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# UNEXPLORED FIELDS OF CANADIAN LITERATURE

BY

LORNE PIERCE

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*Fate cannot harm me: I have had my say.*

—SIR SIDNEY SMITH.

The author of *Tom Jones*, in the Introduction to Book XIV, offers a sprightly "essay to prove, that an author will write the better for having some knowledge of the subject on which he writes." That truth, I believe, has never successfully been challenged. Most editors bemoan the fact that so much of the stuff submitted to them is innocent of any skill in the craft of writing, or of an exact knowledge of the subject chosen. Not only do many writers fail to study the markets for their wares, thereby inviting delay and disappointment, but they also neglect to acquaint themselves in regard to the needs of the time and place.

This essay grew out of a request from the Toronto Branch of the Canadian Authors' Association to provide some sort of dependable road map for our young writers. The title was the inspiration of the executive. My first impulse, based upon a rather lengthy experience as editor of a publishing house, was to exclaim: "What have our writers not explored!" However, certain emotions, some of them colourful enough, recollected in tranquillity, became suitable firstlies and secondlies, and gave promise of a sort of a conclusion. These are now set down as the result of "an insistent demand."

I hesitate to associate my friend Pelham Edgar with anything so trivial. Indefatigable explorer, wise counsellor and true friend, he deserves finer homage; yet, such as it is, I gladly offer this.

L.P.

# Unexplored Fields of Canadian Literature

## I

### THE FIELD OF LITERARY CRITICISM

*Pray tell me, on what particular ground  
A Poet should claim admiration?*

—ARISTOPHANES (*Frogs*).

William Allen White burst upon the world, in 1896, asking: "What's the matter with Kansas?" Kansas, I take it, had something the matter with it, but whether it was in need of a simple consultation or an autopsy does not seem clear. I have very great respect for the critics, those scintillant beings who "from Heaven derive their light—these born to judge." They consult the Oracle of the Bottle in the Land of Lanterns, not the Oracle of the Bottle in the Land of Lanterns that Rabelais borrowed from Lucian, but one lowered directly from Heaven, unique and immediate. The resultant clairvoyancy is quite appalling. Petronius, that immortal wanton, amused himself by convincing his own soul that the world was as bad as he. Not so the modern critic; he holds a spotless, and more or less level, mirror to the temper of poetry and romance, hurling back stupidity, vanity and ineptitude into its rightful face.

The most stubborn critic, however, is the public, the folk who buy books, who know when they have had enough. The hardy obstinacy of this critic mocks that strange tribe, void of humour, who rent neat little offices in skyscrapers, and go down every morning to wrestle with the Oracle. It is this critic, not the reviewer, who confers immortality upon Dickens, Trollope and the rest, and, for weirdly uncritical reasons, consigns countless incompetent scribblers to the endless procession bound for oblivion headed by Anne Radcliff and Harold Bell Wright.

Old writers, we are told, were free to "nap and amble and yawn and look." A good many of them, it happens, did it rather well. New writers find themselves in a less leisurely age; they must be tireless in perfecting their craft. Yet there is a perfection above all others, and that is ripeness.

Canadian writers seem to be singularly impatient of discipline—the long way home of relentless self-criticism. The fundamental substance of literature has changed scarcely at all since Homer; but styles change, which is to say, aims and methods vary from age to age according to altered tastes and needs. A little meditation, one would think, should disclose the fact that one's work has not grown out of life, and that its cadences, contours and colours fall far short of those of the master craftsmen. But it is this meditation and self-examination to which we are so frequently averse.

In a sense all writing is creative, all purposive writing at least. Any enterprise is creative which entails struggling with the barriers of art and overcoming. Superficially it means the winnowing of words, the wrestling with material; success or failure here is the difference between the artist and the botch. The main thing, however, and the only excuse for writing, is to share one's vision with the world, to reveal the essential character of a thing. Robert Frost, you remember, saw the essence of art in an axe-helve:

He showed me that the lines of a good helve  
Were native to the grain before the knife  
Expressed them, and its curves were no false curves  
put on it from without.

Walter Pater, no doubt, never carved an axe-handle, but he had the root of the matter in him nevertheless. He speaks wisely of that "architectural conception of work, which foresees the end in the beginning, and never loses sight of it." He goes on to point out, that failure to do this results in an unconvincing, expressionless, "round-hand" quality of art.

This all sounds very trite and commonplace. Writers should know the simple elements of their craft. There are many good books from which one may gain an insight into the various skills considered necessary. *The Making of Literature, The Writer's Art, Tradition and Experiment, The Discovery of Poetry, An Introduction to the Study of Literature*, these are a few of the non-technical titles which come readily to mind. Yet thousands of manuscripts come to the desk of every editor which are innocent of any kind of skill.

I am urging just now that Canadian writers pay greater heed to the simple elementals, that they turn historians and critics of their craft, in order that they may discover the great traditions governing their chosen field, and, if so may be, wade resolutely out of the morass of ineptitude. "Can you do simple addition?" the White Queen asked. "What's one and one?" It is not as simple as that, yet a writer must submit to the drudgery with as much diligence as the painter and sculptor, or else, in spite of commendable candour and an equally laudable urge to express his reactions to life, find no justification for wasting other people's time.

