

Report of the Annual Meeting Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

Colonialism and Nationalism in Canadian Poetry before Confederation

A. J. M. Smith

Volume 23, numéro 1, 1944

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300260ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300260ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Smith, A. J. M. (1944). Colonialism and Nationalism in Canadian Poetry before Confederation. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 23(1), 74–85. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300260ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1944

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

éru
dit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

COLONIALISM AND NATIONALISM IN CANADIAN POETRY BEFORE CONFEDERATION

By A. J. M. SMITH
Michigan State College

I

"A national literature," wrote the Reverend Edward Hartley Dewart in 1864, in the Introduction to his *Selections from Canadian Poets*, "is an essential element in the formation of national character. It is not merely the record of a country's mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity, and the guide of national energy."¹ An ardent advocate of Confederation, the critic doubted whether a people could be "firmly united politically, without the subtle but powerful cement of a patriotic literature."² Such a literature, he felt, and particularly a poetic literature, would be a counterpoise to the sectionalism which was the political weakness of Canada. Dewart did not deny that such a literature was then only in its infancy and that it had many obstacles to overcome. Among these was a general absence of interest and faith in all indigenous literature that led him to the melancholy conclusion that "there is probably no country in the world, making equal pretensions to intelligence and progress, where the claims of native literature are so little felt, and where every effort in poetry has been met with so much coldness and indifference, as in Canada."³

The anthologist brought forward a number of reasons to account for this state of affairs. First was the obvious one that in Canada then, few people possessed wealth or leisure, while the large majority were engaged in the hard task of subduing the wilderness. But the most interesting of Dr. Dewart's reasons was the stifling effect of the colonial habit of mind.

Our colonial position, whatever may be its political advantages, is not favorable to the growth of an indigenous literature. Not only are our mental wants supplied by the brain of the Mother Country, under circumstances that utterly preclude competition; but the majority of persons of taste and education in Canada are emigrants from the Old Country, whose tenderest affections cling around the land they have left. The memory of the associations of youth, and of the honored names that have won distinction in every department of human activity, throws a charm around everything that comes from their native land, to which the productions of our young and unromantic country can put forth no claim.⁴

Here then at the beginning of Canadian literary criticism the issue is clearly stated. The value of independence is asserted, and the dangers of an imitative colonialism boldly faced.

Colonialism is a spirit that gratefully accepts a place of subordination, that looks elsewhere for its standards of excellence and is content to imitate with a modest and timid conservatism the products of a parent tradition. If we examine the poetry of the pioneer and emigrant in the days when the

¹*Selections from Canadian Poets; with Occasional Critical and Biographical Notes and an Introductory Essay on Canadian Poetry* (Montreal, 1864), ix.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*, x.

⁴*Ibid.*, xiv.

Canadian provinces were struggling for constitutional self-government, we shall find, I believe, that such colonialism reveals itself most surely in the abstract and conventional patriotic poetry, the ostensible subject of which might be devotion to the Empire—or even to Canada!—while true nationalism rises out of the local realism of the pioneer. Indeed, poetry that was colonial in its conventionality and correctness makes up the bulk of the verse in Dewart's anthology that was consecrated to the description of "Canadian" scenery and the expression of nationalist sentiment. This sort of poetry, certainly, comprises most of the verse on "Canadian" themes written by such poets as Mrs. Moodie, who belonged to the class of "persons of respectable connections" to whom, as she says, emigration was "an act of severe duty, performed at the expense of personal enjoyment." Such, too, was the poetry of the Maritimes, where a Tory gentry was anxious to create a little local autonomy that was colonial in its fervent imitation of England. *The Rising Village* of Goldsmith and the *Acadia* of Joseph Howe were also an expression of colonialism, though there are touches of realism in these poems and a sympathetic fidelity to nature; but the form, style, and technique, and the sensibility expressed are reflections of eighteenth-century England.

