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PETER OTTAWA

BY

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E. W. THOMSON

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*These humble lines I dare to dedicate
To all the patriotic dead, whose fate
While living, was to front the foolish scorn,
That still crowns Reconcilers' brows with thorn.*

*Macdonald, Cartier, Baldwin, Lafontaine,
Ye did not vainly tread the way of pain!
Nor vainly strive the healers of our day,
Whose gentle wisdom rules the heart of GREY!*

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He was a mighty rover in his prime,
And still, though bearded white as Father Time,
Content and restless, strong and curious, he
Roams over Canada from sea to sea.

To gaze on all his native love possess—
That impulse urged, for years, his wandering quest;
To achieve some truthful vision of the whole
From Welland's orchards to the circumpole;
To know all tribes and races of the land,
Such was the joy his youthful ardor planned,
And still the yearning holds him, while he smiles
To think of how the Impossible beguiles.

Oft as he turns to share his wealthy home,
 So oft, insatiate, hastes he forth to roam;
 And in the region round about Quesnel
 His ever wondering farmer-neighbors tell;—
 “He’s off again! God knows by what he’s led!
 Old Peter Ottawa’ll never die in bed!”

That pseudonym he took in youth, they deem
 Perchance in pride to boast his native stream,
 Or p’raps to signify, so some declare,
 Himself too nativist to wish to wear
 His patronymic of one Old-World race,
 Since he four glorious ancestries can trace.

“I roam by right of Scottish blood,” he’ll say,
 “My father’s grandsire roved till his last day,—
 Roderick the Red, who strode with kilted thighs,
 The highland light of battle in his eyes,
 Where many a stream of spiriting life was spilt
 Before, with Wolfe, a claymore’s basket hilt
 Gript in his iron fist, he climbed with frown
 More dour than high Quebec could darkle down.”

“Roving is in my blood from Gerald Foy
 Who charged the English line at Fontenoy
 With wild-heart memories of the home he fled;
 Tradition tells that while he thrust and bled
 My visioning Irish ancestor could see
 His emerald hills, his boyhood’s ‘fairy tree,’
 His native glen, with family roofs aglow,
 His stacks red-lit, his mother’s wailing woe,
 His children staring vengeful on the groups
 Of half-ashamed, half-stolid English troops,
 Whose ranks of oak ne’er learned a foe to rue
 Till Ireland’s banished bayonets charged them through.”

“And yet, praise God, the English heart I share,
 The steadfast blood that held the steely square

That broke the cuirassiers at Waterloo,
 Firm, for the Iron Duke, as at review;
 The blood that bided cool that dread advance—
 The veteran, Old, immortal Guard of France
 Who charged, yet knowing well they charged in vain—
 If vain be death-contemptuous Glory's gain—
 Charged to end there th' emblazoned valour scroll
 That Fame can never utterly uproll;—
 Or so my Grandsire, Pierre Deschamps, would say,
 Old Pierre, who charged at Hougomont with Ney”.

In filial love he boasts his Gallic part,
 His half-French mother gave him half his heart;
 But Pierre of Waterloo is less his pride
 Than Pierre's Canadian grandsire, Jean, who died
 In seventeen-sixty, hard by Fort Levis,
 Where Pouchot's braves renewed Thermopylae.

There he, with scarce four hundred, held at stand,
 For nineteen days, stout Amherst's whole command,
 Eleven thousand, balked on ship and shore,
 Till Pouchot's muster fell to thirteen score.

“ Militiamen remember,” Peter says,
 “ Just habitants, like ours of later days,
 Farming their little clearings by the stream
 That floated Amherst down its August dream.—
 And who dare say the least among them all
 Was not a very Paladin of Gaul?
 Go to—our Canada from France retains
 A strain as staunch as pulses British veins!”

French, English, Irish, Scotch he reconciles,
 Boasts them alike, and with his boasting smiles;—
 “ That's me—that's Canada—a fourfold flame
 Of mighty origins surrounds the name.—
 Lives there a man in all the land to-day
 Can wish one pioneering race away?

