
CANADIAN WRITERS AND THEIR WORKS

POETRY SERIES • VOLUME THREE

 EDITED BY 

ROBERT LECKER, JACK DAVID, ELLEN QUIGLEY

INTRODUCED BY GEORGE WOODCOCK

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Z 711.072
LR:3



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ECW PRESS, 1987

CANADIAN CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Main entry under title:

Canadian writers and their works : essays on form,
context, and development : poetry

Includes bibliographies and indexes.

ISBN 0-920802-43-5 (set).—ISBN 0-920763-19-7 (v.3).

I. Canadian poetry (English)—History and
criticism. *2. Poets, Canadian (English)—
Biography. *1. Lecker, Robert, 1951– II. David,
Jack, 1946– III. Quigley, Ellen, 1955–

PS8I4I.C37 1983 C8II'.009 C82-094802-0
PR9I90.25.C37 1983

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The publication of this series has been assisted by grants from
the Ontario Arts Council and The Canada Council.

This volume was typeset in Sabon by Compositor Associates
(Toronto), designed by The Porcupine's Quill (Erin), and printed
by Hignell Printing (Winnipeg).

Published by ECW PRESS, 307 Coxwell Avenue,
Toronto, Ontario M4L 3B5.

The illustrations are by Isaac Bickerstaff.

PREFACE

Canadian Writers and Their Works (CWTW) is a unique, twenty-volume collection of critical essays covering the development of Canadian fiction and poetry over the last two centuries. Ten volumes are devoted to fiction, and ten to poetry. Each volume contains a unifying Introduction by George Woodcock and four or five discrete critical essays on specific writers. Moreover, each critical essay includes a brief biography of the author, a discussion of the tradition and milieu influencing his/her work, a critical overview section which reviews published criticism on the author, a long section analyzing the author's works, and a selected bibliography listing primary and secondary material. The essays in each volume are arranged alphabetically according to the last names of the writers under study.

This is Volume Three in the Poetry Series of *Canadian Writers and Their Works*. Other volumes in the series will be published as research is completed. The projected completion date for the entire series is 1987.

The editors wish to acknowledge the contributions of many people who have played an important part in creating this series. First, we wish to thank the critics who prepared the essays for this volume: Peter Buitenhuis, Paul Denham, Joy Kuropatwa, Don Precosky, and George Woodcock. We are also indebted to the production and design teams at both The Porcupine's Quill and Compositor Associates, and to Patricia Kenny, who keyboarded the manuscript in its initial typesetting phase. Our sincere thanks also go to Ken Lewis, and his assistant Ross MacKay, for their excellent technical editing.

RL / JD / EQ

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Introduction

GEORGE WOODCOCK

A PRELUDE? A transformation? Whatever we may choose to call it, the decade of the 1920s has a peculiar significance in Canadian poetry. Until then, Canadian poets still remained under the influence of the neo-Romanticism that was represented by turn-of-the-century writers like Charles G. D. Roberts and Archibald Lampman, Bliss Carman and Duncan Campbell Scott; there was not even a movement of poets looking on war with a realistic eye as there had been in Britain. But after the 1920s, the issues had become so clear that writers either retreated into the archaist refuge of the Canadian Authors Association or followed one of the various paths towards modernism that offered themselves from the early 1930s onwards.

The 1920s was the decade when genuine poets, whether they were temperamentally conservative like E. J. Pratt, or temperamentally revolutionary like Dorothy Livesay, began to recognize that a new way of expression had to be found, related to contemporary realities, if a poetry true to Canadian experience were to emerge. It was not enough to turn aside from the traditional settings of classic poetry and give recognition to the special character of the Canadian environment, as Roberts and Scott and Lampman had done, if one continued to use the imagery and the diction of another time and place. A language related to the experience of Canadians living in the twentieth century and aware of their difference from Europeans and from other North Americans had to be found, and the 1920s was the decade in which poets embarked on that quest.

