

## **WEIGHING DELIGHT AND DOLE IN CANADIAN POETRY-,**

**NELA BUREU RAMOS  
UNIVERSIDAD DE LLEIDA**

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The aim of this article is to highlight this dialectic of opposites, which gives tension and muscularity to Canadian poetry, by opening an angle on the poetic production of Canadian artists such as the Confederation poets, Edwin John Pratt (1882-1964), and John Newlove (1938-) who are outstanding figures in the history of Canada's literary panorama.

The phrase "Confederation poets" refers to a group of writers who were almost born with the nation since none of them was more than nine years old at the time of Confederation in 1867. Their work constitutes a very important part of Canada's cultural heritage because they were the first to produce a new and independent perception of their country by adapting European cultural trends to the particulars of the Canadian scene.



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When Wilfred Campbell (1858-1918),<sup>1</sup> Bliss Carman (1861-1929), Archibald Lampman (1861-1899) and Duncan Campbell Scott (1862-1947) were born as a school in 1880 after the publication of *Orion and Other*

*Poems* by Charles G. D. Roberts, the Romantic thrust had lost some of its initial force though its spirit survived in the work of Victorian artists such as Tennyson and Arnold who continued to use Romantic conventions to articulate their experiences.

The retreat into nature, the sense of irreparable loss in time, the feeling of serene solitude, the confusing sadness in response to nature's beauty and the world of dreams as somehow preferable to reality were still present in the work of post-Romantic writers both in Britain and Canada. However, the idea that man could define and realize himself in his encounter with nature was much more prominent in the work of the Confederation poets than in the writings of their British contemporaries because the Canadian wilderness was too overwhelmingly present to be ignored and the new nation needed a sustaining myth for its nascent literature. Man's kinship with nature was, therefore, a central theme in the poetry of the Confederation artists.

However, the Wordsworthian idea that all is well with nature did not always fit the Canadian reality. In Canada, the landscape contained wilder, more disturbing aspects than were to be found in the Lake District of Wordsworth, in Tennyson's Lincolnshire or Arnold's Oxfordshire. Thus, as the Confederation poets looked at nature through Romantic lenses but were also aware of the particulars of the Canadian scene, a certain ambiguity towards the natural world was inevitable. This ambiguity resulted from the combination of the Wordsworthian feeling of contentment with nature and references to the latent hostility that the Confederation artists perceived in the Canadian wilderness. Wilfred Campbell speaks of the "joyous tremor" he experienced in a wintry landscape where:

The fields were dead, the wind had lost its will,  
And all the lands were hushed by wood and hill,  
In those grey, withered days.<sup>2</sup>

And Archibald Lampman explains that he felt "A nameless and unnatural cheer / A pleasure secret and austere" in a fearsome and inhospitable site. The following lines express a kind of death-like trance induced by the menacing elements lurking in the Canadian landscape:

It was a bleak and sandy spot  
And all about, the vacant plot  
Was peopled and inhabited  
By scores of mulleins long since dead.  
A silent and forsaken brood  
In that mute opening of the wood,

So shrivelled and so thin they were,  
So grey, so haggard, and austere,  
Not plants at all they seemed to me,  
But rather some spare company  
Of hermit folk, who long ago,  
wandering to and fro,  
Had chanced upon this lonely way,  
And rested thus, till death one day  
Surprised them at their compline prayer,  
And left them standing lifeless there.<sup>3</sup>

It could be argued with reason that Romanticism also includes the attraction for sinister and frightening scenes as exemplified in Gothic writings and, more specifically, in the work of Edgar Allan Poe. However, in the case of the Confederation poets the mixture of delight and fear towards the natural world does not entail morbid tendencies but a desire to render the contradictions inherent to the Canadian experience by combining references to the fearsome nature of the Canadian wilderness with the celebration of its awesome beauty and invigorating power.

Apart from conveying the special characteristics of the Canadian experience, the aim of the Confederation poets was to celebrate the robustness of mind and body bred by a northern environment as G. Ross Roy suggests in his book *Le Sentiment de la Nature dans la Poésie Canadienne Anglaise*. This critic explains that the awesome scenery of the Canadian landscape forced its artists to embrace the idea that nature in Canada was a refuge and a source of joy only for robust spirits since the weak were likely to perish without ever experiencing its invigorating power:

Depuis Wordsworth on avait l'habitude de voir dans la nature un bien agréable même salubre, où l'on pouvait échapper au souci de la vie quotidienne. Or, les premiers poètes qui cherchèrent à chanter le Canada avec une voix nouvelle, c'est à dire effectivement à partir de Charles G. D. Roberts, étaient déjà nourris de ce sentiment dès leurs premières études. Et c'est justement cette attitude qui, nous en sommes persuadés, est au fond de leur malaise vis-à-vis de la nature canadienne. Car comment peut-on concilier l'idée de la nature réparatrice et celle de la nature telle qu'elle est parfois au Canada, dure impitoyable, effrayante? La plupart des poètes ont été poussés à épouser l'idée que la nature canadienne est un refuge seulement pour les caractères forts, car les faibles périssent sans jamais la gagner.<sup>4</sup>

The writings of the Confederation poets contain enough evidence to support Ross Roy's argument. In his book *The Friendship of Nature*, for example, Bliss Carman writes:

There is in reality a power in Nature to rest and console us but few are so strong as to be able to rely on that lonely beneficence; and we must seek the gentler aid of our fellow beings. Indeed, only those who are humane at heart can rightly hear the obscure word of Nature; while those who have been reared not far from the wild school of the forest make the best citizens and friends.<sup>4</sup>

This extract condenses the characteristics of Canadian Romanticism as summarized by Ross in the previous quotation. The Romantic belief that nature is doubly precious because it exalts the spirit and leads to love of man pervades Carman's words, but the idea that only the strong subsist in defiance of natural rigours is also present.

Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott also offer us examples of the fearsome yet fortifying nature of the Canadian wilderness. In Lampman's "Storm," for instance the human and the natural world are presented as two manifestations of life's fiery spirit at its highest and fullest expression:

Nay, Wind, I hear you, desperate brother, in your might  
Whistle and howl; I shall not tarry long.  
And though the day be blind and fierce, the night  
Be dense and wild, I still am glad and strong  
To meet you face to face; through all your gust and drifting  
With brow held high, my joyous hands uplifting,  
I cry you song for song.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, in "The Height of Land" Duncan Campbell Scott suggests that, in Canada, the sense of brotherhood with nature is a difficult achievement demanding unusual strength and courage and that man's physical and moral greatness is attested to by his potential identity with nature. Scott speaks of:

The lonely north enlaced with lakes and streams,  
And the enormous targe of Hudson Bay,  
Glimmering all night  
In the cold Arctic light;<sup>7</sup>

and although the emphasis is on the north as a reservoir of sanctity "that gives the inarticulate part/ Of our strange being one moment of release," the

menacing nature of the Canadian wilderness is also implicit in the terms "lonely," "enormous," "night" and "cold" as it is in the poems of Archibald Lampman and in the writings of the other members of the Confederation group.

E. J. Pratt clearly deviates from the Romantic assumption that all is well with nature but he does not renounce the vision of Canada's northern environment as an inextinguishable source of physical and spiritual vigour. As a consequence of this, the ambivalent response to nature which is a salient trait in the poetry of the Confederation group comes to the fore with force in the poems of E. J. Pratt whose work dominates the first half of the 20th century.

One basic difference between the writings of E. J. Pratt and the writings of the Confederation poets lies in Pratt's realistic stance towards the natural world, a stance that places him in the context of modern poetry for, as I. A. Richards points out, one of the most outstanding characteristics of contemporary verse is the secularization of nature:

The transference from the Magical View of the world to the scientific, a change so great that it is perhaps only paralleled historically by the change from whatever adumbration of a world picture preceded the Magical View, to the Magical View itself.<sup>8</sup>

By the Magical View Richards means the spiritual conception of nature, the belief that the physical world has a significance which is not subject to scientific explanation.

As we have seen, this stance was adopted by the Confederation poets who saw the Canadian landscape as being permeated by a divine spirit that transformed it into a beneficial environment in spite of its roughness. In contrast to this view, Pratt stresses the mechanistic and dangerous nature of his physical surroundings thereby destroying the illusion of the wilderness as an expression of beatitude. For the first time, the evil and destructive element inherent in the natural world is fully admitted into Canadian poetry.

To a great extent, Pratt's realistic vision of nature is due to his childhood experiences. He was born and brought up on the coast of Newfoundland, an extremely harsh environment that put a premium on the daring qualities that ensure human survival. His early poems are saturated with maritime imagery and references to the high death toll the sea imposed on the Newfoundland fishing communities. His poem "Erosion" is especially poignant for it reproduces the ravaging force of the elements and the stoical endurance of the people who were acquainted with death as a tragically repeated experience:

It took the sea a thousand years  
A thousand years to trace  
The granite features of this cliff  
In crag and scarp and base.