Dr. Johnson has assured us that the purpose of a writer is to be read. If he is a scientist he will do his best to prove his hypothesis. The orator's business is to persuade. The writer will endeavour, perhaps, to be truthful and persuasive, but above all he is an artist. People buy his books not because of his thesis, and certainly not for his rhetoric, but simply because his aim is to show "Life *looks* like that!" By means of many devices, the impeccable word, lights and shades as well as the colours, balance and proportion as well as the rhythm, the architecture of the conception as well as the shining metaphor, the senses yield to the bewitchment, the illusion becomes complete, memorable and satisfying.

I am anxious that our writers should preserve good traditions, but I am even more concerned that they should establish worthy traditions in their turn. Wordsworth told Coleridge to be careful of rant, and I fear this expostulation may sound terribly like something of that sort. Since, however, this business of criticism is the basis of all that I have to say, I must run the risk. Geniuses will defy rules and ignore hoary tradition; with these celestial beings we have nothing to do. Others will cast off restraint, and dedicate their talents to experiment, only to find that they lack the skill to direct their energies toward an architectural end—a comprehended ideal. Charles Lamb shrank from such dismal studies as the genesis of masterpieces. He always regretted having seen the manuscript of "Lycidas" corrected and interlined. I admit that I rather enjoy the vision of Keats fumbling over the first line of "Endymion" and, above all, striking out a line here and adding a line there to his "Ode to the Nightingale." If the critic should be conscious of himself as an artist, there is the same necessity for an artist to be conscious of himself as a critic. "He should be aware of the responsibilities imposed by his art; he should respect the technique of his craft." (*J. Middleton Murry.*)

O the little more, and how much it is;  
And the little less, and what worlds away.

—ROBERT BROWNING.

## II

### THE FIELD OF BIOGRAPHY

*Not being able to give her the finer gift  
of the spirit, he loaded her with jewels.*

—ELLEN GLASGOW.

Portraits of great Canadians are too few, and most of them are incompetent. We have made our bow to conventionalized portraiture, yet we still appear to believe that it is our duty to go on nodding approvingly like porcelain mandarins. I do not mean to suggest that we should imitate the sprightly example of Lytton Strachey, or mimic the easy formulæ of Emil Ludwig. Nothing is so easy as to be "modern" in this sense, to pounce upon a man, devise a smug

formula (*eros versus* ethos; *narcissus versus* ethos; *theos versus* diabolus) and squeeze his "life and letters" into a whimsical pattern mould. Nothing is so easy, and nothing can be more remote from truth.

I do not think Lockhart's *Scott* can be surpassed in its class. At the same time, we need in Canada the two types. We require more painstaking, authoritative lives and letters, and we also should have more popular sketches of the lives of great national characters.

It is the custom to smile at the restless self-sufficiency of our frontier life. The answer to that is: a certain amount of self-sufficiency and alertness are necessary to survive at all. There is not absent a good deal of amiable banter in regard to our adolescent hurrah. We are sometimes regarded as a sort of sorority, leather-lunged and whooping it up for the dear old alma mater, its leaders and achievements. But this preoccupation with one's history is not unique. England has arrived at her present state of national solidarity and integration through one thousand years of sagas, ballads, chronicles, legends, romances and historical dramas. The same is true of every other nation which has achieved unity and ripeness. The turning point in the Irish nationalist movement was Standish O'Grady's *History of Ireland: Heroic Period*. The rest is written in the art, letters and politics of the new nation.

Our first families were frontier-minded men and women—explorers, discoverers, pathfinders, colonizers. Above all else they were men and women of lofty character—heroic to the point of daring, sublimely imaginative and of exalted nobility. No other nation is richer in this element. In the history of those three centuries of what is now Canada this is the human type that overwhelmingly predominates. Surely no field offers more alluring inducements than these names, our real nobility.

Human interest is always saleable. It is surely something to be able to recall a certain night at Tibur, when the Falernian stung the palate of Horace and his friend Thaliarchus, or to share the pang of Dante's heart when the living vision of Beatrice Portinari shattered the poet's rest. At the same time, is it not legitimate to write persuasively of those splendid days at old Port Royal, when poetry and drama were born on the North American continent, and Champlain and Lescarbot wrote their names into the annals of the new world. The soil we tread has measured the shadows of heroic men. One would rarely suspect it, so dull and commonplace are the lives we have written about them. We should live with the classics in order that we may discover their secret. Often we must repudiate them in the hope of becoming like them—and so make our world new and magic and inexpressibly our own.

Et si je danse sur les tombes  
C'est pour que la beauté du monde  
Soit neuve en moi tous les matins!

### III

#### THE FIELD OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

*Hamlet: Do you see nothing there?*

*Gertrude: Nothing at all; yet all that is, I see.*

—SHAKESPEARE.

