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Literature and Art in Canada

by Sir John Bourinot, K. C. M. G., LL.D., Lit. D.

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LITERATURE AND ART IN CANADA.

By Sir John Bourinot, K. C. M. G., LL.D., Lit. D.

(Author of "The Story of Canada" (Nations Series), "How Canada Is Governed," Etc.)

The five and a quarter millions of people who own Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific, are displaying a mental activity commensurate with the expansion of territory and accumulation of wealth. If it were possible within the compass of this paper to give a complete list of the many histories, poems, essays and pamphlets that have appeared from the Canadian press during the thirty years that the Dominion has been in existence, the number would astonish those persons who have not followed its intellectual progress. In fact, all the scientific, historical, and political contributions of three decades, whether good, bad, or indifferent in character, make up quite a pretentious library, which shows the growth of what may be called Canadian literature, since it deals chiefly with subjects essentially of Canadian interest. The attention that is now particularly devoted to the study and writing of history and the collection of historical documents relating to the Dominion proves clearly the national or thoroughly Canadian spirit that is already animating the educated and cultured class of its people.

Previous to the confederation of 1867 the only histories of undoubted merit were those of the French Canadians Garneau and Ferland. These were distinguished for clearness of style, industry and research, and scholarly management of the subject. Of the many others published since 1867, which take up so much space on my shelves, only two require special mention. One of these is a history of the days of Montcalm and Levis—the two most distinguished figures in the closing days of the French régime in Canada. This work is written by the Abbé Casgrain, who illustrates the studious and literary character of the professors of that great university which bears the name of the first Bishop of Canada, Monseigneur Laval, and which is one of the most interesting features of the ancient capital of Quebec, on whose heights it stands so conspicuous and dignified a structure. The Abbé's history is distinguished by all that fervor of French Canadians which shows itself when it is a question of their illustrious past, and which sometimes warps their judgment and reason. The venerable Abbé has made many other valuable contributions to the historical literature of the country, notably one on the land of Evangeline, which was deservedly crowned by the French Academy as an admirable example of literary style.

A more pretentious general history of Canada, in ten octavo volumes, is that by an English Canadian, whose life closed with his book. Whilst it shows much industry and conscientiousness on the part of the author, it fails too often to evoke our interest even when it deals with the striking and picturesque story of the French régime. The author seems to have considered it his duty to be sober and prosaic when Parkman is bright and eloquent. The work has, however, undoubted merits—especially in its account of the war of 1812-14 and the troubles of 1837-38—since it throws new light on many controverted points in Canadian history; and assuredly it is never likely to mislead us by a too highly colored and imaginative

version of the most famous incidents in the Dominion's annals.

A good estimate of the progress of literary culture in Canada can be formed from a careful perusal of the poems of Bliss Carmen, Archibald Lampman, Professor Roberts, Wilfred Campbell, Duncan Campbell Scott and Frederick George Scott, whose poetic efforts frequently appear in the leading American and Canadian magazines—and more rarely in English periodicals. I mention these writers particularly, because from the finish of their verse and their freshness of thought they are confessedly superior to all other Canadian poets and may fairly claim a foremost place alongside American poets since Longfellow, Emerson, Whittier, Bryant and Lowell have disappeared. Pauline Johnson, who has Indian blood in her veins and is a connection of W. Dean Howells, the American novelist, Archbishop O'Brien, of Halifax, Miss Machar, Ethelyn Weatherald, Charles Mair, and several others, might be named to prove that poetry is not a lost art in Canada, despite its pressing, prosaic and material needs. Dr. Louis Frechette is a worthy successor of Cremazie, and has won the distinction of having his best work crowned by the French Academy.

