1920 Canada was neither oblivious to the newer developments in world literature nor as thoroughly engulfed in the stream of this literature as the major countries themselves. And since the stream had become decidedly polluted with sediments loosened by that catastrophe, such a removal from the full force and center of the current brought with it some perceptible advantages. In his early poetry Archibald MacLeish capitulated to the pessimism of T. S. Eliot, as Eliot had to that of the French Symbolists. Not so much provincial or aloof, as relatively cool and detached, the Canadians were able to achieve a happily objective and independent attitude. Their younger generation escaped the faddish error of rushing to become culturally English, French, or even cosmopolitan. For this independence their geographical situation was probably no greater factor than their sociological situation. Wherever racial matters are concerned well-educated Canadians enjoy peculiar advantages. Today most of them have been bilingual from youth. As cultural advantages have steadily been increased for both the English and French speaking peoples, their diverse heritages have to some degree at least become common property. Attitudes of mutual respect and instinctive deference have arisen. Small as such a broad-minded minority must be in any country, and especially in a land such

as Canada, as yet by no means a land of a widely disseminated cultural and literary life, it is precisely by such a minority that most of the really distinguished writing is done. Canada looks with a certain impartiality on the achievements of its three outstanding cultural and political allies: England, France, and the United States. She does not herself speak with the highest power or authority, but she does at times speak from a perspective conducive to a peculiar poise. In other words, the Canadian mind at its best is poised in the center of our Atlantic triangle.

At a distinctly decadent moment in the history of Western Europe and of the United States, when social, moral, political and, be it literally added, economic bankruptcy gravely afflicted all, against the threatened senility of the Western Mind, Canadian provincialism won a glamor of youth, temporary, no doubt, as such a light must always be, but attractive nevertheless. The newer Canadian poets are on the whole explorative without being bizarre, sensitive and subjective without being victims of hopelessness and despair. The general impression given by recent Canadian verse is thus peculiarly unpretentious and ingratiating. Moreover, the removal of any weighty force of critical opinion pressing closely upon its authors—the circumstance that their most dreaded as well as their most respected critics are removed by many leagues or a protective political barrier—proves a blessing as well as a loss. Canadian literature is both less self-conscious and less frustrated than that of its rivals. Creative power may be less imposing; it is also freer and happier. Fewer pages are written in compliance with pedantic formulae. The work as a whole bears few traces of being confected on doctrinaire lines. So far as two schools in Canada are clearly marked, they may be roughly defined as that stressing social content, led by Edwin J. Pratt, and that stressing refinement of form, subjective subtlety, and cosmopolitan outlook, led by A. J. M. Smith. Yet happily, not only an amicable understanding but a mutual respect characterizes both factions. While

cultivated Canadians have traveled far beyond the crudities of the Kipling era, they have generally escaped excesses of aestheticism. If their numbers contain no one of the brilliance, delicacy and sophistication of the American poet, Wallace Stevens, neither has any Canadian spun those veils of sophistry wherein Stevens has in recent years gravely enwrapped himself.

Since the contention of this article is that Canadian verse of the present generation constitutes a flourishing limb of English poetry as a whole, the argument naturally leads to the problem of the relation of the movement in the Dominion to the other branches and to the main stem of Anglo-Saxon verse. Although the English literary tradition, robust and indubitably poetic, is singularly irrepressible, when transplanted it usually proves slow-growing and long in reaching maturity. The repeated pattern of British colonization and dominion would lead one to infer for Canada a protracted period of rather sterile culture, followed by an emergence of considerable note. Moreover, that this awakening should show a predominance of poetry is far from surprising. A sturdy and emotionally robust body of literature is to be presumed. Fundamentally, Canada complies with the pattern exhibited throughout the chief English-speaking lands. Pratt, for example, has very naturally been compared with impulsive and spontaneous poets such as the South African, Roy Campbell, and with some recent leaders in Australian verse. But from various causes no part of the British Empire seems today quite so fruitful in verse. Beneath Canadian snows the unquenchable genius of the English language slumbered for long, to produce in its spring a most colorful burgeoning.