His heart's an immigrant.—I say no more;
 We chide no stranger entering at our door,
 But bid him welcome, bid him share the meal,—
 His children yet the native sense shall feel;
 And what care we if twenty races blend
 In blood that flows Canadian at the end ? ”

Our painted Autumn sets him roaming wide,
 As if his lifelong yearning could not bide
 To watch his own Laurentian mapled range
 From pomp to pomp magnificently change.
 But he must up and forth with every dawn,
 Through aisles of glamorous colour following on,
 Mid golden-showering leaves, a viewless trail,
 Through rustling corridors a voiceless hail,
 Over what vista-mirroring lakes a guide
 Whose beckonings misty distance scarce can hide,
 Beyond yet one more rapid's murmurous song
 The enchanting call of *follow, follow long*,
 Which ever sang, and ever sped before,
 And ever led his Fathers one day more,
 Until at last, beyond the enormous plain,
 And past the eternal snow-peaks' ranging chain,
 The imperious western surges ordered STAND,
 And turned them back to claim the traversed land.

And turned them back to ax, and scythe, and plow,
 Toil, thrift, long patience, and the thoughtful brow
 Inspired to rear on Earth what He commands—
 The House that is not builded up of Hands.

“ Which is,” says Peter, “ ancient England's dream,
 Though oft she be distracted from the theme
 By Viking children, and by threatening voice;
 'Tis still the dream in which she doth rejoice,
 (Even as any whirling human soul
 Is glad when toiling toward the heaven-goal),
 She doth rejoice to rear for Man's behoof,

Her hospitable, many-mansioned roof,
 Wherein the immemorial Laborer yet
 Freely shall eat the bread of his own sweat.
 Its when we muse on English greathearts' aim,
 And muse how true our laws pursue the same,
 Then, then we exult about our Mother's throne,
 And love her ideal Empire as our own."

Dreaming a better Britain rising here
 Mid winter forests lovely and austere,
 His creaking snowshoes track what vaulted miles
 Where towering pines uprange converging aisles,
 When neither shrub nor shadow checks the gaze,
 But one white undulation floors the maze
 Of colonnades so tall they seem to lean
 Inward before they branch the roof of green
 Whose rifts, at times asway, disclose the blue,
 At times let aimless snowflakes wander through
 To waver down, as if they hesitate
 Lest merest motion be to desecrate
 That subtle stillness, where the high-head grouse
 Treads three-toed, wondering, and the forest mouse
 Meandering timid, dots a tiny track
 Whose every swerve denotes a fear Attack
 Were hovering in the Mystery all around—
 So much more threatening Silence is than Sound.

The reverent rover, chancing to intrude
 Within the borders of such Solitude,
 Worships in natural piety sincere
 A holy spirit quiet brooding here,
 Within a fane whose ministrants are none
 Except the chanting Winds, the wheeling Sun,
 The patient Seasons' alternating train,
 Their potent servitors of Shine and Rain,
 Ordained by Something, kin to Time and Space,
 Regnant and immanent throughout the place,
 Which urges apprehension on the soul
 That its own being merges with the Whole.

No less he worships where some Western throng
 Of pioneers moves sturdily along
 The hurrying, half-buillt streets of plains he knew
 When buffalo ranged round all the circling blue.

There every face declares some inward tune
 Of Hope and Happiness at plenilune,
 The eyes shine keen, on Enterprise intent,
 As if that every west-Canadian meant
 To realise some visionary State
 Surpassing good, and glorious, and great.
 So strode, be sure, the Viking race of old,
 Elate though arduous, kind and shrewd and bold,
 Scanning the future, as they faced the gale,
 With no misgivings lest their strength should fail,
 Assured the World was made for them who DO,
 And God would see his active children through.

He did, by Heaven, and still our kin fare forth
 Beneath all galaxies of South and North,
 Degenerate only where, by vested Wrong,
 The money-mongers crowd, and rot, the throng.
 Give them but land and air, then not the best
 Of all the broods that flew the ancient nest
 More pleased the Allfather by their works and ways
 Than His adventurers of the latter days.

In treble ribbons see the prairie run
 Black from their plowshares in the westering sun,
 Whose shine the yearning sod-hut settler sees
 Gild children's wealthy roofs through future trees,
 And, patient joyful, deems the vision fair,
 Which his own eyes may never witness there.

Behold rude hamlets, every one with School,
 With Church, with Council-hall for lawful rule,
 The wind-bronzed, hard-hand Fathers giving free

Their little leisure, that the New Land be
 So set for Order in its early years
 That Time's long talk shall bless the pioneers.

Or, clearly vision some September plain
 Where one sole Reaper shrills in harvest grain
 Before the whirring grouse takes morning flight
 Till the long gloaming deepens into night
 That lets the Stalwart, freed from labour's dues,
 Plod shackward, blessing God that sleep renews
 His power to lift the morrow's heavy gage,
 And day by day the lonely battle wage,
 Until at last, with all his wheat well saved,
 A haggard victor from the strife he braved,
 He eyes the stacks that prove his manhood sound
 For her who shall emparadise his ground,
 And sternly knows, within his secret heart,
 That never Warrior acted higher part.