What unites all the poets who are discussed in this volume, apart from their search for a true Canadian voice, is indeed the fact that they first became effectively active during the 1920s. The poetic careers of both Raymond Knister and W. W. E. Ross were almost wholly contained within this decade, for Knister died of drowning in the summer of 1932, and Ross, though he lived on until 1966, fell virtually silent at about the same time. E. J. Pratt, born in 1882 and in early manhood sidetracked into theology, was a late bloomer

in poetic terms, and his first actual collection of poems, *Newfoundland Verse*, did not appear until 1923. Dorothy Livesay, born in 1909, was twenty-seven years younger, but her first volume, *Green Pitcher*, appeared in 1928 — only five years after Pratt's.

There were, of course, other poets writing at the time who contributed notably to the movement of transformation, particularly A. J. M. Smith, F. R. Scott, and their associates on *The McGill Fortnightly Review*, including Leo Kennedy. However, though the literary history of the 1920s in Canada would be incomplete without an acknowledgement of Smith and Scott and Kennedy and the fertile Montreal milieu in general, these writers have their place elsewhere in this series, while the four writers here discussed do represent widely differing aspects of the period and demonstrate the variety of ways in which writers at the time approached the need to find a poetry that would, as Ross once put it, "... contain / something of / . . . the sharper tang of Canada."¹

Dorothy Livesay once said, in a discussion of Raymond Souster which Paul Denham quotes: "Since poets no longer die young, the challenge is unmistakable: they must either stop writing, or be reborn, again and again!"² And her remarks apply admirably to the group of poets we have under discussion. Knister did fulfil what was once thought to be the Romantic poet's proper destiny, by dying young. Ross did stop writing, because the one original and fruitful vein he discovered, that of his neo-Imagist lyrics, gave out and he never found another way of expressing himself convincingly in verse; the last half of his life was lived out mostly in poetic silence. Livesay, like some of her more remarkable contemporaries, such as Earle Birney and P. K. Page, was indeed reborn poetically again and again, and has continued into her old age to write poetry that is fresh and original and constantly different. Pratt, whose last important work, *Towards the Last Spike*, appeared when he was seventy, carried out during his lifetime a kind of one-man revolution in narrative poetry, sustaining and renewing himself as much by the strength of his historical vision as by his search, under the veil of an apparent conservatism, for a language appropriate for describing the experiences of twentieth-century men.

E. J. Pratt's enduring reputation, which has been sustained by all the recent generations of Canadian writers, tends to puzzle English and American critics who concern themselves with Canadian writing, though I suspect Australians and New Zealanders are more

understanding. For Pratt, rather like Frederick Philip Grove in prose, was a writer large in stature but also large in faults. He was not merely conservative but positively reactionary in his personal choice of style and form. He wrote as if T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound had never lived, or indeed anyone later than Thomas Hardy, and he took his narrative models over a wide range of the past, from seventeenth-century Samuel Butler — author of *Hudibras* — whose octosyllabic metre and burlesque manner he often used, down to Tennyson in the nineteenth century. He was unremittingly didactic, and he retained a late-Victorian obsession with evolutionary doctrine and its philosophic consequences that marked him as a resolute premodern. There were times when his narrative verse clotted in the tedium of banal cataloguing, and other times when it slipped from the vigorous into the bombastic. More than any other of the poets discussed in this volume, and indeed more than any other Canadian poet of stature since World War I, he remained throughout his career an uncompromising traditionalist. He had no part in the self-conscious movements of the 1920s and 1930s that aimed at reorienting Canadian poetry in a modernist direction. As Northrop Frye remarked in his Introduction to Pratt's *Collected Poems* (1958): "He has never followed or started any particular 'trend' in poetry, never learned or imposed any particular mannerisms of expression."³

Yet, standing as it were above the conflict that ranged the modernists of various kinds against those who in the 1920s and 1930s still wanted Lampman's and Carman's neo-Romantic lyrics to remain the models for good poetry writing in Canada, Pratt remained important in his time and still does so in retrospect. His importance has been recognized by poets whose own work owes him nothing and is clearly unlike it in character. From Scott and Smith, who invited him into *New Provinces* in 1936, down to Margaret Atwood, who included a sizeable chunk of Pratt in *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* in 1982, writers who stood in the vanguard of poetic development during their own decades have recognized him as an irremovable figure in the history of Canadian poetry.

