

HARSH AND LOVELY LAND

**THE MAJOR CANADIAN POETS & THE
MAKING OF A CANADIAN TRADITION**

TOM MARSHALL

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*The Major Canadian Poets
and the Making of a Canadian Tradition*

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Harsh and Lovely Land

for George Woodcock

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INTRODUCTION

Ralph Gustafson writes (in his Foreword to the revised edition of *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse*) that “the Canadian occupation is distinguished and distinguishable.” It is the purpose of the present book to examine the major Canadian poets and the making of a “distinguished and distinguishable” poetic tradition in English. (The development of Quebec poetry is, of course, a separate story, one I am not competent to discuss, though I can admire the works of Alain Grandbois, St.-Denys-Garneau, Anne Hébert, Gaston Miron and others.)

When I first began to teach Canadian literature in 1965, and to read widely within it, I was moved to write a brief (and very partial) history as one section of a longish poem called “Macdonald Park.” Macdonald’s park is, of course, Canada and the Canada that is to be. Reading the earlier and later writers I was fascinated by what seemed to be going on in their work and felt that I myself was a participant in the ongoing process of discovery and creation of self and country. It is in that spirit—as poet and critic and teacher and Canadian—that I write now. I cannot pretend to a very great intellectual or emotional detachment.

I am aware, of course of a general debt to such acutely intelligent critics as George Woodcock, Malcolm Ross, Northrop Frye, Margaret Atwood, and D.G. Jones. But I feel as well that I have my own slant on things, a perspective different from theirs, my own idea of what is “Canadian.” After a number of years of reading and teaching I have wanted to put this on record, since I believe that there is still much room in this field for a variety of approaches and insights.

It is dangerous, as we all know, to announce that this or that characteristic or tendency is *peculiarly* Canadian (though our popular journalists never stop doing it). And it may be that nothing is exclusively Canadian, that what happens repeatedly in Canada happens as well elsewhere for similar reasons. But I think our literature does demonstrate certain characteristics in certain patterns or conformations, and these latter may surely be said to be Canadian. The obsession with space, with enclosure and openness, that persists in our poetry is surely Canadian in the forms that it takes, even if it may exist as well in other literatures.

Again, the complexities and anomalies of the Canadian situation where a relatively small population is concentrated in disparate regions with an

immense territory are such that there exists in our most serious and characteristic creative literature a particular kind of irony that is not always very well understood elsewhere. A pervasive ambivalence characterizes the poem that is Canada. Herein lies our actual and potential strength (and our survival) as well as our past and present weakness. Beyond the undoubted obsession with survival are other overlapping concerns, or depths within depths: the complex search for harmony in continuing diversity, for communion and community among people and between land and people; and, related to this, our northern mysticism, a longing for unity with the world that leads to a greater and greater openness to and acceptance of the beautiful and terrifying universe in flux. This is the ultimately religious concern that informs the Canadian poetic idiom developed by writers like Al Purdy and Margaret Avison. I want, in the linked series of essays that follows, to discuss the evolving styles and structures of such poetry.

I believe that a work of art attempts to capture the universe (to “swallow” life, as Northrop Frye—in *The Educated Imagination*—has it), to be a microcosm or model. What the work of art conveys then is its own structure, its own design, which is an attempt to capture the design or larger rhythm of the universe as it “unfolds” in human consciousness. This is the meaning of artistic form now and in the past. In this sense, all art is religious. I know that many creative writers may disagree with me, but my belief is that whether or not they know it they are performing a religious function—the function of the shaman who attempts to control the weather—except that in the context of our modern technological society and of Western man’s intellectual history, it is wider understanding and greater emotional balance for author and reader alike that are the aims rather than more external forms of power.

This work is not, strictly speaking, a history of Canadian poetry. It is too selective, since only work of a certain quality, that is, formal self-realization, very fully reveals that poem-that-is-Canada that interests me, and I have little inclination to dwell on the earnest bumbblings and occasional successes of most of the nineteenth-century poets which may well be a useful task for social and literary historians. I have proceeded chronologically, because I believe that the development of certain Canadian formal and thematic continuities can best be observed in this way. But there is also reference backwards and forwards, since I perceive Canadian poetry as one evolving organism.

I write as a practising poet who can make, one hopes, intelligent comments on the work of other poets. The kind of critic I admire most is the man or woman who is engaged with the world and at the same time with the work of artists who are engaged with the world. Among Canadian critics one might single out George Woodcock, who seems, in his critical

books and in his biographies as well as in his many books on other than strictly literary subjects, to be a man engaged with the world and making sense of the world. The intellectual scheme, the search for an ultimate structure in Western literature at large, of a critical theorist such as Northrop Frye is impressive and is certainly intellectually stimulating, providing as it does a framework for Frye's brilliant insights of a more particular nature, but I think the artist is always aware that life is much more complex and open-ended—that anything that he says about it may well prove eventually to be, at best, an approximation of its totality, its marvellous variety, of the way in which it is always changing itself. The artist attempts to capture that flux, suspecting that his best work is still an approximation. I think the critic ought to feel that way too.