The oldest as well as the ablest among the leaders of the new era in Canadian poetry, Edwin J. Pratt, has produced a dozen small books of verse since 1923, when his *Newfoundland Verse* appeared. An ample and well-chosen selection of whatever he himself wishes remembered may be found in his *Collected Poems* (1944). His art comes most legitimately by its austere

northern temper, since the poet was born and bred in a Newfoundland village. It is against the background of those bold shores rather than against that of Toronto and Queen's College, where Dr. Pratt has taught for many years, that the soul of his art is best understood. Pratt's poetry is in spirit at once epic and humane, unusually severe yet never heartless. Completely divorcing himself from the banality and sentimentality of commonplace magazine verse, he nevertheless achieves his distinction with adherence to the fundamentals and to the basic simplicities of life. He is author of a number of narrative poems with an epic flavor, depicting man's most strenuous labors and boldest heroism. Thus "Brebeuf and his Brethren" epitomizes the story of the Jesuit martyrs in Canada; "The Roosevelt and the Antioe" recounts one of the most famous modern rescues at sea; "The Cachalot" celebrates whaling; and "Dunkirk" is a war poem of more than usual strength. Epic feeling turns subtly into both tragic feeling and form in "The Titanic," a discerning study in modern *hubris*. From the land of Paul Bunyan come some truly remarkable extravaganzas, such as "The Witches' Brew," with their basis of folk fantasy and fairy tale and an eloquence and spontaneity almost Elizabethan. Many of Pratt's extravaganzas deal most imaginatively with natural science; indeed it is safe to say that no poet quite equals Pratt in utilizing for verse the rich materials of geology, zoölogy and paleontology. "The Great Feud," subtitled "A Dream of a Pleiocene Armageddon," and "The Fable of the Goats" are especially skillful in this vein.

With his singularly robust, simple, and direct approach Pratt also shows poetic insight as to the relations of modern science and industry to the modern man in both peace and war. A considerable number of his shorter poems deal with men and machines. In these and other pieces his simple attack by no means signifies a want of intelligence or sensibility, for his vocabulary is rich in scientific terms, while his feelings are deep rather than sensuous, over-refined or decadent. Only the extreme sensitiv-

ity of the romantic aesthete and egoist, of the follower, for example, of the tradition of Rilke, remains alien to him. Against the pessimism and despair of a waning intellectual and social aristocracy he pits the massive resistance of the common man. Against defeat, also, he knows two primary barriers: the sheer heroism of an unacademic stoicism, aided by that resilience and power found in many of his grave and tragic elegies, such as "The Iron Door," and a remarkably robust sense of humor, companion of the imagination exhibited in his already mentioned extravaganzas.

Pratt commands an art generally firm and fully adequate to express this strong and appealing philosophy. His art, too, is classical, simple, epic, and direct. Although he may not himself have considered the matter, he is classical in the Greek rather than in the Latin tradition. Affectations and intricacies of style he avoids, yet by his terseness, frankness, and boldness he proves to be forward looking and by no means reactionary. Beside him, for example, Masefield seems as strangely outmoded and outdistanced as beside T. S. Eliot. Indeed, when poets such as Pratt appear, the school of Eliot itself may well look to its laurels and ascertain whether the melancholy yew of the metaphysical churchyard is not beginning to fade a little. Pratt belongs not only to Canada; he belongs also to the present and to the future.

A younger writer, Dorothy Livesay, illustrates some of the inevitable refinements in the contemporary movement of which Pratt will almost certainly be regarded as the first and in many ways the most impressive figure. Her work clearly reflects her cultural environment. Most of her best verse to date is to be found in a volume of selected poems, *Day and Night* (1944). This book may well be placed with the most attractive books of lyrics and short poems ever to appear in Canada, and quite equal to any collection of verse published in English during that year. It is, not unnaturally, divided between poems stressing public and personal relationships. Of the former