II

One of the most damaging of the results of pure colonialism is the feeling of inferiority and doubt it engenders and the remoteness it encourages. The colonial attitude of mind, as Professor E. K. Brown has well said, "sets the great good place not in its present, nor in its past nor in its future, but somewhere outside its own borders, somewhere beyond its possibilities."⁵ Thus a direct result of colonialism may be a turning away from the despised local present not towards the mother country but towards an exotic idealized crystallization of impossible hopes and "noble" dreams. The romantic spirit, indeed, is encouraged by a colonial sense of inferiority. This is illustrated by the preface to a book of poems by a New Brunswick author, Peter John Allan, which was published in London in 1853. The verse showed strong influences of Byron, Moore, and Shelley. "My lot," wrote the poet, "having been cast on the wrong side of the Atlantic in a colony where the Muse cannot find a resting place for the sole of her foot—in its very little capital, whose politics would be a mere private scandal to a European ear, and where society is strangely limited—can it be a matter of surprise that I should have sought for relaxation from more severe studies in the amiable foible of verse making?"⁶

To consider the realities of the life around him as too modest or too coarse for the attention of poetry is a temptation that faces the poet in a colony, particularly if he thinks of himself as an inheritor of the elaborate tradition of the poetry of the Motherland, and he makes poetry an escape from reality.

Mrs. Catherine Parr Traill, whose *Backwoods of Canada* (London, 1836) anticipated by some sixteen years her sister Mrs. Moodie's classic *Roughing It in the Bush*, agreed that Canada was not romantic enough to provide rich material for poetry, and she quotes with approval the "lamen-

⁵*On Canadian Poetry* (Toronto, 1943), 14.

⁶*The Poetical Remains of Peter John Allan, Esq., late of Fredericton, New Brunswick* Edited by the Rev. Henry Christmas (London, 1853), Preface by the Author, xx.

tation of a poet." "It is the most unpoetical of all lands," this person said; "there is no scope for imagination; here all is new—the very soil seems newly formed; there is no hoary ancient grandeur in these woods; no recollections of former deeds connected with the country."⁷

This is an example of pure colonialism, before the slightest feeling of veneration for the new land had a chance to arise. Mrs. Traill complains that poetic feeling is quite alien to the sort of people who are likely to succeed in Canada: . . . "The class of people to whom this country is so admirably adapted are formed of the unlettered and industrious labourers and artisans. They feel no regret that the land they labour on has not been celebrated by the pen of the historian or the lay of the poet. . . . They would not spare the ancient oak from feelings of veneration, nor look upon it with regard for any thing but its use as timber. They have no time, even if they possessed the taste, to gaze abroad on the beauties of nature."⁸ We hear in these words the disillusioned voice of an English gentlewoman, the wife of a half-pay army officer, submitting to the painful drudgery of the unbroken wilderness. The English publisher of Mrs. Traill's book was able to take a more romantic view of things, and he wrote in the Introduction of a special compensation that the colony might afford the better-class settler's wife: "To the person who is capable of looking abroad into the beauties of nature, and adoring the Creator through his glorious works, are opened stores of unmixed pleasure, which will not permit her to be dull or unhappy in the loneliest part of our Western Wilderness."⁹

This latter opinion is the orthodox one. It was held by Dr. Dewart and others like the emigrant poet, Standish O'Grady, and the encyclopedist, Henry J. Morgan, whose testimony I have quoted elsewhere.¹⁰ The first person who arose with a sufficient command of language and feeling to treat what were felt to be the particularly "Canadian" aspects of scenery with the enthusiasm expected of a genuine romantic poet was Charles Sangster.

III

Sangster (1822-93) was born in Canada—in the Navy Yard at Kingston—and though he knew poverty he did not experience the hard lot of a pioneer settler. He became a journalist in Kingston, and later a civil servant in Ottawa. He published *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay* in 1856 in Kingston and New York, and at once he was hailed as a national poet. "A Canadian Poet, whose poems are far above mediocrity—whose songs are of Canada—her mountains, maidens, manners, morals, lakes, rivers, valleys, seasons, woods, forests, and aborigines, her faith and hope"—so he was described by a contemporary reviewer.¹¹ Dr. Dewart proclaimed him first among native poets. "Many other Canadian poets," wrote the anthologist, "having spent their youth in some other land, though cherishing a strong regard for the country of their adoption, keep their tenderest affection for the land of their birth; selecting their principal imagery from its scenery and associations, somewhat to the neglect of the materials,

⁷Catherine P. Traill, *Backwoods of Canada* (London, 1836), 154.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*, Intro., 4.