One convenient way of examining the development of Canadian poetry is to see it in terms of four stages. First there are the pioneers—those British North American Victorians whose task was somehow to adapt the forms and modes of their British and classical literary education to the experience and overwhelming physical reality of the new land. D.C. Scott is the Confederation poet who is able, in ways that I shall discuss, to carry this adaptation furthest both technically and symbolically; and it has long been evident to most observers that E.J. Pratt is the man who was best able to utilize the large gestures and narrative forms of the great Elizabethan and Romantic poets of the parent tradition in order to transform Canadian history and geography into national myth. This had its drawbacks and clumsinesses, however, imposing as it did past European metrical and linear norms on the discontinuous spaces of the wild future land to which their applicability was real but necessarily limited. Nevertheless, it seems the inevitable expression of a society moving very rapidly from heroic pioneering to sophisticated technology even as it moved psychically from Europe to America. Scott and Pratt, and before them, Lampman with his "City of the End of Things," are transitional poets. In the second stage the modernists of a younger generation that is now elderly offered as an alternative to the force and narrative drive of Pratt a new compression of thought and meaning, a metaphysical subtlety and sophistication, and a formal eclecticism that were inspired by the theory and practice of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and other poets (mostly American) of the 1920's. And though this movement, which rejected vociferously the lingering influence of the Confederation school, might be seen, at least in its weakest and most derivative products, to represent a somewhat updated colonialism, this does not characterize adequately its best results, the finer poems of F.R. Scott, A.J.M. Smith, Ralph Gustafson, John Glassco, Dorothy Livesay and others, which made possible the distinctive work of such "modernist" Canadian masters as A.M. Klein, P.K. Page, Earle Birney and Irving

Layton, who are able in their best and most mature work to combine the vitality and vigour of Pratt with the technical sophistication and meta-physical wit of Smith.

But eclecticism and versatility carry one only so far. There was still another stage of adaptation that would go beyond versatility to a further mastery: the assumption by the inheritors and assimilators of the first two stages of a distinctive Canadian free-verse idiom that is more nearly, instead of just approximately, appropriate to the new reality of stretching space and multiple perspective. This occurs most impressively in the poems of Al Purdy and Margaret Avison, though one may find it at times as well in the work of older and younger poets such as R.G. Everson, Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster, D.G. Jones, Phyllis Webb, and others. Here technique is what Dennis Lee once termed a "clean fit . . . which seems to be skin, not costume," that is, here one is less aware of technique or form as such than one is when reading the highly wrought and variously beautiful or effective works of our Canadian modernists. For Purdy and Avison poetry is process (as is life anywhere, though this insists upon itself much more in a vast, open land); process of language and consciousness and finished work are one thing. And this is a lesson that has been learned by the most notable poets of the generation after Purdy, for example, Margaret Atwood, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Michael Ondaatje, John Newlove, Dennis Lee himself, who constitute a fourth stage, the explosion of innumerable new talents in the heady 1960's. I find it significant that some of the most notable of these poets of my own generation, who are now in mid-career, creeping into middle age, have wanted to express their vision of life and of changing Canada in works of prose-fiction as well, so I have concentrated on this phenomenon since it is impossible to do anything like justice to *all* of the interesting poets who are writing and publishing now. The poet-novelists are seeking to extend themselves, to re-discover the largeness and scope of Pratt, who remains a somewhat ambiguous monument in their ancestral past, in new ways more appropriate to their own time. Leonard Cohen is perhaps the most notable new pioneer of this new departure.

My central concern has been the poem that is Canada and Canadians. A poet beginning today may assimilate all the past stages by which poetry has assimilated or "swallowed" life in Canada. ("Let me swallow it whole and be strong," writes John Newlove in "Resources, Certain Earths.") The Canadian land and the Canadian community as it is and as it might be; this is the distinctive context for a poetry concerned with the universal matter of life, love and death on the earth. The journey of the Canadian poet—with the important milestones and particular characteristics that are my concern in what follows—has been and is a continuing journey toward wholeness of comprehension and of being.

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PART ONE

Half-Breeds: The Pioneers

Dear Bad Poets

Tentative Approaches to the Canadian Space

James Reaney has written in passing of the “dear bad poets/who wrote/
Early in Canada/And never were of note” (“To the Avon River above
Stratford, Canada”). These were the Ur-poets, these McLachlans,
Camerons, Drummonds, Johnsons, and others, the necessary, competent
drudges who prepared the way for the more accomplished, more genuinely
native poets who followed. If they are of note, it is less for the quality of
their work than for their brave pioneering and their exemplification of the
colonial poet’s problems. Their failures and moderate successes were
instructive to their successors. There were, pre-eminently, the three Charleses:
Heavysege, Sangster, and Mair. There were Thomas Chandler Haliburton’s
associates Joseph Howe and Oliver Goldsmith. One might even, for fun,
throw in the four Jameses—Gay, McIntyre, Gillis, and MacRae—whose
efforts have earned them honourable place among the world’s “great bad
poets.” McIntyre, who penned the immortal “Ode on the Mammoth
Cheese,” is surely the Canadian McGonagall:

We have seen thee, queen of cheese
Lying quietly at your ease,
Gently fanned by evening breeze,
Thy fair form no flies dare seize.