group — the more palpably related to Pratt's thought — the most notable is "West Coast."³ This poem gives a view from a hill-top of a war-town hastily erected for shipbuilding on the Pacific coast. More welding is done than on steel alone. Hungarians, Greeks, Sicilians, Czechs, French, English, Germans, Poles, and Irish are fused by a common cause. It is an occasional poem, but written with a warmth which should help it to last for a considerable time. There is also a fine and impassioned elegy for the eminent Spanish poet, Lorca, killed by Franco during the recent revolution in Spain.⁴ "The Outsider"⁵ and "Day and Night,"⁶ the title poem of the volume, are proletarian pieces of unusual force, the former showing in rhythm and imagery how deeply allied is Dorothy Livesay's eminently social art to the dance. There is a symbolical, imaginative, and moving poem on childbirth, a subject which discourages the less daring poets.⁷ The love poems give chiseled expression to highly feminine and ecstatic experience. In some the imagery is strongly physical or in a popularly accepted sense, Freudian.⁸ One group of five lyrics deals with a metaphysical love, beyond emotion and beyond will, where consciousness is reduced to the passive role of listener.⁹ This is a subtle conception artfully expressed. Finally, in "Fantasia"¹⁰ the poet enjoys a holiday of pure fantasy, controlled, nevertheless, by sure artistry in rhythm and image. The entire volume is perceptibly feminine and, like most of the best Canadian poetry, similarly youthful in tone. But the reader would be unwise to quarrel with such art because it is neither more masculine nor more thickly painted. Much of its beauty lies in its purity and translucence, in its lyrical litesomeness and spontaneity.

³ *Day and Night* (Toronto, 1944), 40.

⁴ *Day and Night*, 22.

⁵ *Day and Night*, 7.

⁶ *Day and Night*, 16.

⁷ *Day and Night*, 29.

⁸ *Day and Night*, 6.

⁹ *Day and Night*, 33.

¹⁰ *Day and Night*, 37.

A comparable achievement is *David and Other Poems* (1942), by Earle Birney, whose title poem, hardly less than a masterpiece in brief poetic narrative, has frankness and vigor, notably in agreement with the work of Pratt, Livesay, and other Canadians, yet with a special charm. "David" is at once a song of innocence and of experience. Youth and a spiritual coming of age through sorrow are its themes, as these are the typical themes of Canadian poetry emerging to importance in critical years just after the agony of the First World War. The last line ends on the dominant chord: "That day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains." Not only the scenery but the temper of Birney's brief verse story is indigenous. He has fallen upon a rhythm peculiarly fitting the emotion: it is swift, lyrical, tender; popular without being vulgar, and unpretentious though subject to delicate modulation. The story is of two youngsters at work during a summer in the Canadian Rockies. In their spare hours they climb among the mountains. As they reach a summit, the less able boy, the narrator, careless of his footing, is so preoccupied with the view that he is about to slip, when his more experienced friend, David, on reaching to secure him, falls into an abyss. When the former has climbed down to David's side, he finds him impaled on a rock edge, paralyzed. Realizing his condition and the doubtfulness of securing aid, David asks his friend to shove him off to final destruction; and at last, after an inner struggle more implied by the poem than actually described, this crime of mercy is performed. The naïve spirit, translucent atmosphere, unfailing tact, and narrative art sustained throughout evince skill of a high order. Delicately handled symbols and portents prepare for the catastrophe. It is not a deeply and grandly emotional poem, like Pratt's epic, "The Roosevelt and the Antinoe," but it has a purer and more artful beauty, a charm that is fresh, virginal, and almost ethereal, suggesting the touch of morning upon new mountain snow. This is all the more impressive since, almost needless to say, Birney, in the Second World War a captain in the Cana-

dian Army, is far from being a child. In his short poems one encounters a keen sense of the ironies of Canada's place in this war, where the long arm of strife has reached into her remote, peaceful valleys;¹¹ one even finds satirical humor, as in "Anglo-Saxon Street,"¹² depicting unpleasant provinciality in the lower-middle-class mind of a Canadian city. This piece, with its clever re-creation of an Early English idiom, proves to be considerably more than a class-room exercise; for it exhibits a true poet's studied use of word and phrase and a fruitful response to his environment. The closing poem of the volume, the airman's farewell to his wife and child as he flies overseas into the storm of war, returns us to direct, simple feeling, artful in expression and wholly free from the humors of a deliberate virtuosity.

Similar in spontaneity and vigor, but more prolific and more apparently excursive in his reading, is the contemporary Canadian poet best known in the United States, Abraham Moses Klein. Most of his verse has been published in the States, and much has received hearty if somewhat limited praise. *Hath not a Jew . . .*, his first book (1940), appeared with an introduction by Ludwig Lewisohn; his most recent "Hitleriad" was first of the *New Directions* "Poet of the Month" series for 1944. A slashing, carefree manner suggests that Klein finds in Montreal little to confine or inhibit the free exercise of his talents. In this respect alone, perhaps, is he really typical of his homeland. For he repeatedly declares himself—at least in his earlier poetry—to be at heart first of all a Jew, as he is in fact a zealous leader of the Canadian branch of the Zionist Movement. According to Mr. Lewisohn, whose voice in the matter carries authority, Klein's first book gives the best picture thus far achieved in English of the thoughts and feelings of the modern Jew not only conscious of his race but deeply stirred by racial and religious tradition. The great majority of his poems are deliberately marked with Judaic coloring. This holds true even in his love

¹¹ *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, 335.