I can think of no better cure for the easy nonchalance of our writers, and the shallow flippancy of our critics, than a brief trial of self-analysis and portraiture. There may be a good deal of private work being done along these lines, although one can scarcely imagine it. Certainly the spring and autumn book lists do not expose such. In all our literature there are but two autobiographies worthy the name, and it is not strange that they should have been offered as romances. To have christened them autobiographies would have impaired their commercial success, let alone thrust them into a bleak and uninhabited world.

If we put aside the journals, prayers and hymns of Handley Chipman (1717-1799) and the Life and Journal of Henry Alline (1748-1784) of the Maritime pre-revolutionary period, as well as the Journal of Jacob Bailey, a Maritime Loyalist, all of which are not accessible, we discover but two, *The High Romance*, by Michael Williams, and *A Search for America*, by Frederick Philip Grove. These are Macmillan books, and I congratulate my friend Hugh Eayrs, President of the Company. Both books record the quest for the spirit's Moated Grange. Williams found peace in the Roman Catholic Church; Grove never found peace, but he discovered Canada, the Prairies, and new life for old. Williams writes a sort of idyll; Grove, fearlessly and candidly, unfolds a stark drama. They are both brave, searching and memorable.

The journals hitherto published in Canada have been too superficial, timid and objective. Of these the three to survive are by women, Anna Jameson, Susanna Moodie and Mrs. Simcoe. They belong to the travel type of memoir, vignettes of the countryside, rather than chronicles of the kingdom within. We have done this sort of thing without end, and it is not without value. On the other hand, I do not wish to have the electorate suddenly take to exposing their whole souls. It would be quite embarrassing, so much heart-searching and public unrobing. We shall leave it to those wise and ripe, who, in the dervish dance of life, have succeeded in keeping their souls on top.

## IV

### THE FIELD OF DRAMA

*Plasticity loves new moulds because it can fill them, but  
for a man of sluggish mind and bad manners there is  
no place like home.*

—GEORGE SANTAYANA.

The literary dramas of Charles Heavyside, John Hunter-Duvar, William Wilfred Campbell and Charles Mair, not to mention the comedies of Joseph Quesnel, and the dramas of F. A. Marchand, Pamphile LeMay, Louis Fréchette and Frère Marie-Victorin, have left little or no impression upon the Canadian stage. Anything approaching significance is to be found in the short plays of Duncan Campbell Scott, Marjorie Pickthall's "The Wood-Carver's Wife," and miscellaneous one-act plays by Mazo De La Roche, Isabel Ecclestone Mackay, Carroll Aikens, Marian Osborne, Fred Jacob and one or two others.

Merrill Denison, more than any other, has laid the foundations for a native Canadian drama. The *Unheroic North* (1923) has recently been followed by *Henry Hudson and Other Plays*. The first collection was designed for The Little Theatre, and the latter for the radio; both will be found under the corner-stone of a new national drama.

As I have already pointed out, there is endless poetry, romance and drama in the Canadian scene. One does not need to go to the barren lands for native atmosphere, as is usually supposed. We are a prey to adolescence, are caught up in the breathless drama of nation building, and so fail to find leisure for that detachment, reflection and probing necessary to significant work. The essence of drama is character, and Merrill Denison has shown that the annals of Canada teem with it.

The whole future is before us in this field, but we must go down deep into the crypt and abyss of a man's soul, and report what we find there. Until we can learn this art, submit to this discipline, learn to recognize nobility of mind and spirit when we see it, and then achieve lifelikeness, compelling and significant, we shall stand still. Our failure may be due in part to the lack of a National Theatre and a sympathetic atmosphere on the part of the public, but the roots of the matter go far deeper than that. The majority of our play-makers are unspeakably shallow, and the result is pawky characterization and an infinite amount of ephemeral mutter.

## V

### THE FIELD OF BELLES LETTRES

*We must never attempt to separate prose  
from poetry too dogmatically.*

—BLISS CARMAN.

The field of the essay is more crowded, or, perhaps one should say, what currently passes for the essay. The true essay is the perfect fruit of ripeness, taste and urbanity. There is a closer kinship between the good letter-writer and the good essayist than between any others. The easy inconsequence, grace, charm, sophistication and personal intimacy of the letter are all found in the essay, which may be defined as an epistle to the world of kindred spirits at large.

The successful essay is a touchstone of urbanity, and only comes after long standing in the oak. Good talk sparkles and has a rich bouquet; the essay is that. Judged by these standards little of what we have accomplished in Canada along this line approaches the true essay. The style is self-conscious, bookish, lacks charm, in other words our essayists do not move easily and naturally in the native element. On the other hand the purpose of the essay has been often misjudged. We confuse it with appraisals of literature and art, and load it with far too much preaching, expostulation and tub-thumping. The essay should be compact of worldly wisdom carried lightly. We try to load it with knowledge of some sort, and mistake sprightliness for lightness.