¹⁰In *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (Chicago, 1943), 12-13.

¹¹In *McKenzie's Message*, quoted in "Opinions of the Press" at end of Sangster's *Hesperus and Other Poems and Lyrics* (Montreal and Kingston, 1860).

which nature so profusely lavishes on the scenery of this country. But Mr. S., while cherishing a loyal attachment to the mother land, gives Canada the chief place in his heart."¹²

Yet we cannot feel that Sangster succeeded in becoming a national poet; and the reason is, I believe, that he was not first a local poet. Romantic enthusiasm and literary polish kept his work vague and general. He was steeped in the romantic tradition of Byron and Shelley, and his diction and imagery were much less national than his early critics wished to think. It is true that he chose to describe Canadian scenery, but the sensibility that interpreted what he saw and the language in which he expressed his feeling were the common heritage of European romanticism. "His whole soul seems steeped in love and poesy," wrote another reviewer. "He is thoroughly sentimental, teeming with ideas of the sublime and beautiful. . . ."¹³ His diction and imagery are indistinguishable from those of a minor romantic poet in England or the United States, and he suggests comparison with Campbell, Moore, or Longfellow—occasionally with Byron, Shelley, or Tennyson. The real source of the enthusiasm with which Sangster was hailed as a national bard was pride in the fact that here was a poet who was *not* different from English poets but who was good enough to be named in the same company with some of the most firmly established of them.

This, I think, is the heart of the problem of nationalism in Canadian poetry (and in the other arts as well). Is a Canadian poet one who is indubitably a *poet* because he has, in sufficient strength, qualities which are recognizably the same in kind as those of the standard poets of the English tongue, and a *Canadian poet* because he happens to live and write in Canada, to use Canadian place-names, and to mention the flora and fauna of Canada? Or is he a poet as original and indigenous as Thoreau or Whitman?

I put these questions; and I shall not try to answer them here. I shall content myself with two remarks. The first is that Canada need feel no sense of humiliation that a poet who is Canadian as Whitman is American should not have arisen among us. America only produced one Whitman and one Thoreau. The rest of the American poets are no more and no less American than our poets are Canadian. My second observation is that we have called our poets (Carman and Roberts, if not Sangster) *national* because they were recognizably *poets*, judged by the standards of the accepted English masters, and then have pretended to ourselves that they were *Canadian*. The late Professor Cappon, of Queen's University, perhaps the best literary critic this country has produced, was right when he remarked in a passage I have quoted before but which is so important that it will bear repeating—"Perhaps our best Canadian poets have devoted themselves too much to an almost abstract form of nature poetry which has too little savour of the national life . . . and is more dependent on literary tradition than they seem to be aware of."¹⁴

IV

Professor Cappon's observation is as true of Sangster as it is of Roberts. But there were men in Canada whose closeness to the soil and the back-

¹²*Selections from Canadian Poets*, 150.

¹³In the *Huron Signal*, quoted in "Opinions of the Press" at end of *Hesperus*.

¹⁴J. Cappon, *Roberts and the Influences of his Time* (Toronto, 1905), 84.

breaking labour of clearing the wilderness kept them from acquiring the smoothness and glossy finish that was expected of the "serious" poet, and it was these, more than the literary poets, who prepared the way for the expression of a genuine nationalism. This they did by avoiding the abstract and grandiose, and concentrating with sympathetic insight upon the familiar and the local. The result was a poetry less poetic than Sangster's but native enough, and *tangy*—the necessary prelude to a realistic nationalism.