Northrop Frye has offered an ingenious explanation for Pratt's reputation by presenting him as essentially original rather than derivative, a poet who stood out by sheer uncompromising individuality: "When everybody was writing subtle and complex lyrics, Pratt developed a technique of straightforward narrative; when everybody was experimenting with free verse, Pratt was finding

new possibilities in blank verse and octosyllabic couplets. He had the typical mark of originality: the power to make something poetic out of what everybody had just decided could no longer be poetic material."⁴

And indeed there do exist writers in every age and place who neither oppose the streams of their time nor drift with them, but are strong and substantial enough to stand on their own ground and let the currents flow around their feet while they perform their own particular magics. Pratt was obviously such a writer, and one of the signs of his inner security was the fact that he kept up an interest in the new things younger writers were doing, and was always ready to encourage them. During his six years as editor of the *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, from 1936 to 1942, he made use of that somewhat conservative journal to encourage new and often experimental poets, including Dorothy Livesay, whose "Day and Night" he published in his first issue and described as "a splendid bit of work."⁵

Pratt's praise of this particular poem by Livesay, which is greatly concerned with the relationship between men and the machines they operate, is not really accidental for her subject coincided with one direction of his interests, in which he can perhaps be regarded as genuinely innovative. In *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, Susan Gingell makes the point that though Pratt's choice of forms and metrics was conservative, "... his diction was experimental, reflecting in its specificity and its frequent technicality both his belief in the poetic power of the accurate and concrete that led him into assiduous research processes, and his view that it is the poet's task to bridge the gap between the two branches of human pursuit: the scientific and the artistic."⁶ And, if Pratt had little in common with the early modernists like Eliot and Pound, he shared more than has in the past been acknowledged with the young English poets of the 1930s like W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and C. Day-Lewis, who not only returned, after a period when free verse was dominant, to a re-exploration of the possibilities of conventional verse forms, but also, like Pratt, wrote about machines and made uninhibited use of technical words and phrases with which they assumed a modern readership would be familiar. Pratt was certainly interested in these poets, as I know from first hand, since in 1950, when I published a paper on the English poets of the 1930s, I received out of the blue a letter from him, welcoming my essay and discussing the points I had made.⁷

But clearly the respect in which Pratt continues to be held more than thirty years after he published his last important work stems from something more than his willingness to use the images and the diction of modern technology, something more even than his demonstration that the long poem, an early Canadian form, was still viable, a demonstration which helped to encourage from the 1960s onward the widespread writing by younger Canadian poets of lengthy interconnected works, not all of which were as narrative in character as Pratt's had been.

I suggest that the really important aspects of Pratt's achievement have in fact been the exemplary and the inspirational. Like Robertson Davies in a different genre, and George Orwell in a different culture, he had shown that a writer can stand within his own vision and communicate it as he chooses, without bowing to any aesthetic or political imperative, so long as he has strength of purpose and vigour of mind and language. And, on the inspirational level, he has shown that the reality of Canada, however political its beginnings may have been, has acquired social and cultural dimensions that can become the matter of poetry. In this way he has strengthened his successors in their resolve to defend a distinctive Canadian literary tradition, which is necessarily bound up in an awareness — projected by Pratt himself in poems like *Brébeuf* and *His Brethren* and *Towards the Last Spike* — of the difficulty with which a civilized society establishes itself within a wilderness. Later writers, it is true, see the process of making terms with the wilderness as less a conflict and more a process of harmonization than Pratt did in *Towards the Last Spike*, while it is hard to think of any writers of the 1980s presenting the Indians — as he did in *Brébeuf* — as demonic personifications of the evil forces in nature. But in these matters Pratt was a man of his time, and few of his contemporaries — F. R. Scott was a rare example among them — saw fit to challenge assumptions we might regard as uncomfortably near to racist if we encountered them in poems written now, when we look so differently on the historical impact between native peoples and white intruders.