French Canadian poetry, however, has been often purely imitative of French models—like that of Musset and Gauthier—both in style and sentiment, and it consequently lacks strength and originality. It might be thought that in a new country like Canada, poets would be inspired by original conceptions—that the intellectual fruition would be fresh and vigorous like some natural products which thrive so luxuriantly on the virginal soil of the new Dominion, and not like those which grow on land that is renewed and enriched by artificial means after centuries of tilling. Perhaps the literature of a colonial dependency, or a relatively new country, must necessarily in its first stages be imitative, and it is only now and then that an original mind bursts the fetters of intellectual subordination. It is when French Canadian poets become thoroughly Canadian by the very force of inspiration of some home subject they have chosen, that we can see them at their best.

Frechette has all the finish of the French poets, and while it cannot be said that he has yet originated great thoughts which are likely to live even among the people whom he has so often instructed and delighted, yet he has given us poems—like that on the discovery of the Mississippi—which prove that he is capable of even better things if he would always seek inspiration from the sources of the deeply interesting history of his own country, or would enter into the inner mysteries or social relations of his own people, rather than dwell on the lighter shades and incidents of their lives.

When we compare the English Canadian with the French Canadian poets we can see what an influence the more picturesque and interesting history of French Canada exercises on the imagination of its writers. The poets that claim Canada for their home give us rhythmical and pleasing descriptions of the lake, river and forest scenery, of which the varied aspects and moods might well captivate the eye of the poet as well of the painter. It is very much painting in both cases; the poet should be an artist by temperament equally with the painter who puts his thoughts on canvas and not in words. Yet it may be said that descriptions of our meadows, prairies and forests, with their wealth of herbage and foliage, or artistic sketches of pretty bits of lake scenery, have their limitations as respects their influence on the people. Great thoughts or deeds are not surely bred by scenery. The American poem that has captured the world—that has even obscured the truth of history—is not any one of Bryant's delightful sketches of the varied landscape of his native land, but Longfellow's "Evangeline," which is a story of the

affection that hopes and endures and is patient.

Mr. Lampman touched a chord of human interest in one of his poems, “Between the Rapids,” which has been quoted more frequently than perhaps any others by this gifted Canadian. The scene of the poem may be either on the Ottawa or St. Lawrence River, so famous for their rapids; but what gives it a real charm is that touch of nature which makes the whole world kin.

Of all the poems so far written by Canadians none have evoked more praise in critical journals than that by Frederick George Scott, describing in powerful verse the agony of the imprisoned Samson.

Mr. Wilfred Campbell has been called with truth “The Poet of the Lakes,” but his best work has yet to be done in poems of human life and passion, as we may well judge from the one, remarkable in its conception and execution, which was printed some time ago in a leading American monthly, and in which the great love of a mother for her child is described as forcing her from her grave to seek it. His genius is essentially dramatic.

The life of the French Canadian *habitant* has been admirably described in verse by Dr. Drummond, who has always lived among that class of the Canadian people, and been a close observer of the national and personal characteristics. He is the only writer who has succeeded in giving a striking portraiture of life in the cabin, in the “shanty” (*chantier*), and on the river, where the French *habitant*, forester and canoeman, can be best seen to advantage. The poet makes each character tell his story in the broken and peculiar English of the French settlements, and in doing so never becomes vulgar or tiresome, but is always spirited and true to nature. His poems are specially suited to recitation by one who knows the people, like the author, and can give the words their proper emphasis and swing. Of course the French Canadian *habitant* is at times idealized by the imagination of the poet, but such departures from the actualities of life in French Canada only give a greater charm to the verses. Still this is, after all, a class of verse which is soon worked out, and a man of true poetic inspiration will not be content with so limited a field on which to build up a lasting reputation.