The best known of these poets was Alexander McLachlan, who came to Canada to escape the hard lot of a poor tailor's apprentice in Glasgow. He told the story of his voyage to Canada and the opening up of a pioneer settlement in the wilderness near Guelph in a spirited little epic called *The Emigrant* (published 1861). On the ship bound for Canada, one of the emigrants sings a song that states the feelings of McLachlan towards the country he is leaving. It has a humour and heartiness that suggest no one more certainly than Cobbet. The middle stanzas will show the radical independence and economic bias of McLachlan's thinking.

I love my own country and race,
Nor lightly I fled from them both,
Yet who would remain in a place
Where there's too many spoons for the broth.

The squire's preserving his game.
He says that God gave it to him,
And he'll banish the poor without shame,
For touching a feather or limb.

The Justice he feels very big,
And boasts what the law can secure,
But has two different laws in his wig,
Which he keeps for the rich and the poor.

The Bishop he preaches and prays,
And talks of a heavenly birth,
But somehow, for all that he says,
He grabs a good share of the earth.¹⁵

An equally spirited poem and one that gives a good picture of the agrarian distress that prompted the emigration can be found among the verses of a fellow-countryman of McLachlan, Alexander Glendinning. This author described himself on the title page of a volume simply called *Rhymes*, published in London, Ontario, in 1871, as "sometime in Eskdalemuir, Dumfriesshire, Scotland." He appears to have come out to Canada in the late thirties, via New York, and settled in Upper Canada, near Scarborough. Glendinning's name is not mentioned in any book on Canadian literature, but his work, homely and unpretentious in the extreme, has a directness and personal tang which give it a value that mere literary polish could never have imparted to it.

Glendinning tells of the hardships of "Annandale Farming" in a poem that united humour and social significance.¹⁶ The ills are a compost of

¹⁵*The Emigrant and Other Poems* (Toronto, 1861), 27-8.

¹⁶*Rhymes* (London, Ont., 1871), 72-4.

"dead sheep, daft bargains, a tea-drinking wife; Dull markets, partial payments, a long rent." His description of his stock is a fine bit of country realism—precise, disillusioned, and humorous:

Four or five horses, leaning 'gainst their stalls,
 Eight calvers, high of bone and hard of skin;
 Some forty porkers, making hideous squawls,
 Through lack of murphies, pitifully thin,
 With savage snouts they undermine the walls;
 Soon shall the half-rotten roof-tree tumble in
 And crack their rigbones, pound their hams and flitches,
 And put a finisher upon the wretches.

The poem continues with an ironic address to

Ye happy few, ye owners of the soil,
 Who feed upon the fat and drink the sweet,
 Just look and see how your poor tenants toil,
 And, after a', have hardly bread to eat;
 Let down your rents, live and let live the while,
 And we will be your servants, as 'tis meet;
 We'll gang and buy oursels new coats and breeks,
 And never speak a word on politicks.

Glendinning gives us an excellent account of his journey to Canada and of the opening up of a new home in the wilderness. He describes the discomforts of the ocean voyage in feeling terms. He was battered down with other "luckless wretches"

In a ship's hold and under hatches
 'Mang twa three hunder lowsie bitches,
 Brood of blue ruin!
 These, as the vessel rolls and pitches,
 Cursin' and spuein'.¹⁷

Glendinning landed at New York and travelled in a steam boat up the Hudson to Albany. From there he journeyed westward by stage (rather than by Erie Canal) and crossed Lake Ontario to settle for a time at Scarborough. Then came the hardships, the new kind of back-breaking labour, the discouragements, and the loneliness. The years during which all these disadvantages are slowly overcome and a new feeling of pride and independence gained gave Glendinning the subjects of his spirited rhymes.

It is the same story we read in Mrs. Traill, Mrs. Moodie, and Alexander McLachlan, but the accents are harder, the tone richer and more realistic. The writer who is to make anything worthwhile out of this material has to face it squarely and look back on it (for often he cannot write about it at all until the worst of the preliminary work is over) not with the sentimental glance of the local colourist but with the strict eye of the realist. It is the chief claim to serious consideration of the Scottish emigrant poets that this is exactly what they did. They were colonial poets to the extent that they could not forget their sturdy and almost instinctive sense of hearty British rightness, but this, more often than not, made them independent, and resentful of interference from the mother country, and was indeed one of the most important elements in the Canadian national feeling that was rising among them. Indeed, it was just their vivid sense of the harsh neces-

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 46.

sities that confronted them in the wilderness and their close grip upon immediate realities that gave them the solid foundation upon which to build a new national pride. This developed when they had at last conquered their environment and established themselves in greater security and prosperity than they had known in the old country.