Canadian literature is too serious. Surely there is a place for books of trifles, *inter alia*, relaxation and escape. We need more resounding laughter, perhaps, but certainly more subtle humour and even satire. Still we go on writing sermonettes, trying to prove something or convert somebody. Blake, MacMechan and Macphail come nearest to the real essay. Bliss Carman nearly always had a thesis to expound. McArthur's best prose pieces were sketches not essays. As for the rest they write criticism, an art, it is true, but not the kind of art that makes the essay. The successful Canadian essayist will resemble Bunyan's hero, whose solemn moral burden dropped from his stooped shoulders at sight of the Celestial City—in this case the Celestial City of Urbanity.

"Of all the arts, let me here observe, poetry is the nearest to prose. That is a very obvious reflection; so obvious that our thinking sometimes misses it, and rarely, I fancy, attends to its implications. For is not this a very serious situation for poetry—to be so near prose, to hold its station always on the edge of that precipice, to have this hair-breadth remove from the very negation of itself? I cannot think that poetry stands thus near to prose for nothing. It runs this daily danger of being prose just because it exists, not for its own sake (as perhaps some other arts do), but for ours, to serve essentially human needs. It is near to prose for the opportunities of discourse, for the communication of experience. It has deliberately elected to say things; and having made that election, is it not going to say the things that most matter?" (*Prose and Poetry*, H. W. Garrod).

If poetry runs this constant danger of breaking into prose, the essay shows that prose can be but a hair-breadth removed from poetry. Hazlitt is still the shining example of this truth, though you may prefer to reflect upon Montaigne, and his bewitchment for Shakespeare. "*C'est icy un livre de bon foy, lecteur!*" As for serving essentially human needs, that also is true, providing we do not fall into the customary Canadian error and confuse these with moral reform, literary uplift and miscellaneous information. Nothing so perfectly illustrates "the sheer incompetence of prose" as this death-in-life moral atmosphere, heavy with the breath of necessity and wanting the light of the imagination.

## VI

### THE FIELD OF THE FIRST CANADIAN

*For the essence of humanism is that belief ... that nothing which has ever interested living men and women can wholly lose its vitality—no language they have spoken, nor oracle beside which they have hushed their voices, no dream which has once been entertained by actual human minds, nothing about which they have ever been passionate, or expended time and zeal.*

—WALTER PATER ("Picodella Mirandola").

How do you account for the fact, that the life of the North American Indian has been so little exploited in our literature? Among the adventurers John Jewitt and Daniel Harmon have left the most faithful pictures of tribal life and custom. Catlin and Kane are chiefly valuable for their artistic records. Holgate among the modern artists seems to be the only Canadian to have discovered them. McKelvie's *Huldowget*, and Barbeau's *Indian Days in the Canadian Rockies*, and *The Downfall of Temlaham*, if you exempt the various anglicized retellings of their legends, are the only two who have joined hands with David Higgins, author of *The Mystic Spring*.

How long the native races ruled the wilderness we do not know; some say 25,000 years. Down through those millenniums they persisted and flourished. To have done so they must have had something which was socially, aesthetically and spiritually satisfying. In other words, they must have had satisfactory equivalents for what we mean by government, social etiquette, art, poetry and religion. Had it not been for Marius Barbeau and other indefatigable anthropologists every vestige of their life would have disappeared. Their songs, folk tales, fugitive fragments of their art, these are stored in the archives of a Federal Department—that is, so much of them as remains.

There is a place for Indian folk tales, providing they are not anglicized; but surely there is a more important place for good novels. As for Indian art it has had no effect upon our native art; only on the ceiling of a grill room and the top of a skyscraper could one find any hint of Canadian prehistoric art, and now the grill room has mercifully disappeared, metamorphosed into a Dutch tea room! Barbeau and McKelvie have begun right. They throw Indian life and manners into bold relief by placing it over against civilization. They show how, in spite of apparent Christianization, in the hour of tribal stress the whole weight of centuries of custom bear down and prove too much for the modern veneer. It has always been thus. The conquered race is not an assortment of corpses; there is a spark of life left, and it strikes back. This is so well illustrated in the story of the conquest of Christianity, and its successive accretions of pagan elements thinly disguised. Our pioneer novelists in this genre will be followed by many, let us hope. We are nourished by the same soil that sustained the native red man, and we are, in a very real sense, his heirs.

## VII

### THE FIELD OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

*But oh, a scrap of orange peel,  
Or stump of a cigar,  
Once trodden by a princely heel  
How beautiful they are!*

—ANON.

Much of what passes for history in Canada is a congeries of bald dates, petty wars, private feuds, coalitions, constitutional acts and amendments, treaties and statistics. These are repeated *ad nauseam*—the same heresies, the same quotations, the identical snippets on social and industrial backgrounds.

The treasures of our Federal and Provincial Archives are not known, except to a mere handful of research men. These men, if given time, will change our interpretation of Canadian history. Current versions of events are often far astray. Outstanding characters are either wrongly apotheosized or stupidly defamed. There are many notable figures upon which we have nothing. We prattle endlessly about the Loyalists, the Family Compact, the headwaters of Canadian Literature and so on, when we do not take the trouble to examine what has been painstakingly assembled and catalogued for our benefit. We need more gold in our histories, yet there are bulging treasure-rooms of it already about which we are apparently content to remain ignorant.