¹² *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, 14.

sonnets. In the best and most serious passage of his "Hitleriad,"¹³ he assumes the eloquence of a Hebrew prophet, and thus writes some of the finest poetical invective yet composed on a theme whose very magnitude has depressed less courageous poets. The opulence of oriental imagery, half Hebraic, half Elizabethan and Jacobean, enriches his language. It may conceivably be argued that Klein is avowedly a Jewish author, not primarily a Canadian, and that his background has accordingly won him an international currency denied his more provincial fellow countrymen. But the question still arises, if Mr. Lewishon is correct, why the most gifted of English-speaking Jewish poets should be a Canadian? Though much ill has been spoken, and spoken in classic language, of Montreal, there Klein lives and indubitably flourishes. His considerable talents have developed not only freely but to a certain extent in a favorable atmosphere. He himself enjoys ironies. It may well be no less true, then, as it appears paradoxical, that Canadian literature should lay a claim upon his neo-Elizabethan work and that from fundamental causes his singularly frank and fresh evocation of the Jewish spirit in verse accompanies the equally vigorous and dynamic revival of English poetry in Canada.

The comparatively quiet airs of the Dominion, free at least from more metropolitan stridencies, have simplified the poetic life not alone for A. M. Klein; they have served a like purpose for a very different but equally distinguished poet, Arthur James Marshall Smith. Where Klein is expansive, Smith is economical. One is by nature pantheist, the other purist. Happily Smith is not puritan, for puritanism does not flourish in either French or English-speaking Canada. The title of his selected poems, *News of the Phoenix* (1943) may be taken to intimate his place in a revival. Although far from being the only phoenix in the nest, he is one of the most brilliant and clear-throated. There remains, nevertheless, a suspicion that the purifying flames wherein the Canadian phoenix burns are considerably more artificial than warming. More than once the bleeding

¹³ *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, 29-30.

heart has been served in a synthetic shell — Crashaw, as it were, on ice. This phoenix has been reported rather than seen close at hand. Notwithstanding all qualifications, however, it must be admitted that the Canadian species is one of the most delightful. As a student at McGill, Smith studied the older metaphysical poets and came naturally under the congruous influence of T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell. Shortly thereafter he worked in Edinburgh with that great scholar of seventeenth-century poetry, Sir Herbert Grierson. Something of the spirit and measure of the intellectual variety of Canadian poetry may be discerned by comparing Smith's ode on the death of Yeats¹⁴ with that on the same theme by the highly talented English poet, W. H. Auden.¹⁵ The Canadian poem is the purer lyric, though distinctly less involved in thought and frustrated in emotion. Smith writes with an uncommonly clear and lucid pen, as well he should, since it behooves him to clarify mystery, his favorite theme. He seeks the unseen behind the seen, life through death. The sensuous phase of the metaphysical tradition is skillfully handled in "Prothalamium,"¹⁶ the ascetic phase in "The Offices of the First and the Second Hour"¹⁷ and in a still finer lyric, "The Shrouding."¹⁸ On occasions, as in "Far West,"¹⁹ he attempts satire, for which the sharpness of his pen renders him fit. But the most widely admired of his poems is "The Lonely Land,"²⁰ which expresses his literary personality and brilliantly interprets the Canadian coast scenery without excessive leaning upon learning or poetical metaphysics. This lovely piece should give anyone pause who should be tempted to see in Smith a writer wholly cosmopolitan and in no sense Canadian. His finely distinguished metaphysical lyrics have been achieved largely by virtue of his simplification of the

¹⁴ *News of the Phoenix and Other Poems* (Toronto, 1943), 21.

¹⁵ *Another Time* (New York, 1940), 93.

¹⁶ *News of the Phoenix and Other Poems*, 15.

¹⁷ *News of the Phoenix and Other Poems*, 38.

¹⁸ *News of the Phoenix and Other Poems*, 41.

¹⁹ *News of the Phoenix and Other Poems*, 32.