But if Canada can point to some creditable achievements of recent years in history, poetry and essay writing—for I think if one looks from time to time at the leading magazines and reviews of the two continents he will find that Canada is fairly well represented in their pages—there is one respect in which Canadians had never won any marked success until Mr. Gilbert Parker appeared, and that is in the novel of romance. “Wacousta, or the Prophecy; a Tale of the Canadas,” was written sixty years ago by Major John Richardson, a native Canadian, but it was at the best a spirited imitation of Cooper. Even Mr. Kirby’s single romance, “Le Chien d’Or,” which recalls the closing days of the French régime—the days of the infamous intendant Bigot, who fattened on Canadian misery—does not show the finished art of the skilled novelist, but it has a certain crude vigor of its own which has enabled it to live while so many other Canadian books have died. French Canada is even weak in this particular, and this is the more surprising because there is abundance of material for the novelist or the writer of romance in her peculiar society and institutions and in her historic annals and traditions. It is true that we have a work by De Gaspé, “Les Anciens Canadiens,” which has been translated by Professor Roberts and one or two others, but it has rather the value of historical annals than the spirit and form of true romance.

It must not be imagined, however, from their failure for so many years to cultivate successfully this popular branch of letters, that Canadians are wanting in the inventive and imaginative

faculty, and that the spirit of materialism and practical habits, which has so long necessarily cramped literary effort in the country, still prevents happy ventures in this direction. Mr. Gilbert Parker, now a resident in London, but a Canadian by birth, education and sympathies, is animated by a laudable ambition to give form and vitality to the abundant materials that exist in the Dominion among the inhabitants of the old seigneuries of the French Province—materials to be gathered from that historic past of which the ruins still remain in Montreal and Quebec, in the Northwest with its quarrels of adventurers in the fur trade, and in the many other sources of inspiration that exist in this country for the true story-teller, the one who can invent a plot and give his creations a touch of reality, different from that doll-like sawdust appearance that the vapid characters of some Canadian stories assume from the very poverty of the imagination that has originated them. His most popular book, “The Seats of the Mighty,” the scenes of which are laid also in that old city whose rocks recall such a deeply interesting past, shows that he possesses that inventive faculty, that power to construct and carry out a skillful plot, that deep insight into human motives, that power to conceive original characters—such as “Voltaire,” a strange compound of cynic, conspirator, philosopher, “master-devil”—which are necessary to the author of romance if his work is ever to have more than an evanescent fame. While “The Seats Of the Mighty” is probably the greater novel, his previous story, “When Valmond Came to Pontiac,” is even more artistic in its treatment of a difficult subject, and in one respect more original in its conception. His sketches of the conditions of life in a little French Canadian community, where mystery and doubt surround a stranger who claims to be a son of the great Napoleon, and who awakens the simple, credulous people from their normal sluggishness into mental activity and a positive whirl of excitement, are worked out with a rare fertility of invention and delicacy of touch.

Canada has only one “Sam Slick,” that strong, original character in American humor which was conceived sixty years ago. That imagination and humor have still some existence in the Canadian mind—though one sees little of those qualities in the press or public speeches, or in parliamentary debates—we can well believe when we read “The Dodge Club Abroad”—which first appeared in *Harper’s Monthly*—by Professor De Mille, who was cut off in the prime of his intellectual strength; or “A Social Departure,” by Sarah Jeanette Duncan (Mrs. Coates), who, as a sequence of a trip around the world, has given us, not a dry book of travels, but a story with touches of genial humor and bright descriptions of life and nature, and who has followed up that excellent literary effort by promising sketches of East Indian life. A story which attracted some attention not long since, for originality of conception, and ran through several editions, “Beggars All,” is written by Miss L. Dougall, a member of a Montreal family; and although this book does not deal with incidents of Canadian life it illustrates the fertility of invention which is latent among our people and which requires only a favorable opportunity to develop itself. Mr. McLennan, of Montreal, is also a writer whose efforts in romance are most meritorious and deservedly find many readers on this continent.

On the whole, there have been enough good poems, histories and essays written and published in Canada for the last four or five decades by native Canadians—men and women born and educated in Canada—to prove that there has been a steady intellectual growth on the part of her people; and that it has kept pace at all events with the mental growth in the pulpit or in the legislative halls, where, of late years, a keen, practical, debating style has taken the place of the more rhetorical and studied oratory of old times. The intellectual faculties of Canadians require only larger opportunities for their exercise to bring forth a rich fruition. The progress in

the years to come will be far greater than that Canadians have yet shown; and this necessarily so, with the wider distribution of wealth, the dissemination of a higher culture, and a greater confidence in their own mental strength and in the resources that the country offers to pen and pencil. What is now wanted is the cultivation of a good style and artistic workmanship.