Historical research is not the business of the "scientific historian," whatever that may mean. Any man is a scientist who wants to know and tries to find out. A little more of this sort of passion would have saved endless novels from utter banality, the historical romance type which seems to flourish here and cover the earth like a banyan tree. I can think of no term strong enough to use in connection with the shoddy, hurried, absurd trash that is sent by the truckload to editors every year in the name of Canadian historical romance, and Canadian social romance. The writing is as slovenly as the thinking, and practically all of it is without any atom of verisimilitude.

This is not the place to catalogue the names of those themes upon which we require intensive research. Each subject requires rigid specialization. One cannot well embrace an era. A good beginning is to draw a circle round some theme, step inside, and remain there until its resources are apparently exhausted. I recommend this to writers of fiction; it is an admirable discipline. I know an artist, C. W. Jefferys, who will spend months in verifying a musket-lock, a uniform, the outline of a palisade. Our novelists are less finicky. What does it matter if side-arms are carried by field officers? What does anything matter so long as we get away with it?

I do not suppose Hardy's lifelong study of archæology and folk-lore detracted in any way from the romantic value of his Wessex novels. Some day, let us hope, a Canadian writer will give us a few novels built round the life of the Hudson's Bay Company forts. There is no end of material ready at hand for this timely undertaking, but it needs to be dug out, and digging is hard work.

Many are the uses of historical research, and significant will be the work of the artist who loads the rifts of his creations with the precious ore.

## VIII

### FIELDS FOR THE AMATEUR HISTORIAN

*We rose from Homer's halting flight  
To Cicero; we also rose  
To what the real people write  
To-day—we also rose in prose.*

—HILLAIRE BELLOC.

The amateur historian is frequently confused with that cheerful imbecile who synthesizes and vulgarizes the research of others. How often has the inspired research of Francis Parkman reappeared in the easy rhetoric of John Smith, Regular Member of the Canadian Authors' Association, Swayback Centre! The amateur historian is a *bona fide* historian, but whereas the specialist selects a single object for his devotion, the amateur is rather more fickle, having more loves and loving them none the less.

I sing the virtues of this anonymous hero. He has no ambition to break into print, and to rise in prose. Parish Registers unfold for him the humble annals of his folk. Local traditions, legends, ballads, even genealogies, are the stuff that feed his hunger. I have seen his harvested treasures, bulging scrap-books, notebooks, letters and diaries. I have watched him tunnel into old cupboards, burrow in musty attics, part the weeds in a country cemetery to copy an inscription or verify a date. The fame of this local Herodotus was not even local. Yet, out of his splendid hobby grew a collection of books, prints and papers which one day made the town museum justly notable.

This is no place to discourse on the amenities of book collecting—if indeed there can ever be a place where one may fittingly invite others to sin! However, there is no sin in this gentle lover of old things. Under his brooding solicitude the *genius loci* took form, some Sussex, some Bassetshire, or Tantramar. Writers for the papers, feature journalists, local colourists, even the lordly novelist, will sow his gold with a lavish hand. It matters not. In heaven the angels all know that John Smith put Hainsville on the map.

In the world of letters there is a quality, rare and indefinable, by which certain real places take on a new nature and acquire through books an added magic. In Bassetshire the imaginary is made real and Barchester cloisters, echoing Mr. Harding's footsteps, are more to us than most cathedral precincts...

There are yet other ways in which literature may be transfigured. To read an epitaph by Pope or Dr. Johnson on the grave for which it was written turns it from mere elegiac verse into the lament of friend for friend. So, too, a name long dear in literature may glorify the tomb of some forgotten ancestor. To read in Eastwick Church the epitaph of "John Plumer of Blaxware, Esqre., who died on the 27th Day of December, 1709, leaving five of his children living, viz. Walter, William, Richard, Ann and Katherine," is to realize that this son Walter was that sprightly bachelor-uncle who had visited much in Italy and was the reputed author of fine, facetious rattle-headed Plumer of the South Sea House. But for Charles Lamb, what were the Plumers even of the true descent save country squires? It was their housekeeper's grandchild who gave them immortality and glorified for ever that mansion which another Mrs. Plumer "had lately pulled down."

The spirit of man desires to go on pilgrimage. What that pilgrimage will be depends upon his nature and his training. To some the restoration of St. David's or St. Mary's, Walsingham, with their new fellowship of worship, may be all-important; to others, as the young American Louise Imogen Guiney felt, the yearly service at the Confessor's tomb in Westminster is a new baptism of the spirit; others, again, will find in Dr. Johnson's epitaph on Catherine Chambers, with whom he prayed upon her deathbed, and to whom parting with him was the greatest grief she ever felt, that which makes one little Lichfield church and one small tablet there more sacred than the great cathedral and all the sculpture it contains.