It seems to me a blasphemy immense
 To imagine God the foe of common-sense,
 And not a Power of sanity complete,
 Who surely holds an arduous useful feat
 Of resolute labour something over par,
 Compared with deeds of War, which ever are,
 At best, but just a fate-defying stand
 Made, since the World began, in every land,
 For hate, or hope, or pay, or love, or lust,
 But mostly just because the soldier must
 Obey the officer, who must obey
 In turn the ordered orderer of the day,
 Himself a sort of slave to slaves whose trade
 Is just to get Stupidity obeyed;—
 The cruel dense stupidity of Pride
 Callous to wholesale murder on each side,
 And loathe to arbitrate, lest Judges wise
 Settle some trival point by compromise.

Poor World, insensate bred, and deep possest
 By febrile Fear pretending warlike zest!
 Could your bedevilled peoples see arise
 The kindly Sun of west-Canadian skies
 Over the solitudes of perfect Peace,
 Surely might blustering forever cease;
 Then all your unencited multitudes,
 Calmed into love of calm, might still the broods
 Who rave, persuasive in the Music Hall,
 That Man must arm and kill lest worse befall;
 Would trust the common wisdom of the heart,
 Which purely whispers that all combats start
 From that Yahoo suspicion which insists
 Peace cannot be, even while peace exists;
 Would resolutely reason—God's fair world
 Was given all kindly, and by Hate is whirled
 Into those horrors which shall henceforth end—
 So vast the earth, with room for all to wend
 In labour's honest ways, their fellows' friend.

To share the western work, to smack its taste,
 Old Peter hies him often to the waste;
 One year, with thirty wagons in his train,
 He took the Athabasca trail again,
 Adventurer, trader, settler all in one,—
 Reapers, provisions, disc-plows, cartridge, gun,—
 Sure, as of old, his proper gain to find
 Though every market-place were far behind.

It chanced he saw six hundred acres spread
 Golden and ripe, where one sole reaper sped.

"Alone?" called Peter.

"Quite," the settler cried,
 Halting his horses in their sweating stride.

"This wheat all yours?"—

"Well, that I hardly know.

"Although I paid its planting months ago,
 The blackbird swarms may get the larger share,"

The youth was blue-eyed, ruddy, Saxon fair;—
 “ My name is Brown—I’m English—green as grass—
 And no one warned me what a thundering ass
 I was to buy, at Home, a section here,
 Pay cash to have it broke and sowed this year;
 It wasn’t till I came across in May
 I learned my ‘ farm ’ is two long days away
 From railways, neighbors, markets, help from man.—
 But greenhorns just must do the best they can.—
 Go on!”—He chirruped gayly to his pair,
 Once more the reaper’s whirring held the air.

Old Peter laughed and swore;—“ Absurd young fool!
 “ English as English! Eight-year-olds at school
 About Quesnel would be too sharp for *that*!
 And yet, *tort dieu*, he smiles beneath his hat
 Good-humoured, game!—I like the fellow fine!
 What’s more, the lad’s an Ancestor of mine!”

Turning he faced his plodding wagons then;—
 “ Halt ! Halt ! *Arrete* ! Pull up ! Unhitch, my men !
 Unload the reaper-binders—rig ’em quick !
 Pitch all the tents—right here a week we’ll stick.
 Who ever saw a prettier spread of wheat?
 Dashed if my English blood shall taste defeat !”

Ten days went by—the grateful settler saw
 Great stacks enroofed—his acres stubble straw—
 His fourteen thousand bushels safely stored,
 And Peter’s wagons winding past the ford.

“ Talk me no pay,” the oldster laughed him down,
 “ Call it a wedding gift for Mistress Brown,—
 Scotch, Irish, French, her strains of blood must be—
 Mixed with your English, Lord the brood we’ll see !
 Fathered and mothered on the surest plan
 To make ’em through and through Canadian !”
 So Brown reports Old Peter’s joke today,
 Roared as he whipt his team, and raced away.

Ten days of thirty men and thirty teams!
Well—Peter's often shrewder than he seems.

The veteran's thirty teamsters settled down
On homestead blocks about the land of Brown,
While Peter bought the Railway Lands between.—
Two years—a branch line hastened to the scene!
He saw that finish clearly from the start;
He'd picked out settlers that he knew by heart,
Furnished them all supplies till next year's Fall,
Horses, machinery, waggons, shacks and all;
No note, no mortgage, not a scratch of pen
Twixt him and them—old Peter knew his men.
To-day they farm his boughten tracts on shares,
And half the township's his, and half is theirs.