No doubt literary stimulus must be more or less wanting in a colony where there is too obviously, at times, an absence of self-confidence in ourselves and in our institutions, arising from that sense of dependency and habit of imitation and borrowing from others that are a necessity of a colonial condition. The tendency of the absence of sufficient self-assertion is to cramp intellectual exertion, and to make us believe that success in literature can be achieved only in the old countries of Europe.

The name of Dr. Todd has been for many years well known throughout the British Empire, and indeed wherever English institutions of government are studied, as that of an author of most useful works on the English and Canadian Constitutions. Sir William Dawson—who has just died—for many years the energetic principal of McGill University, whose scientific prominence owes its origin largely to his mental bias, is well known as the author of several geological books, written in a graceful and readable style. The scientific work of Canadians can be studied chiefly in the proceedings of English, American and Canadian Societies, especially of late years in the transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, established over seventeen years ago by the Marquis of Lorne when Governor-General of the Dominion. This successful association is composed of one hundred and twenty members, who have written "memoirs of merit or rendered eminent services to literature or science." All Canadian Societies, whether historical, literary, or scientific, can assist in the work of this national institution, and representatives can make reports on their annual work and take part in all discussions except those relating to the purely internal affairs of the Royal Society. The papers and monographs are yearly printed in a handsomely illustrated volume, and embrace a wide field of intellectual effort—the whole range of archeological, ethnological, historical, geographical, biological, geological, mathematical and physical sciences. The association is doing an invaluable work for science and literature, not only by its system of publication, but by bringing together a number of educated and thinking men for the exchange of ideas.

As the public libraries of the Dominion are small compared with those of Massachusetts and other States in the Federal Republic, so its public and private art galleries are relatively few in number and insignificant as respects the value and greatness of the paintings. Montreal at present has one fairly good museum, due to the liberality of two or three of her rich men, several of whom also own some very valuable paintings representing the best work of European artists. The National Art Gallery, at Ottawa, it not worthy of the name and place, and is far inferior to the Museum—a building of some beauty—connected with the University at Sackville, in New Brunswick. The Chicago Exposition of 1893 was a revelation to the foreign world—and probably to many Canadians, not to say Englishmen—that there was in Canada artistic performance of no mean order. Where Canadian artists generally fail is in individuality of expression and general excellence from a technical point of view, especially in the thorough knowledge of construction in both figures and landscapes. The tendency to be imitative rather than native is also too obvious—a fault of a new country still under the influence of colonial dependence. Still, despite these inherent defects, there is much good work done by L. R. O'Brien, Robert Harris, J. W. L. Foster, Homer Watson, George Reid—the painter of "The Foreclosure of the Mortgage," which won great praise at Chicago—John Hammond, F. A.

Verner, Miss Bell, Miss Muntz, W. Brymner—all of whom are Canadians by birth and inspiration. The establishment of a Canadian Academy of Art by the Princess Louise, and of other such associations, has done a good deal to stimulate a taste for art, although the public encouragement of native artists is still very inadequate when we consider the excellence already attained under great difficulties in a relatively new country where the mass of people has yet to be educated to the necessity and advantages of high artistic effort.