All those who think at all have their own Iona, their own Marathon; that man is little to be envied who does not find somewhere or in something a source of reverence and inspiration, a raising of the spirit to a power not himself that to him makes for righteousness. It may be Nature, as with Wordsworth; it may be the haunting memories of youth, as with Charles Lamb; it may be art or history or literature, or the shrines where men have worshipped. It is the highest gift of genius to create places of refreshment for the soul, to explore some unknown Delectable Mountains from which new visions of Eternity can be discerned.—["Genius Loci," *London Times Literary Supplement*. Dec. 25, 1930.]

## IX

### THE FIELD OF SCHOOL TEXTS

*And five times to the child I said:  
"Why, Edward, tell me, why?"*

One of the most neglected fields this is, as well as one of the most inviting. "The neglected fields of fact—history, biography, travel, industry, art and natural science—all need development; not a crude rehearsal of ill-selected facts, but skilful composition incorporating salient interest-provoking elements. There are a few such books to-day within the reading ability of primary children, but there need to be many more, to open doors into many fields and attract the developing intelligence to pursue paths which lead on to widening interests and worthier thoughts." (F. W. Dunn).

In a nation-wide experimentation, conducted by a publishing house in the United States, it was found that many of the old classics were of far less interest than educationists generally suppose. On the other hand it was proved, that boys and girls found greater pleasure in such moderns as Ernest Thompson-Seton, Albert Payson Terhune, Howard Pyle and others. In addition to this the fact was emphasized, that children are eager to know the hows and whats and whys in regard to every-day things.

There is a danger that, by overstressing this informational material, the standards of taste may suffer. However, the pressure is squeezing out such absurd things as "Boadicæa" to make way for Roberts' "They Who Seek Their Meat From God" and other reading materials, which are more interesting and better literature to boot. The tendency south of the line is to go too far, and lug in all sorts of commonplace factual readings. Someone will come along who can explain the technique of fighting a fire, riding in an elevator or fishing through a hole in the ice, and do so with a high degree of style. There is a great and immediate need for this sort of thing, new literary material, suitable for classes in English, and the social sciences generally. It should bear the earmarks of that literary excellence which characterized most of the old, but deal with contemporary life, and our near past. Books most desirable for children from nine to twelve years of age are one of the greatest problems of Canadian publishers. At present most of our story materials are presented in an utterly banal style. Take the stories of our pioneers, of the Loyalists, or the early days on the frontier, what could be more insipid and killing? The stories are not selected on a basis of intelligent interest to the children themselves. On the other hand, factual material is presented with the dull precision of an encyclopædia. Children like reality. They are quick to detect a hoax, either in the narrative or in the illustrations. They will not tolerate the writer who approaches them in a now-my-dear-children manner. Publishers will welcome books for this class of reader.

There is no course offered in this fine art, and only a very rough idea can be given as to the essentials. In the first place, the story must come within the range of the child's social and æsthetic experience. It must also be graded properly, both in style and vocabulary. Given so much, the writer for this public will endeavour to maintain the element of surprise; pay heed to the child's love of liveliness and animalness and good talk; construct his plot with as much care as if writing for an adult group; and never fail to preserve a sense of humour.

The subjects for those fitted to write children's books are many and varied. Fairy tales and fables, legends and folklore have been fairly well covered, and it will be hard to surpass the best that has been done. The same is even more true of light lyrics and narratives in verse upon these related topics. One field remains practically unoccupied. There is a golden opportunity for the poet who can turn the great characters and episodes of Canadian history into fine swinging ballads. We have a surfeit of lyrics upon hepatics, but not a single first-rate ballad to commemorate the past of our country.

Historical narrative, substantial information in regard to present-day life—the doctor, policeman, fireman and the rest—biographies, travel, community life at home and abroad, stories of science and invention, industry, trade and commerce, narratives stressing moods and characteristics—fun, courage, good sense, fair play, sympathy—these are a few of the needs. But let there be no moralizing, irrelevance, or silly conversation. Simpleness is not simplicity. And let there be musical meaning to your words, and fitting colour patterns, and a well-knit style. Even a boy of ten knows a sloppy style when he sees it, will detect the vagaries of your paragraphing and lay an accusing finger on your conceits.

## THE FIELD OF BONNE ENTENTE

*La pensée dominante de ma vie a  
été d'harmoniser les différents  
éléments dont se compose notre pays.  
La pensée est vraie et elle finira  
par triompher.*

—SIR WILFRID LAURIER.

The writer is spokesman and interpreter of his country, and as such has a national, as well as an international, duty to perform. In a more special sense he is the chosen ambassador of good understanding between all races and creeds within our boundaries. Tolstoy closed his essay on "Art" in these words: "The task for Christian art is to establish brotherly union among men." Bliss Carman's comment upon that was: "Has any one any better aim to propose for the art of the future?"

In 1877 William Kirby opened up a rich vein when he published his romance upon the French régime. The mine has been worked thoroughly in that particular manner. It is more essential that we now endeavour to understand the mind of Quebec. Too long have we prided ourselves upon our provincialism. It is not necessary that we melt into one another, lose every last token of individuality; but it is imperative that we know and respect each other's traditions and ideals.