²⁰ *News of the Phoenix and Other Poems*, 19.

cosmopolitan idiom into a fresher, more youthful, and cooler speech. Canada is nearer the seventeenth century than England, and Smith nearer to it than T. S. Eliot. If Pratt's lyrics express the Canadian earth and wave-beaten shores, Smith's are keen and cold as the Canadian aspect of the stars.

The Master of the Phoenix has a rival in a fellow poet whom he much admires, Robert Finch. The latter, like a number of other skillful Canadian verse makers, has published no volume, but is to be known through magazines and anthologies, especially through the handful of his poems in *New Provinces*. His biography gives the clue to his somewhat enigmatic character. After living for several years in France, he has become a teacher of French in University College, Toronto. Whereas imitations of French symbolist and surrealist poetry by Englishmen and Americans are too often forced, with Finch the precious seems almost natural, for the French spirit cannot be exotic to a truly educated Canadian. In all his close collaboration with French ways of thought and expression the Canadian poet proves himself to the manner born. Though his art certainly appears in part French, and most legitimately so, it is typical of his British-Canadian background that it should be in no way decadent.

While Finch in his poetry owes a debt to French literature, Leo Kennedy owes a like debt to his Irish blood. Though lacking in scope, this Canadian poet has a very definite gift. Themes that, literally considered, remain commonplace, banal, or sentimental with others, with him prove genuine and the source of unquestionable poetry. Kennedy is one of the relatively few English poets of Canada trained in the Catholic tradition. Although he eventually broke away from the Church and its theology, he retains a vision long fostered by the ritual, poetry, and insight of the Church. Like Francis Thompson, Kennedy has a rare feeling for what might be called cosmic genetics, or, in other words, for the life cycle of birth, death, and resurrection. The theme is in his eyes repeated with variations through-

out nature and nature's capricious flowering in the infinitely varied manifestations of sex. But where Thompson is ornamental and baroque, Kennedy remains simple and unimpeachably sincere. A genuineness and enthusiasm give force and wings to all his better verse. Much of his spirited lyricism is a Canadian analogue to the erotic poetry of Yeats. But where Yeats, all his great strength notwithstanding, at times became snarled in pedantries and convolutions of esoteric thinking, the lesser poet enjoys the not inconsiderable advantage of a smoother, clearer tone. For a poet in the twentieth century a provincial background is not always a disadvantage.

Less traditional in their approach, and if possible even more genuine and sincere, are two strongly individualistic and somewhat romantic Canadians of the modern school, L. A. MacKay and Kenneth Leslie. MacKay is not an occasional poet, but he is occasionally a poet, and one of decidedly convincing power. He has published little. Although a few of his poems are in the over-literary, rhetorical manner of the later-day Parnassians and followers of Heredia,²¹ most have an almost startling emotional compulsion.²² In such work poetry patently becomes for him not a profession but a necessity. Some violent love or hate demands and receives terse and yet eloquent words. No cold Parnassian, then, he writes of the hurt or the ecstasy of love with almost the ancient Greek authority. Though his art is polished and groomed, his spirit is jagged, heroic, Aeschylean. No doubt he is a minor poet, but at times he speaks of the emotional life with true distinction and a complete self-confidence. As with many other Canadians, one feels here the valid artist and not a minor digit in a school of *litterateurs* inhabiting an intellectual slum. In the case of Kenneth Leslie the story proves even more arresting. Even less given to merely imitative, per-

²¹ *Viper's Bugloss* (Toronto, 1938), 3; also, "Loki Bound," in *An Anthology of Canadian Poetry*, 79.

²² *Viper's Bugloss*. See his "Admonition for Spring," 1; "Traffic," 2; "Sour Sonnet for Simpletons," 3; "Stript bare, strung up on tiptoe by the wrists," 4; "I wish my tongue were a quiver," 5; "Now o'er the one half world the frosty rime," 7; and, "Battle Hymn of the Spanish Rebellion," in *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, 372.