Sincerity, simplicity, and directness distinguish the verse of the best of the pioneer poets. They were not, most of them, distracted by any self-conscious literary awareness. They did respond to one literary influence—that of Burns: but this influence was on the side of reality, homeliness, good sense, and humour; it was not a distracting or sentimental one like that of Shelley or Byron, Poe or Tennyson, upon Sangster.

This poetry is full of realistic and vividly humorous pictures of life in the bush. Glendinning describes

A band o'loggers at a bee—
Smart chieis wi' handspakes working free
In shirt and breeches,
And teamsters, loud wi' ha and gee,
Twirling blue beeches.¹⁸

One of Glendinning's compatriots—Robert Boyd, who came to Upper Canada in 1830 from Ayreshire and died at Guelph in 1880, at the age of eighty-three—painted the hardships of a settler's life in a vivid descriptive poem called "The Bachelor in His Shanty."¹⁹ Here humour and realism are united in a characteristic manner. Why, he wonders, did he leave his native country and "freens of social glee"

To come to this strange land o' trees,
The vile abode o' frogs and fleas,
Wi' no ane near to sympatheese,
Or yet to hate us;
Devour'd alive by slow degrees
By curs'd mosquitoes.

Roasted by summer's heat, frozen by the winter breeze, his sheep and lambs carried off by wolves, the poor shanty man tells of his other troubles—

A grumphy, too, I fed with care,
Till he might weigh Twal' stane or mair;
And when about to scrape his hair,
Though no' that able,
A muckle black and ugly bear
Saved me the trouble.

* * * *

A farmer too I'm called by name,
Nay—even a Laird—so much for fame,
Which makes me blush wi' burnin' shame
The truth to tell,
For a' my craps scarce fill my wame
And nane to sell.

Twa-three bits o' potato hills,
For stumps are sworn foes to drills,

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁹In *Selections from Scottish-Canadian Poets . . . With an Introduction by Dr. Daniel Clark* (Toronto, 1900), 61-8.

Some pumpkins big as cadger's creels,
Is a' my crop;
For aught I raise, markets and mills
Might a' gie up.

But the significance of the story that all unite in telling is that a real source of pride, at first local but later becoming national, grows out of the sense of accomplishment when the fruits of strenuous labour are made the foundation of independence, if not of wealth. "Canada, say what they will on't," declared Glendinning,—

There's mony a gude-gaun' busy mill in't,
And weel-fill'd ark,
And every man gets bread and yill in't
That likes to wark.²⁰

And one of the finest passages in Isabella Valancy Crawford's masterpiece, "Malcolm's Katie," tells how the "axe-stirr'd waste" is filled with eager crowds—

Upheav'd by throbs of angry poverty,
And driven by keen blasts of hunger, from
Their native strands—

who found new vigour as they found new hope.

The lab'rer with train'd muscles, grim and grave,
Look'd at the ground and wonder'd in his soul,
What joyous anguish stirr'd his darken'd heart,
At the mere look of the familiar soil,
And found his answer in the words—"Mine own!"²¹

It was this independent spirit more than anything else that prompted, sustained, and rewarded the emigrant, and eventually motivated his patriotism. At first it may have been limited by colonial loyalties, but it eventually and almost inevitably became a national one. This can be traced in the verse of Alexander McLachlan, though McLachlan's background made him a little different. His youthful experiences as a poor weaver in Glasgow had given him the humanitarian and political tenets of the Chartist movement. He writes of the horrors of poverty in an industrial metropolis,

Where bloated luxury lies,
And Want as she prowls the streets
Looks on with her wolfish eyes,²²

and his verse is nowhere keener than in his description of the modern city with

Its palaces raised to gin,
And its temples reared to God;
Its cellars dark and dank,
Where never a sunbeam falls,
Amid faces lean and lank
As the hungry-looking walls.²³

One of the liveliest of the sketches in McLachlan's *Lyrics* is a reminiscence of old country radicalism. It is called "The Glasgow Chap's Story; or,

²⁰Glendinning, *Rhymes*, 52.