The Quebec of the romancer is not the land of *les anciens Canadiens*. It bears little resemblance to the Province of Garneau's *Histoire*, of Fréchette's *La Légende d'un Peuple*, of Crémazie's epic verse, of De Gaspé's and Gérin-Lajoie's community novels. One would suspect that the story of Quebec was told in the tinkling of glasses, the ring of swords, and the witty talk and fervent love-making of seigneurs and soldiers of fortune. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The life of Quebec has changed little; still remain the ancient devotions—the altar, the hearth and the deathless loves of the race. That is true whether you tap the School of Quebec, or the newer groups of Montreal and Sherbrooke. The bottles are new, but the wine is old wine.

The same is true of other parts of the Dominion. It is not enough that we know the folk-lore, dances and idioms of our several elements. We must translate their masterpieces, read them in our homes and schools, and arrive at a finer sense of mutual sympathy and mutual responsibility.

The French-Canadian is ambidextrous. He knows English, can procure our works and read them for himself. The Anglo-Saxon is a slow-witted beast. He learns another language painfully. I suspect it is that, although the real agony may not be in the exertion, but rather in the supposed necessity that he should make a gesture to understand anybody. He has things to sell; let men speak to him in his bargaining tongue.

Well, here is an attractive field. There is a surprising number of men and women at work in it already, interpreting us to ourselves, delving into our histories, translating our ablest work. Perhaps our chief need is for a few competent poets who can snare the music and the fancy of the French poets in Canada, and give the English-speaking public, who do not read French, an inkling of what our compatriots are accomplishing. A goodly number of them have been crowned by the French Academy. How many of our poets are laureated in London?

This work is perhaps least conspicuous of all. The returns are small, very small, when measured in terms of monetary reward or public approval. But I can think of no finer literary service than this. Our national future depends upon it. The reward will be a nation of good companions.

"Thou hast inherited Sparta.  
Adorn her!"

## XI

### THE FIELD OF CHARACTER

"A hill can't be a valley, you know," said Alice. "That would be nonsense." The Red Queen shook her head. "You may call it 'nonsense' if you like," she said, "but I've heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary."

—LEWIS CARROLL.

Plato was the first writer in Europe to assume that man is a spiritual being, and that all valuations which matter are spiritual valuations. We fail to remember that spiritual preparation is necessary to discover that which can only be spiritually discerned. I do not see why we should be bashful about this, why one should not talk naturally about spiritual values. To me one of the delightful features about French-Canadian poetry, fiction and *belles lettres* is the easy, matter-of-fact way in which they introduce spiritual subjects.

Bliss Carman, speaking of Matthew Arnold, called him a "great friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit." One of Arnold's well-known dicta was, that poetry is "a criticism of life ... mainly on the side of morality." The prophet of sweetness and light did not have social uplift in mind when speaking of morality, or any cant about conventional ethics. He simply wished to stress the fact, that literary values are human values, and that the summit of literary expression is the presentation of things spiritual.

"Frankly," says H. W. Garrod, "frankly, I do not know what it is that we are all so frightened of. Moral ideas are not going to bite us, that, when we meet them here, or in some other poetry, we should bury our heads in the bedclothes, seeking safety in form and expression, until the ethical terror be overpast. I sometimes wonder whether what we are afraid of is not, in fact, poetry itself." (*Poetry and Life*.)

Longinus, "On the Sublime," defines sublimity as "an echo of magnificence of mind." Perhaps that is as near to an exact definition as we can come. Certainly it is based upon an exalted spiritual foundation which can always be easily recognized.

I have stressed at some length the two outstanding needs in our literature—the necessity for painstaking discipline in the matter of style, and the want of significant content. In so far as content is concerned the principal element is character, not simply individuality, but the individual. It has been observed that our history is rich in this. The very landscape reflects our national character. So, whether your gaze be outward or inward, you are bound to see, if you have eyes at all, those spiritual qualities which distinguish us as a people.

Pastoral simplicity is in retreat. The tempo of life has immeasurably quickened, while civilization has grown more and more complex. It is not enough that the poet should come out of his retreat and count for us the several freckles of the tulip. The nature lyric turned out in such unbelievable quantities is pale and anæmic and has no remote contact with life. The writers of our novels are too busy to glimpse the quests of humanity about them. Their work is thin, has little bottom, substance or reality, with a corresponding lack of finish, unity, aim and method. That is why we accept nudity for truth, confuse morbid realism with reality, mistake etiquette for good manners.

I think it was Coleridge who stressed the necessity for a deeper sensibility to character, to human life, and a profounder attention to it. He urged that we present our whole awareness to character. The serious artist idealizes character; the lesser craftsman exults in defects, fiddles sentimentally with exalted themes and twiddles suggestively with viscous things. The fault is that we have little spiritual sense. What Chateaubriand called "the exact science of character" requires the inclination, as well as the talent, for spiritual observation. George Santayana held the same view. "No one can be a great artist or a sound artist whose experience is not coloured, organized, purified and intensified by his awareness of the difference between good and evil."