functory, or mechanical writing, he has published relatively little. While his miscellaneous poems only rarely have merit or charm — qualities that might, to be sure, be detected in such a lyric as “Halibut Cove Harvest”²³ — one receives the distinct impression from his books that only once did the power of strong inspiration descend upon him. The inference is that certain experiences with living as he neared middle age moved him profoundly. *By Stubborn Stars* (1938) stands with the very few first-rate sequences of love sonnets written since the English sonnet enjoyed a gorgeous youth with Sidney and Shakespeare. If an effort of this sort is to be successful, it must run the risk of skirting close to tracts so well worn by a thousand feet that little or no nourishment can be derived from the worn soil. In these sonnets Leslie is consistently close to dull conventionality yet never strays into that arid zone. It is true that his recurrent symbolism of earth and sea used to express the states of the lover belongs with the bolder techniques of modern symbolist poetry. But in this work he always persuades us that his poetry means life and not letters, experience and not theory. *By Stubborn Stars* nicely contrasts, for example, with the philosophical love sonnets in the Petrarchian tradition written by George Santayana during the early part of his career. The Canadian poet has not written to comply with any fashion, new or old; on the contrary, he resembles a man caught by a blizzard; his words seem desperately wrung from him.

While Kennedy, MacKay, and Leslie have hovered brightly near the horizons of the literary scene in Canada, Francis Reginald Scott has occupied a central position and, had he seen fit to publish a collected edition of his poems, might appear a still more notable figure than is the case today. Son of Archdeacon F. G. Scott, a poet of the older school, he was educated at Oxford and at McGill, where he is now a well-known professor of constitutional law and author on social and economic questions. Scott was the leader in the memorable Canadian anthol-

²³ *An Anthology of Canadian Poetry*, 65.

ogy of young writers, *New Provinces* (1936). His poetry, an avocation of its author, proves singularly typical of the best produced by the younger group of Canadians. Economical and severe without being positively harsh, experimental and witty without becoming bizarre, and critical and satirical of the social order without growing either doctrinaire or didactic, it shuns the typical faults of more metropolitan authors and affords a number of lively and highly readable lyrics which are the better for not pretending to be great. Scott almost escapes being a minor poet by performing his task so consummately well. The prevailing wholesomeness and sanity of Canadian poetry, which none the less is neither smug nor in any ill sense provincial, appears to better advantage in no other writer. Some critics may find Scott too prose-minded, honest, straightforward, and reasonable to be an ideal lyric poet. Others will discover him to be not only a valued leader in Canadian verse but at least a refreshing figure in the larger sphere of English poetry.

The ten writers thus far mentioned offer a representative cross section of movements in present-day Canada. An equal number of representative names must be treated more briefly, not so much because they are confidently to be held as less typical or rewarding a reader's attention, but because they have as yet left a less pronounced mark on Canadian literary opinion, have published less or as young writers seem richer in promise than in accomplishment. Too many able young Canadians have in the past as in the most recent time met sudden death. A singularly tragic instance during peacetime was that of Raymond Knister, who died by drowning in 1932 after giving a new impetus to realism and sincerity in both Canadian verse and prose. By no means a major poet, and one whose verses have never been collected, he nevertheless wrote a number of savory genre lyrics, rich in sensuous tone and generous human understanding.²⁴ He will not soon be forgotten. Many of his aims are suc-

²⁴ *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, 313-315; and *An Anthology of Canadian Poetry*, 62-64.

cessfully pursued in the honest lyricism of W. W. E. Ross,²⁵ a Canadian imagist whose verses have in the United States been praised by Marianne Moore and published by *New Directions*. A less fastidious but not greatly dissimilar writer, Arthur S. Bourinot, began his publications at the age of twenty-two with *Laurentian Lyrics* (1915), a book of much diluted romantic poetizing, but in time not only felt the force of the new developments in poetry but to some extent contributed to them. In Bourinot something of a *rapprochement* between the clarity of the classical French tradition and the newer and more cosmopolitan standards of succinctness becomes discernible. So in this relatively minor poet the dual aspect of the Laurentian culture is disclosed more strongly than in more commanding figures, and wins for him a position of some honor among Canadian authors who stand at a meeting place between old and new.

An imaginative grasp of our disturbed social living inspires the best work of an increasingly large group of younger men and women. When writing lyrics on personal or more traditional themes, Anne Marriott seldom rises above the commonplaces of emotionally inflated newspaper rhymes, but when touched by social themes her imagination has repeatedly taken fire. *The Wind Our Enemy* (1939) is more sustained in artfulness than any of the similar and more robustious accounts of the western prairies by Carl Sandburg. It was a very notable first book. The lyric, "Prairie Graveyard"²⁶ successfully carries on the same theme. *Calling Adventurers* (1940), a radio play in which as poet she took a leading share, stands among the first serious contributions to an important field for future verse in Canada, as in the world. The Canadian Northwest is her spacious subject, treated by no means unworthily. A distinctly refreshing poet born in Alaska but now of British Columbia, Floris McLaren, has recently achieved a symbolical and modernistic expression.²⁷ A manly and direct approach is effective-

²⁵ *Laconics* (Toronto, 1930); and *Sonnets* (Toronto, 1932).