²¹I. V. Crawford, *Old Spookses' Pass, Malcolm's Katie, and Other Poems* (Toronto, 1884), 51-2.

²²*The Emigrant*, 34.

²³*Ibid.*, 35.

Confessions Over a Bottle"²⁴ and describes a Chartist meeting with a clear-sighted irony that must not be mistaken for antipathy. The speech of "bloody Tom" is rendered with fidelity and humour:

Odd man! how nicely he set aff
The guid that's in puir folk,
And o' their rights and virtues lang
And tenderly he spoke.

* * *

Says he, we a' came naked here
The best get but a grave,
Then why should ane be made a lord,
Anither made a slave.

How ane should drive a coach and six,
While millions drive the shuttle,
How ane should waste while thousands want
Were questions rather kittle;
And thus he argued lang to prove
That things are ill divided,
Then put it to a show o' hands
And it was soon decided.

Finally, catching the enthusiasm, the Glasgow chap jumped to his feet and essayed to make a speech. But his tongue and knees failed him, and in mortification at his lamentable exhibition he slunk away and emigrated to America.

McLachlan himself brought such ideas into Upper Canada. In his early poetry the prevailing note is one of radical idealism. A characteristic expression of it may be found in *The Emigrant*, Chapter IV, "Cutting the First Tree." This describes the celebration at the end of the logging bee, during which one of the settlers addressed his "fellowmen." The orator outlined a mythical age of gold, when "a simple honest race" lived in communal anarchy which recognized only the individual conscience as its law.

They gave power and place to no man,
And had everything in common;
No one said this is mine own—
Money was a thing unknown;
No lawgiver and no pelf,
Each a law was to himself. . . .²⁵

Peace and plenty blessed this innocent classless society. The contrast with the present is obvious—now

Every man is for himself . . .
Hunting for the root of evil,
Restless as the very devil—²⁶

and it provokes a passage of biting satire upon the hypocrisy and double dealing that leads to modern success. The modern gospel is "get cash if ye can come at it by fair means, but be sure and get it." The moral of the

²⁴Alexander McLachlan, *Lyrics* (Toronto, 1858), 54-9.

²⁵*The Emigrant*, 48-9.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 49.

speech is Utopian co-operation. Let us unite to redeem the world from gold.

Each for all, and all for each,
Is the doctrine that I preach;
Mind the fable of the wands,
'Tis a fact that always stands;
Singly, we are poor and weak,
But united, who can break,²⁷

It was the hope of establishing in Canada a classless society, where energy and merit would be unhampered by the unfair competition of birth and privilege that inspired McLachlan with an independent national zeal. In one of his later poems, "Young Canada, or Jack's as Good as His Master,"²⁸ his patriotic enthusiasm is kindled for "The Land where Labour's free." "Rank and cast are of the past, They'll never flourish here," he exults, and praises the new aristocracy of labour, "the nobles of the forge and soil, With ne'er a pedigree."

McLachlan's patriotic poetry is sometimes both radical and national in tone. This can be seen in a little song called "The Genius of Canada" in the volume of 1858.²⁹ The Spirit speaks:

Though bleak the skies may be,
The maple dells
Where freedom dwells
Have a special charm for me.

She avows a determination to "rear a race to shed a grace On the mighty page of time." The arts shall flourish and the palm of peace shall wave over a home of rest for the oppressed; and if at the end of the poem the shamrock, rose, and thistle entwine in the land of lake and pine, at the beginning there is a clear indication of sympathy with the abolitionist cause of the north which was in sharp contrast with the attitude of the British Government. From the point of view of the mother country, indeed, Canada's apathy in the face of a possible attack from the United States as a result of Britain's encouragement of the Confederacy was one of the most distressing aspects of Canadian nationalism. McLachlan went so far as to write an "American War Ode" in which his republican radicalism found expression in a hymn that was neither Canadian nor imperialist.