“ Its square,” he says. “ But fair? I have my doubt.
Yet, when Old Peter Ottawa peter's out,
The lads will find him at the latter end,
As at the first, a pretty steady friend;—
Thank God *my* children are not money-mad!
Meantime, I hold the Landlord system bad.
Oh yes, its been my profit many a year,
And owning property *is* a kind of cheer.
Its handy, too, for if your fellow man
Is needing help, its good to know you *can*.
Of course it grits my Irish many a night
To know a Landlord's just a parasite;
But take the world the way its made we must.
Meantime I'll hold myself a Landlord-Trust;
Two hundred tenants get one fourth my ground
When Peter Ottawa's finished out his round.
That kind of saves my Irish fourth from shame,—
The rest—my Scotch-French-English—stand the blame
For landed property they *can't* let go,
Its God Almighty makes Canadians so!”

Easy in dogma, Peter holds all creeds
 Sufficient unto true religion's needs;—
 "Do unto others as you would they should
 To you," he says, "sets out the whole of good.
 The life that's guided so, its Lord is He
 Who savoured anguish in Gethsemane;
 No matter if such Christian be a Turk,
 He'll get what's justly coming for his work.
 Methodist, Catholic, Shaker, Theist, Jew,
 Buddhist, its all according as they DO.
 No need to name the seven score creeds enrolled
 Equal in Canada, and each extolled
 By true-believing seekers after God
 To be pre-eminent as Aaron's rod;
 In what they hold alike is surely found
 The essential elemental Truth profound,
 And that's—there's something heavenly in the plan
 Of dealing gently with your fellow man,
 And something hellish in the heart that sates
 Its cruel greed and domineering hates."

For worship Peter's never in the lurch
 In any place, or any kind of church,
 Cathedral glorious built, or chapel rude,
 He finds in each his spiritual food;
 Ever he enters reverent, with one prayer;—
 "Oh! Father, grant thy wandering child to share
 The blessing sought by them who built this shrine—
 A sense of nearness to the Soul divine";—
 And from no congregation could he part
 Without a benediction in his heart.

"Good will," he says, "is true Canadian growth,
 And Toleration is a word I loathe,—
 It comes from times when every theolog
 Hankered to persecute, as some fierce dog
 Chained to a staple, winks with wicked eyes,

Shows snarling teeth, and still quiescent lies,
 Angry and devilish from tail to jaws,
 Because he's clamped—as bigots by our laws.
 To hearken brag of 'Toleration' here,
 Where all are equal, makes me kind of rear,
 And, if I swore, I'd launch my biggest curse
 Against such insolence. Can one be worse?
 Except, perhaps, that brawling arrogance
 Which roars opinion that our strain from France
 Should dumbly bear to have its mother tongue,
 Creed, laws, and customs trampled into dung,
 Because one set of soldiers long ago
 Climbing a hill by night, surprised their foe!
 Be hanged to conquerors' right! Our monarch's claim
 Is broadly founded on fair Freedom's name,
 And half the liberties which we entrench
 Came from the patient struggle of our French."

As Scots hold Scottish customs unco sound,
 As Erin is by Erin's sons renowned,
 As France's children celebrate her praise,
 As English folk are staunch for English ways,
 So Peter guides him by his native light;—
 "Whatever is Canadian, that is right!
 And if we change it of our own free will,
 Its right again, because Canadian still!
 By this great dogma, and by this alone
 Can native-born Canadians hold their own
 Against the meddling, not ill-meaning crew
 Of immigrant advisers What to do;
 By this alone the sound Canadian stands,
 Like all his forbears in their native lands."

Squared to this dogma he'll philosophize
 Smilingly contra to the imported Wise,
 Or Wiseacres, who rail at Separate Schools,
 Two tongues official, all the liberal rules
 Our Fathers made, by compromise benign,

To ease the creeds, the races, and incline
 All native hearts one patriot sense to share
 That here mankind is freer than elsewhere.

“ Homo-gen-e-ity,” he drawls, “ Absurd
 To make a fetich of the long-tailed word !
 And then proceed to allege that its command
 Is *Christian creed from public schools be banned*;
 A plan in Puritan Yankeeland evoked
 Mainly to keep one Christian creed provoked,
 And force its children to a double tax
 For schooling, lest their children’s faith relax.”