²⁶ *Salt Marsh* (Toronto, 1942), 16.

²⁷ *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, 345-347.

ly made by Charles Bruce, whose writing has responded with increased effectiveness to the crisis of the Second World War. Much more intricate and involved in its statement is the work of Ralph Gustafson.²⁸ His longest work, *Alfred the Great* (1937), is a verse drama produced after a careful study of the thought and language of the Anglo-Saxon period. But Gustafson finds striking kinship between pioneering Canadian life and the harsh realities of the medieval Anglo-Saxon world. He has not merely studied his subject; he keenly feels its relevance for his native setting. No Canadian poet writes more affectionately of the austere northern scenery. His language is often truly imaginative, though as to certain of his poems his critics have fairly agreed that the style is ingenious and labored instead of being truly created and inspired. His sincere and by no means vain efforts to be both a loyal Canadian and a Canadian liberal admit, however, of no serious doubt.

Finally, it must be reiterated that with conditions of verse publishing as they are in Canada, especially during a great war, the vigor of the new poetry in the Dominion can hardly be attested more strongly than by the high quality of the work of many young writers known only through magazines and anthologies. Patricia K. Page,²⁹ who has published no volume, is generally recognized in Canada as one of the most skilled craftsmen in the terse and oblique modern idiom—seldom, to be sure, in the least bizarre after the manner of the extreme surrealists, but nevertheless imaginative after the newer fashions. She possesses a particularly refined and refreshing sense for lyrical rhythm. Ronald Hambleton³⁰ is known to American readers through *The Partisan Review*. All his verse is vigorously imagined, tight-grained, distinctly intellectual, and emotionally refreshing: an invigorating north wind for the too languorous atmosphere of current poetry in the United States.

²⁸ *Flight into Darkness* (New York, 1944).

²⁹ *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, 418-420; *An Anthology of Canadian Poetry*, 113; and *A Little Anthology of Canadian Poets*, 23.

³⁰ *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, 421-425.

The dynamic condition of Canadian verse may be further inferred from several authors whose works A. J. M. Smith, in his ample but discriminating anthology, includes as represented largely or wholly by unpublished works. The youngest of his poets, Margaret Avison, for example, has published extremely little; but if judgment may be formed from the four pieces printed for the first time by Mr. Smith, some ingenious metaphysical poetry is at present being written in Toronto.³¹ His anthology quietly concludes with this little known author, thus suggesting with an almost impersonal allusion not only that the most recent years in Canadian poetry have been fruitful but that much is still forming upon the bough.³²

From the foregoing analysis it may be judged that the new verse in Canada has surprisingly high merits and that it is by no means impossible with a little careful savoring of it to detect a unique flavor. Here is the art of a young, active, and hopeful people, no longer isolated and narrowly provincial, at once conscious of their own identity and of the cosmopolitan meaning of culture. Their poetry presents one of the happiest and most natural meeting places for literary influences from England, France, and the United States. Canadian poets, today objective rather than isolated, are sufficiently aware of modern criticism to profit from its force but sufficiently removed to be spared its more vicious self-consciousness, foppery, and frustration. To put it simply, the writers are intelligent but as yet spontaneous and aesthetically creative. They have put books to the service of life and allowed life to serve books, thus avoiding the isolationism of that worst of pedantries, the pedantry of the aesthete. In poetry Canada possesses a fairly large number of notable figures, ranging from names of distinct importance, like Edwin J. Pratt, to fruitful though minor artists. It is high time that Canadian poetry, at present well in advance of Cana-

³¹ *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, 426-429.

³² Since this article was written there has appeared a new anthology, *Unit of Five* (Toronto, 1944), edited by Ronald Hambleton, with new and interesting poems, especially those by P. K. Page.

dian prose, and markedly superior to the verse produced in the other dominions, be at last fully incorporated into our commonly received picture of the larger organism of English-speaking literary culture.