The spirit of Washington
Stalks from the grave,
And calls on his children
Their country to save.

* * * *

Where backwoodsmen triumphed,
O'er tyrant and King;
There still the long rifle,
For freedom can ring.³⁰

But such ideas, we must remind ourselves, are exceptional, and even in McLachlan they were found along with others that were impeccably and

²⁷*Ibid.*, 51.

²⁸Alexander McLachlan, *Poems and Songs* (Toronto, 1888), 119.

²⁹*Lyrics*, 16-17.

³⁰*The Emigrant*, 234-5.

almost fulsomely loyal to Britain. The Crimean War, the birthday of the Queen, the visit of the Prince of Wales, the Fenian raids—these and like subjects inspired the Scottish emigrant poets as often, and about as effectively, as they did Sangster.

V

It would be unjust to deny, however, that the patriotic nationalism so earnestly fostered by Dr. Dewart—and by most of his successors among critics and anthologists—found expression in an occasional lyric of precision and power. Indeed, it would have been surprising if it had not; for that spirit was the one in which the political and economic life of the provinces was developing in the crucial years between 1840 and 1867, when the poetry we have been discussing was written. The causes are well known: they were long ago summarized by J. L. Morison. "With reciprocity had come prosperity; with prosperity had come independence, and a great increase in the number of the colonists. . . . Education in the energetic hands of Egerton Ryerson was playing its part; every addition to the travelling convenience of the provinces meant additional political cohesion. . . . The strong imperial note in John A. Macdonald's speeches bears witness to the popular movement by its underlying nationalism—it is Canada, no mean national unit, which begins to offer filial assistance to the mother country."³¹

This note is heard in the poetry of the times. It is sounded often in Dr. Dewart's anthology, but while it only rarely takes on an accent of power and beauty, it rang out clear and convincing in one or two lyrics before it later found classic expression in Roberts's "Canada." Sangster's "Brock" is one of these.

One voice, one people, one in heart
And soul, and feeling, and desire!³²

And in a stanza or two at least of the elegy which Charles Mair wrote on William A. Foster, the leading spirit of the "Canada First" movement—the note of conviction is sounded, if not held.

First feel throughout the throbbing land
A nation's pulse, a nation's pride—
The independent life—then stand
Erect, unbound, at Britain's side.³³

This is the sentiment that all the poets and versifiers express and return to. Nowhere does the idea of annexation or of independence find expression in our early poetry, but the ideal of Confederation and of a Canadian nationalism that will contribute strength to imperialism because of the free participation of a strong, self-reliant, and unified nation: that ideal we can watch growing in the quarter of a century before Confederation. But before this feeling could find adequate expression, it had to be nourished in the very earth of the new land. It is the pioneer realism and humour of the backwoods poets that show the solid base of experience out of which national pride and self-confidence alone could grow.

³¹*Canada and Its Provinces* (Toronto and Edinburgh, 1914), v, 79.

³²Sangster, *Hesperus*, 84.

³³*Tecumseh, A Drama and Canadian Poems* (collected edition, Toronto, 1926), 258.

DISCUSSION

Professor Bailey pointed out that the radical tradition in Canada before 1867 which was indicated in the paper was of great interest. Also the fact that there were expressions of nationalism before this date was significant. This is the first such paper read at the Canadian Historical Association. Canadian historians seeking elements of Canadianism have not sufficiently consulted literature. This is a fruitful field for investigation.

Professor Sage stated that the author of the paper ought to develop further his remarks about proletarian verse in Canada.

Professor Smith, in reply to a question about forms of poetry, said that changes in form are necessary to the advance of poetry. Though not as well written, this humble poetry, which he quoted in his paper, had a greater historical interest than the poetry of Carman and others like him.

Professor Lower affirmed that up to now Canadian literature had emerged from several "societies" not from "the whole Canadian society." At present there is an effort to reach towards the merging of these societies into a whole society. Perhaps Canada has to settle its political problems before there can be a national literature.