W. W. E. Ross was in many ways the polar opposite of Pratt, and in this sense the two of them showed the great range of poetic attitudes that were appearing during the 1920s. Pratt excelled in long poems that bore portentous messages (though his short poems are worthier of attention than has often been assumed), while Ross

excelled as a miniaturist in clear, concise poems in which the image was the message. Pratt's importance was early recognized, and he has been a major figure in Canadian poetry for the past fifty years and more, whereas Ross, though a few of his poems have found an enduring place in anthologies, was not widely recognized in his lifetime and was not published by a commercial press until after his death.

This happened in the late 1960s, when his reputation began to spread among the younger poets of the time, and Raymond Souster and John Robert Colombo collected his relatively small body of work into *Shapes and Sounds* (1968). It was a slight volume for a life's work, and it shows how, unlike Pratt, who kept working prolifically until his late sixties, Ross found his inspiration drying up around 1930, turned unsuccessfully to the very traditional forms (sonnets and rhymed quatrains) in which Pratt worked with ease, and during the last three decades of his life wrote only three or four poems resembling in quality those of his youth.

But the most important difference between the two poets was that Pratt remained a traditionalist while Ross represented in its most uncompromizing form the avant-garde of his time; Barry Callaghan has gone so far as to call him "the first modern poet in Canada" ("Memoir," in *SS*, p. 3). What this has meant in terms of influence it is hard to say, but I would hazard that while younger poets have admired Pratt and have been encouraged by his example to move into larger forms than the brief lyric, which was the dominant form from the 1890s to the 1960s, it is from Ross that they have learned most in terms of close perception and clear, direct statement.

For Ross was Canada's only thoroughgoing Imagist. Other poets of the 1920s, like Livesay and Knister, as well as A. J. M. Smith and F. R. Scott, came under the influence of Imagism and took from it what they needed, but they diluted it with other strains in their poetry: the polemical in Scott and Livesay, and the inclination to literary parody and palimpsest in Smith. But Ross, in his best poems, followed his beliefs that, as Don Prekosky remarks in his essay, "Imagism was the right form and that Canadian nature was the right content." In doing so, of course, he was fulfilling the legendary insight of the founder of Imagism, T. E. Hulme, who in 1906, crossing Canada, had the sudden thought that to capture the vast raw landscape of the prairie one would need a new kind of poetry, with a language that was clear and with images that would

convey immediately — without the mediation of poetic devices or diction — the nature of the land.

Ross actually did what Hulme talked about. An intense feeling for the Canadian land as a concrete entity, and for its “sharper tang,” combined in him with the inspiration of his first encounter with Imagist theory and practice to produce poems that not only are as fine examples of Imagism in practice as any of the more famous poets in the movement produced, but also are among the most expressive and compelling nature poetry ever written in Canada.

He began to move into his Imagist phase about the mid-1920s. Before that he had written some quite conventional poems, rather in the manner of Edward Thomas, hovering between the traditional and the new, in which a clear perception was often expressed in somewhat romantically vague words and concepts:

The lake is mirror-like tonight.

The trees on the bank

Dark, beautiful,

Look down at their reflections.

(“Night Scene,” in *SS*, p. 17)

At times there was even a touch of the polemical:

This is a

race of the

west and we

hate the old

graveyards of

Europe.

(“Pacific,” in *SS*, p. 32)

Within a couple of years, in a poem like “Sphere,” he had moved on to the point of insight where he could create a poem that gave complex and sufficient expression to a single dominant image:

A sphere. Hold it
in the eye.

The polished glass
surface attracts,
drawing the eye

into its centre
as it draws all
the light surrounding.

The sphere gathers
the light surrounding
into its polished
smooth surface.
Set the sphere
in the light of the sun —
it will give you
back the sun.