Sculpture would be hardly known in Canada were it not for the work of the French Canadian Hebert, who is a product of the schools of Paris, and who has given to the Dominion several admirable statues and monuments of its public men. While Canadian architecture hitherto has been generally wanting in originality of conception, yet it affords many good illustrations of the effective adaptability of the best art of Europe to the principal edifices of the Provinces, notably the following: The Parliament and departmental buildings at Ottawa, admirable examples of Italian Gothic; the Legislative buildings at Toronto, in the Romanesque style, with details of the Celtic and Indo-Germanic schools; the English cathedrals in Montreal and Fredericton, correct specimens of early English Gothic; the French parish church of Notre-Dame, in Montreal, attractive for its stately Gothic proportions; the University of Toronto, an admirable conception of Norman architecture; the Canadian Pacific Railway Station at Montreal, and the Frontenac Hotel at Quebec, fine examples of the adaptation of old Norman architecture to modern necessities; the Provincial buildings at Victoria, in British Columbia, the general design of which is Renaissance, rendered most effective by the pearl-gray stone and the several domes; the headquarters of the Bank of Montreal, an artistic example of the Corinthian order and notable for the artistic effort to illustrate, in the walls of the interior, memorable scenes in Canadian history; the county and civic buildings of Toronto, an ambitious effort to illustrate the modern Romanesque, so much favored by the eminent American architect, Richardson; Osgoode Hall, the seat of the great law courts of the Province of Ontario, which represents the general idea of the Italian Renaissance. Year by year we see additions to our public buildings, interesting from an artistic point of view and illustrating the accumulating wealth of the country, as well as the growth of culture and taste among the governing classes.

The development of culture of a high grade in a relatively new country like Canada, with so many urgent material needs, must largely depend on the educational machinery of the country. Chiefly, if not entirely, owing to the expansion of our common-school system—good in Ontario and Nova Scotia, but defective in Quebec—and the influence of our universities and colleges, the average intelligence of the people of this country is much higher than it was a few years ago; but no doubt it is with Canadians as with their neighbors, to quote the words of an eminent public speaker whose brilliancy and humor sometimes lead one to forget his higher criticism—I refer to Senator Chauncey Depew—"Speed is the virtue and the vice of our generation. We demand that morning-glories and century-plants shall submit to the same conditions and flower with equal frequency." Even some Canadian universities, from which we naturally expect so much, seem disposed from time to time to lower their standard and yield too readily to the demand for purely practical education, when, after all, the great reason of all education is to draw forth the best qualities of the young, elevate their intelligence, and stimulate their highest intellectual forces. The animating principle with the majority of people is to make a young man a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, or to teach him some other vocation as soon as possible; and the tendency is to consider any education that does not immediately effect this result, superfluous.

If we are to come down to the lower grades of the educational system, it is also doubtful whether, despite all its decided advantages for the masses—its admirable machinery and apparatus, its comfortable school-houses, its varied systematic studies from form to form and year to year, its well-managed normal and model schools, its excellent teachers—there are not also signs of superficiality. The tendency of the age is to become rich fast, to get as much knowledge as possible within a short time; and the consequence of this is to spread far too much knowledge over a limited ground—to give a child too many subjects and to teach him a little of everything. These are the days of many cyclopædias, historical and scientific digests, reviews of reviews, French in a few lessons, and interest tables. All is digested and made easy to the student, consequently not a little of the production of our schools, and some of our colleges, may be compared to a veneer of knowledge, which easily wears off in the activities of life and leaves the roughness of the original material very perceptible. One may well believe that the largely mechanical system and materialistic tendency of education have some effect in checking the development of a really original and imaginative literature among Canadians.

Be this as it may, the universities, colleges, academies and high schools, and the public and common schools of the Dominion illustrate the great desire of the governments and people of the Provinces to give the greatest possible facilities for the education of all classes at the smallest possible cost to individuals. At the present time there are between 13,000 and 14,000 students attending the universities and colleges, of which there are in all some 59, divided as follows: Universities, 16; English colleges, chiefly theological, 15; Quebec classical colleges, a combination of school and college, 17; ladies' colleges, 6; agricultural colleges, 5. The collegiate institutes and academies of the Provinces also rank with the colleges as respects the advantages they give to young men and young women. Science obtains prominence notably in McGill and Toronto Universities—the most largely attended universities—and the former affords a notable example of the munificence of the wealthy men of Montreal in establishing chairs of science and otherwise advancing its educational usefulness. Laval University stands deservedly at the head of the Roman Catholic institutions of the continent, both on account of its deeply interesting historic associations and the scholarly attainments of its professors, several of whom have won fame in Canadian letters. Several universities give instruction in medicine and law, and Toronto has also a medical college for women. At least one-fifth of the youth of the Dominion are in attendance at the universities, colleges, public and private schools. The people of Canada contribute upward of ten millions of dollars annually to the support of their educational establishments; these contributions being in the shape of government grants, public taxes, or private fees. Ontario alone in 1897 contributed over four millions of dollars to the support of its public-school system. Of this amount the people directly contributed 92 per cent. in the shape of taxes.