All gaily dressed soon you’ll go
To the great Provincial show
To be admired by many a beau
In the city of Toronto

.

We’rt thou suspended from balloon,
You’d cast a shade even at noon,

Folks would think it was the moon
About to fall and crush them soon.

This is certainly Canadian content and much funnier than the more recent, pleasingly bad poems in Paul Hiebert's *Sarah Binks*. Perhaps the combination of "thee" and "your," "thou" and "you'd" even represents a genuinely Canadian compromise between archaic and colloquial diction.

Sangster, whom the nineteenth-century versifier Susanna Moodie dubbed "the Canadian Wordsworth," wrote of the thousand islands and the Saguenay in Spenserian stanzas employing diction that echoes Wordsworth and Keats at once:

Over the darkening waters! on through scenes
Whose unimaginable wildness fills
The mind with joy insensate, and weans
The soul from earth, to Him whose Presence thrills
All Beauty as all Truth.

"The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay"

Goldsmith wrote of a rising Canadian village in the manner of his great-uncle's "Deserted Village." Charles Heavysege wrote pseudo-Shakespearean closet-dramas on biblical subjects, making no direct or obvious references to Canada. Like the young A.M. Klein later on, he found it more congenial to express himself in terms of the "timeless" old-world culture. In a long life involving Ontario imperialism, horsewhipping, the first Riel rebellion, and theatrical drama, Charles Mair occasionally described minute Canadian particulars with some of the sharp focus later found in Roberts and Lampman:

Now one may mark the spider trim his web
From bough to bough, and sorrow at the fate
Of many a sapless fly quite picked and bare,
Still hanging lifeless in the silken mesh,
Or muse upon the maze of insect brede
Which finds a home and feeds upon the leaves
Till naught but fibre-skeletons are hung
From branch to branch up to the highest twig.

"August"

Most of these examples suggest some incongruity between Canadian subject-matter and the English Romantic-Victorian poetic idiom. But why

should these poets write in a fashion different from their British contemporaries? They *were* Victorians and certainly felt themselves to be as British as any other of Her Majesty's subjects. They had no notions of attending to an "American language."

Why then did they fail to write good British poetry about Canada? Is it simply that they were mediocre poets? In a way, yes. They could only work with the literary education and models that they had, and they failed to see that these were not always particularly appropriate to the Canadian reality that they were attempting to articulate. John Matthews, whose ideas about these poets and their cultural dilemma are very helpful, has observed that the successes of the later Confederation poets have much to do with their ability to apply the Romantic-Victorian idiom selectively to the Canadian environment. Matthews' account of Lampman's "Morning on the Lièvre" in *Tradition in Exile* shows this selective adaptation at work.

It is Wordsworth's power of precise description rather than his passages of lofty sentiment that prove most useful to Roberts and Lampman. The lofty sentiments belonged to a tamer, more settled, more manageable country. The eeriness of Canadian space, the apparent emptiness, the silence required another expression, one the Canadian poets could not yet utter. Meanwhile, what they could do was to describe the particular things that inhabited the vastness in such a way that the space around these things could be felt too. There were perhaps largely unconscious native tendencies towards imagism and, in Duncan Campbell Scott, towards free verse as well. In this way it became possible, and necessary, to move formally towards a North American language, one that would be, in Al Purdy's hands, for example, significantly different from the kindred "American language" fathered by Walt Whitman. Canadian poetry had to find its own way out of the English confinement of those hedge-rows, rhyme and metre.

Sangster felt the emptiness but did not sharply delineate the particulars in a way that might reveal the strange spaces around each particular thing. Mair sometimes looked hard at particulars, as the above quotation shows, forgetting about the vast context. Charles G.D. Roberts provided in his best poems, such as "The Tantramar Revisited," a kind of synthesis, one that Lampman and D.C. Scott, in poems in which individual things are perceived as separate and distinct but also as parts of the vast cosmos, developed further. There is then further development of description, cosmic consciousness and narrative from Scott to Pratt, Pratt to Birney, Birney to Purdy, and Purdy to younger poets. This is one stream that leads us to contemporary Canadian poetry, though not the only one.

There was also the possibility of presenting the external environment as it lives in the mind, in the dream-life of the poet. This is a way of at least temporarily minimizing the strangeness, of psychologically containing the