(SS, p. 53)

Ross, at the height of his Imagist period, compromised with traditional regular verse patterns by evolving a favourite form of three narrow eight-line unrhymed stanzas, which gave him a perfect vehicle for exploring the visual aspects of a scene and presenting his observation as a well-turned poetic artefact. One of the best is "Rocky Bay," which shows all the virtues of the form and particularly its combination of conciseness and complexity:

The iron rocks
slope sharply down
into the gleaming
of northern water,
and there is a shining
to northern water
reflecting the sky
on a keen cool morning.

A little bay, —
and there the water
reflects the trees
upside down,
and the coloured rock,
inverted also
in the little
shining bay.

Above, on the rock,
stand trees, hardy,

gripping the rock
 tenaciously.
 The water repeats them
 upside down,
 repeats the coloured
 rock inverted.

(SS, p. 78)

The poem proceeds with a natural ease from one element to another of the scene — rocks, water, those “tenacious” trees that will appear often again in Canadian poems — until the whole is contained within the reflections through which the elements of the scene echo each other within the closed sphere of the poem, the visual reflections emphasized by the verbal repetitions.

Souster and Colombo were right to call their collection of Ross's poems *Shapes and Sounds*, for — parallel to the intensity of his visual perceptions — Ross was highly sensitive to the aural aspects of poetry, and this emerges not only in his echoing repetition of key phrases, but also in the subtly onomatopoeic quality of poems like “Falling Water” and “If Birds Are Silent,” in which the flowing of springs and the song of birds are suggested by the poems' sound patterns. But Ross would hardly have been so important as a nature poet if he had been content with the sharp, clear presentations of wilderness scenes; he was conscious to the point of empathy of the creatures who inhabited such scenes, and among the few of his later poems that seem to equal in quality those he wrote in the 1920s were pieces about wild creatures, like “The Snake Trying” and “Loon” in 1939 and the fine trio of poems which he wrote between 1939 and 1947 and which his editors bring together under the title of “Great Blue Heron.”

If Ross has his place as, arguably, Canada's best nature poet as well as its most consistent Imagist, Raymond Knister must certainly count as our most authentic pastoral poet. There have been other poets who wrote about various aspects of the agrarian life — Charles G. D. Roberts and Archibald Lampman especially — but they observed it from the outside, as Hardy had done when he wrote his poem beginning, “Only a man harrowing clods.” James Reaney, in his turn, exploited the pastoral convention in *A Suit of Nettles*, his parody on Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender*, in which Knister actually makes an appearance under the guise of Raymond the

goose, a tribute, even if a backhanded one, since Reaney has been one of Knister's most consistent admirers and advocates. But Reaney the academic was as far removed from real pastoral life as Spenser the courtier or, for that matter, as Marie Antoinette and her lords and ladies playing at being shepherds and shepherdesses in the gardens of the Trianon at Versailles. Knister was a real countryman, as close to the earth and dung as John Clare, and when he wrote,

Turn under, plow,
My trouble;
Turn under griefs
And stubble⁸

he was writing as a real ploughman, just as his fine poems about horses were inspired by his actual relations with these animals, whom he tended and loved.

In a different way from Pratt, Knister was a poet hard to place within the Canadian context because he did not fit into any of the rather rudimentary groupings that existed in the 1920s and the early 1930s. He himself talked of Canada as a place where "we have room for all schools, space to be free of all schools."⁹ He moved within the modernist circles of the time, was friendly with Dorothy Livesay and Leo Kennedy, and published in some of the more avant-garde foreign magazines of the time, like *Poetry* [Chicago], *This Quarter* [Paris], and *The Midland* [Iowa City]; at the end of the 1920s there were not many Canadian magazines that gave space to the newer types of poetry.