Friar Salimbene in his chronicle sets forth fifteen reasons why a brother ought not to have spoken so improperly. The most plausible was, that the offender and his hearers were all Florentines together, and that no joke, however indecent, could shock a Florentine, "*cum sint homines solatio et maximi trufatores.*"

The definite, personal and direct impression of life, which Henry James conceived to constitute the value of a novel, "is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression." That is partly true. It is true to the extent that it will keep one in the middle of the highway of life, and prevent one from dropping into the ditch of eccentricity, sensationalism and baseness. But the heights of art are reached by the clarity of spiritual perception. Only in this way will brutality and vulgarity, if they must come within the limits of our vision and our art, be securely retained within the borders of true life.

The demand of young writers for the whole of life is silly. It was beyond Shakespeare. All Homer could attempt in the *Odyssey* was a presentation of what was relevant and representative, or as much of it as he could divine and set down in a number of self-contained situations. The artist is not concerned with all of life; he is concerned with character. Character, rightly understood and motivated, means noble expression, "an echo of magnificence of mind." Failure here results in Pater's "round hand," the expressionless, insipid style which no amount of correspondence school work can ever disguise. G. K. Chesterton, discussing the formlessness of the modern novel, compared it to a sack stuffed with anything the novelist happens to have about him. There is no substitute for character. It means nobility of style and exalted significance.

I spoke a moment ago of our reticence in regard to spiritual things. I think it accounts for our adolescent attitude toward life in general, and toward art in particular. "If character is subject matter," remarks Galsworthy, "moral attributes cannot be irrelevant." And yet it is still the custom for a certain type of reviewer to scoff at the use of the word "wholesome" in connection with a literary work. On more than one occasion I have heard the reviewer inquire flippantly as to the meaning of the word. I will tell him. A work is wholesome when the artist has the right tags on things, and when, whether he paints black or gold, there is the magnificence of a great spirit brooding over it and restraining it within the bounds of true life. A work is wholesome when its import is revealed, not in moral teaching, but in the significance of its approach to life. A work is wholesome when the author, like Marius, "willed to live with scrupulous thoroughness the artist's life." Exalted beauty, spiritual significance, good taste and noble utterance are wholesome qualities, and have nothing in common with that easy ecstasy which flutters the hearts of anæmic housemaids, or the facile amorousness designed to transport the tired business man. The best illustration that I can recall of what wholesomeness means is to be found in the *Iliad* (Book XVIII). Homer is describing the shield which Hephæstus, at the request of Thetis, made for Achilles: "And behind the plough the earth went black and looked like ploughed ground, though it was made of gold; that was the miracle of his craft."

And so I come back to character, and I say with Homer, let us have life, all of it that is art. It is not necessary to remind you of Lessing's *Laocoon*, his justification of the sculptor for not leaving the strangled father's mouth open in a shriek. You will recall his mention of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, and how he commended the artist's sympathetic strategy. The horror of the bystanders was shown, but not the despair of the father—it was too awful.

"Style is the man." Rather, style is the man when that man is artist. Beauty deals with externals; the sublime goes to the heights and depths of character, hinting at magnificence of spirit. I find that I have come back to Longinus. Then let me quote him once again.

"It was no mean or low-born creature which Nature chose when she brought man into the Universe, and ordained us to be spectators of the cosmic show and most eager competitors; from the first she poured into our souls a deathless longing for all that is great and diviner than ourselves."

Mankind is in quest of this Moated Grange. That is why Hardy's mercilessly bludgeoned heroes, and Dostoevsky's middle-class Russians, oppressed with a passion for the refining culture of suffering, move out of the isolation of the community of their birth and possess the world. In *Jude* the beaten artist everywhere goes down to defeat; in *Raskolnikov* the wanton rabble of the earth find the way to atonement. One day a character comes upon the artist which summons up all his wealth of experience, and he cries, as did Faust when he beheld Margaret:

"Ah, still delay, thou art so fair!"

She does delay. That is the magic of the artist. And there she stands! Faust's Margaret and our Margaret. Like the figures on Keat's Grecian urn she will abide, lovely for ever. The artist cries to the character of his ideal: "Ah, still delay, thou art so fair!" A disciplined hand, obedient to the swift spiritual insight of the artist sweeps the brush unerringly upon the canvas. Then we cry in our turn: "Ah, that is she! Life is like that!"

**Transcriber's note:**

The edition used as base for this book contained the following errors, which have been corrected:

*Chapter II (quotation at start):*

ELLEN GLASCOW

=> ELLEN GLASGOW

*Chapter VI:*

McKelvey's Huldowget

=> McKelvie's Huldowget

[It is possible that Pierce intended McKelvey, but we have used the standard spelling of the name of Bruce Alistair McKelvie (1889-1960), the author of the 1926 novel Huldowget: A Story of the North Pacific Coast]

*Chapter XI:*

Lessings' Laocoon

=> Lessing's Laocoon

[End of *Unexplored Fields of Canadian Literature*, by Lorne Pierce]