The libraries of Canada are not numerous, and it is only in Ontario that there is a law providing for the establishment of such institutions by a vote of the tax-payers in the municipalities. In this Province there are at least 174 libraries, of which the majority are connected with mechanics' institutes and are made public by statute. The principal libraries, conspicuous for a valuable accumulation of historical manuscripts, books and pamphlets, are the Parliamentary Library at Ottawa, the Public Library at Toronto, the Library of Laval at Quebec; Osgoode Hall Library at Toronto is probably the best legal collection in the Dominion. All the libraries of Canada, large and small, legislative, public, educational and special (law, medicine, and so forth), now number nearly 500, containing over two millions of volumes, including pamphlets.

The library at Ottawa probably contains one-tenth of this number, and is on the whole the most important collection of archives, pamphlets and books so far owned by the people of Canada.

Much of our daily literature—indeed the chief literary food of large classes—is the newspaper press, which illustrates necessarily the haste, pressure and superficiality of the writings in that important engine of public instruction. Canadian journals, however, have not yet descended to the degraded sensationalism of some New York papers, too many of which circulate in Canada to the public detriment. Personal and scandalous attacks are not now a feature of the leading Canadian papers, although party warfare, often carried to an inordinate degree in the Dominion, too often makes them very unfair to their political opponents. On the whole, the tone of the most ably conducted journals is quite on a level with the tone of debate in the legislative bodies of the country.

Now, as in all times of our history, political life claims many strong, keen and cultured intellects, although at the same time it is too manifest that the tendency of our democratic condition and heated party controversy is to prevent the most highly educated and sensitive organizations from venturing on the agitated and unsafe sea of political passion and competition. The speeches of Sir Wilfrid Laurier—a French Canadian who has mastered the English tongue, like so many of his compatriots—Sir Charles Tupper, Mr. Foster and others who might be mentioned, recall the most brilliant period of parliamentary annals—the first Parliament of the Dominion (1867-1873), when the most prominent men of the Provinces were brought into public life, under the new conditions of Federal Union. The debating power of the several legislative bodies is excellent, and the chief defects are the great length and discursiveness of the speeches on local as well as on national affairs. It is a question, too, whether of late years there is not a tendency to impair the dignity and tone of discussion.

In the course of a few decades Canada will probably have determined her position among the communities of the world; and, no doubt, the results will be far more gratifying to her national pride than the results of even the past thirty years, during which Canadians have been laying broad and deep the foundations of their present system of government. We have reason to believe that the material success of this confederation will be fully equalled by the intellectual efforts of a people who have sprung from nations whose not least enduring fame is the fact that they have given to the world of letters so many famous names that represent the best literary genius of the English and French races. All the evidence now goes to prove that the French language will continue into an indefinite future to be the language of a large and influential section of the population of Canada, and that it must consequently exercise a decided influence on the culture and intellect of the Dominion. It is within the last four decades that the best intellectual work, both in literature and statesmanship, has been produced in French and English Canada; and the signs of activity in the same direction do not lessen with the expansion of the Dominion, but give promise of a rich fruition in the magnificent future which is in store for this rising nation of the North.

[The end of *The Anglo-American Magazine: Literature and Art in Canada* by John (Sir John George) Bourinot]