Knister was an ambitious writer who died while his powers were still maturing; there was so much energy evident in him at the time of his death that the suggestion he committed suicide can be safely dismissed; there are no signs of inner conflicts like those that led Shelley to play so perilously with water. Clearly his ambitions went unfulfilled. A great deal of the considerable mass of writing he did complete is unpublished and therefore unknown to the reading public. But from what we do have in print, it would seem that something more tentative might be appropriate than Joy Kuropatwa's bold claim in her essay: "The totality of Knister's work, too much of which remains unpublished or unreprinted, and the Knister papers and letters suggest that Knister has been overlooked as a major Canadian writer — if not the major Canadian writer — of the 1920s."

Major and minor, of course, are relative terms, and our judgments of majority are likely to be subjective except in the cases of writers whose power is so obviously overwhelming that it cannot be denied: the Tolstoyes and Stendhals and their like. This was certainly not the case with Knister. He was a writer of evident potentiality; if he had lived, he might have developed in many ways. But on the strength of the work he actually completed, one cannot claim him as one of the more important Canadian writers.

Of his two novels that were published, *White Narcissus* is an engaging liaison between romance and realism, but no masterpiece, while *My Star Predominant*, his novel about John Keats (another poet who died young), is a clumsily architected monument to careful research. Knister wrote some shrewd, but not profound, criticism and some very good short stories, but so far as his actual achievement — as distinct from his ambitions — is concerned, his reputation is likely to stand or fall on his poetry, which in any case is the province of this volume.

Here Knister succeeds, as his own statements might lead one to expect, through virtues that are not necessarily connected with modernism. Like many of his contemporaries, he learned from the Imagists without accepting their precepts as the only guide to the kind of poetry he sought, a poetry of simple diction and of clear observation in which, at its best, feeling and form are admirably fused. Claims for Knister's experimental daring are, it seems to me, misplaced. Experiment for its own sake was far from his intent, though he was perpetually involved in that most basic of all experiments, finding the true word for the experience.

But there are many ways of finding that true word, and Knister tended to follow one that was tangential to the main highway of modernism. Reading his poetry, one realizes that in its own way it is as innocent as Pratt's of the influence of the great mainstream modernist masters like Eliot and Pound. But there are affinities with more idiosyncratic figures like D. H. Lawrence and Gerard Manley Hopkins and — though they still kept to traditional verse patterns while he adopted free forms — with writers like Edward Thomas and Robert Frost, whose rebellion against tradition was expressed in diction, rather than in metrical form, in the exactness of the words and the concreteness of the image. These affinities, I suggest, are shown in a Knister poem like "The Hawk":

Across the bristled and fallow fields,
The speckled stubble of cut clover,
Wades your shadow.

Or against a grimy and tattered
Sky
You plunge.

Or you shear a swath
From trembling tiny forests
With the steel of your wings —

Or make a row of waves
By the heat of your flight
Along the soundless horizon.¹⁰

Yet it is still the tantalizing edge of promise, rather than the sum of his achievement, that fascinates us in Knister. What if he had survived, in Livesay's phrase, to "be re-born, again and again"?

Dorothy Livesay did survive, to be reborn, again and again, and in doing so she has produced a body of work that I still think justifies the claim I made in 1979, that she is "the best poet writing in Canada today."¹¹ Livesay's is an extraordinary career, spanning the whole period of the Canadian poetic renaissance, from the decade of the 1920s, which we are now discussing, down to the 1980s; she published a new volume of poetry as recently as 1984, well into her own eighth decade, and there are no immediate signs that her enviably enduring ability to write good verse has been extinguished.

How far Livesay may have been influenced by Ross, how far she was even aware of that retiring and little-recognized man during the 1920s, when she began to write poetry, is uncertain. The influence of Imagism on her first two volumes of verse, *Green Pitcher* and *Signpost*, is evident, but it could have come from her reading of Pound and H.D., rather than of Ross, just as her later and more polemical poetry was influenced more by British writers like Auden and Spender than by such Canadian contemporaries as F. R. Scott and later, Earle Birney, who were also seeking means of writing poems that would be socially critical without descending into mere propaganda verse.

From her own accounts, the Canadian poet towards whom