“ A sillier tyranny no country shows—
 Its somewhat as if every youngster’s nose
 To be snipt off were by an edict doomed,
 Because some few small noses were presumed
 Likely to relish incense if they grew
 To know its scent as parent noses do—
 Then every youthful nose were snipt—save those
 That went apart for incense when they chose!”

“ To teach the children reverence for a creed,
 No matter what, which duly taketh heed
 Of God’s perennial miracle, the World
 And all the lives about its orbit whirled,—
 To teach them conscience, duty, love, and awe,
 Respect for righteous ethics and for Law,
 But one sure way the Wise have ever found
 Since our first Fathers spaded up the ground,—
 And that’s to impart, in childhood’s earliest schools,
 A sense for guidance by religious rules.”

“ Give me a Methodist that’s methodist,
 A true-blue Lntheran, true-blue Calvinist,
 An Anglican who *is* all anglican,
 Or catholic Catholic,—then I’ve got a man
 Who’ll stand for genuine Right through thick and thin,
 And help guard Canada from rotten sin.”

“ Even a Chinaman who fears his Joss
 And burns a stick before his moral Boss,
 Is fitter far to help us run the State
 Than those greed-sodden empty-hearts who prate
 That plants, and beasts, and men must share one fate,
 Material atoms all, enlivened clod,
 Dust unto Dust, and nothing raised to God.”

“ A greedy public victimized by greed
 Women who wed determined not to breed,
 Virtue defined as wishy-washy cant
 Where long-haired men and short-haired women rant,
 That’s what they get, and get it more and more,
 Who oust all creeds from Education’s door;
 That’s what they get, a populace dead at heart
 To Him who still performs His chastening part,
 Whose mills still grind exceeding small, if slow;—
 Look at the grist the Yankees have to show;—

“ A Nation which, like Hope’s bright star, arose
 To flash long fear on Man’s oppressive foes,
 Now seeming destined to be saved at last,
 Controlled, directed contra to its past,
 By them whose teachers ever hold on high
 ’Tis Heaven’s command, Increase and Multiply.

“ Homo-gen-e-ity! And why should we
 Ignore the blessings of Diversity?”

“ Where several tongues, and many creeds prevail,
 Though equal all alike in Freedom’s pale,
 No sudden general madness strikes the throng
 And sweeps the whole to foolishness or wrong.”

“ We saw the solidarity of France
 For war, betray her to the Devil’s dance;
 We saw the solid States rise up in rage,
 An inconsistent, tyrant war to wage

For domination over brown allies
 Who'd served them faithfully, for Freedom's prize;
 We saw the solid English slowly worked
 Against their nature, to a war that irked
 Their inward, temperate sense that, largely, right
 Lay with the freemen whom they wrought to fight;—
 And many and many a woful slaughter more
 Must Truth lay at the Homogeneous door."

"Count up the dead by fever, shot and shell,
 Count up the cripples, count all tears that fell,
 Count up the orphan children of the strife,
 Count the long-yearning heart of parent, wife,
 Count the vast treasure, count the labour's waste,
 Count all the cost of passion's headlong haste,
 And then you'll know what *solid* Nation's pay
 When common impulse sweeps good sense away,
 Flushing the millions madly all at once
 With *Wisdom down and up the truculent Dunce!*"

"Give me to live where public matters wait
 The careful issue of the long debate,
 Where steady champions of divergent creeds
 And differing races urge their various needs,
 Where naught of serious consequence is done
 Unless approved as fraught with wrong to none,
 Where every honest man of every kind
 (Though momentary party passion blind)
 Shall know full well, within his secret heart,
 The adopted course is common-sense's part,
 Expedient in its time, and therefore sound
 For all alike within the Nation's bound."

"In such a land, though many a year we go
 So patient-cautious, neighbours call us slow,
 We shun the abyss, we move by Reason's light,
 We march as brothers, and we climb the height
 Where yet our flag shall gently be unfurled

Symbolic of a federated World,
Whose problem do we daily solve while we
Climb upward, peaceful in Diversity.”

So Peter Ottawa lives, full well content
To bide the lot he deems as Heaven-sent;
Keeping his glorious ancestries in mind,
To all traditions piously inclined;
He'll plod, and laugh, and hope, and boast, and roam
About the enormous tracts he calls his Home,
And thank the Lord that things are as they are,
And glad his soul with dreams of futures far,—
Whereby, perchance, full many a time he stands
Within The House not builded up of Hands.

E. W. THOMSON