It took the sea an hour one night,  
An hour of storm to place the sculpture  
Of these granite seams  
Upon a woman's face.<sup>9</sup>

To a great extent, Pratt's early contact with death accounts for his difficulty in adopting a Romantic attitude towards a landscape which he never experienced as being a benevolent attendant on human emotions. For the Confederation poets nature was a mother, a harsh and demanding one, but a mother nonetheless. For Pratt it was often a murderess to whom he was, however, powerfully attracted. In a poem entitled "The Shark" Pratt describes the horrifying beauty and ferocious efficiency of one of the greatest killers of all the oceans. The shark is seen as a perfect mechanism which ultimately represents the beautiful but also the menacing and uncaring nature of the Canadian wilderness:

His body was tubular  
And tapered  
And smoke-blue,  
And as he passed the wharf  
He turned,  
And snapped at a flat fish  
That was dead and floating.  
And I saw the flash of a white throat,  
And a double row of white teeth,  
And eyes of metallic grey,  
Hard and narrow and slit.

Then out of Harbor

...  
He swam—  
That strange fish,  
Tubular, tapered, smoke-blue,  
Part vulture, part wolf,  
Part neither—for his blood was cold.<sup>10</sup>

The differences between the poetry of E. J. Pratt and that of the Confederation group are evident in this poem. Pratt emphasizes the

dangerous element lurking in the Canadian wilderness and thus departs from their emotive stance towards the natural world. He also substitutes the technical vocabulary of modern age for the Romantic diction of his predecessors to describe the animal with Imagist poignancy and precision. These characteristics illustrate Pratt's modern vein which is also seen in the poet's love of detail, his realism and his detachment from the action related. However, the tone of admiration for nature that pervades the poetry of the Confederation group is also perceived in Pratt's poem through the fascination that the animal exerts on the artist.

The same feeling of awe in front of the natural world is evident in "Towards the Last Spike," a long poem the subtitle of which appeared in the original edition of 1952 as:

A verse-Panorama of the struggle to Build the first Canadian Transcontinental from the Time of the proposed Terms of Union with British Columbia (1870) to the hammering of the Last Spike in the Eagle Pass (1885).<sup>11</sup>

In this long narrative, Pratt gives a detailed and well-documented account of the parliamentary debates that took place before and during the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and describes the unimaginable natural barriers the builders had to overcome before the driving in of the last spike. He tells us that the prairies were relatively easy to conquer:

The grass that fed the buffalo was turned over.  
The black alluvial mould laid bare, the bed  
levelled and scraped.<sup>12</sup>

However, the Laurentian Shield and the Rockies were obstacles that "put cramps in hands and feet / Merely by the suggestion of the venture." Then, Pratt endows the mass of precambrian rock along the north shore of Lake Superior with mythological status by likening it to a female dragon that had lain undisturbed for aeons "snug" against another huge reptile representing the full extent of the Shield:

On the North Shore a reptile lay asleep—  
A hybrid that the myths might have conceived  
But not delivered, as progenitor  
Of crawling, gliding things upon earth.  
She lay snug in the folds of a huge boa  
Whose tail had covered Labrador and swished  
Atlantic ties, whose body coiled itself

Around Hudson Bay, then curled up north  
 Through Manitoba and Saskatchewan  
 To great Slave Lake. In continental reach  
 The neck went past the Great Bear Lake until  
 Its head was hidden in the Arctic Seas.  
 This folded reptile was asleep or dead;  
 So motionless, she seemed stone dead — just seemed:  
 She was too old for death, too old for life,  
 For as if jealous of all living forms  
 She had lain there before bivalves began  
 To catacomb their shells on western mountains.<sup>13</sup>

It is in this kind of environment, northern, beautiful and dangerous, that Pratt places his characters endowing them with almost superhuman faith and courage. Pratt's heroes never shrink back in fear of danger and, in this, he is more Romantic than modern because he is essentially optimistic about man's potential and celebrates progress, strength and resilience instead of brooding on life-destructing forces.

Like the Confederation poets, E. J. Pratt realized that Canadian history was an important chapter in a distinct and even a unique human endeavour, the civilisation of northern and Arctic lands and that it was from this landscape that Canadian artists had to make their myths in order to forge a national consciousness. Besides, Pratt was acutely aware of the fact that Canada as a young country lacked the epic phase that enriched other cultures, so he attempted to fill this gap by producing extended treatments of two epic stories — one going back three centuries and involving the physical endurance and religious fervour of the French missionaries martyred by the Iroquois in 1649 as contained in "Brébeuf and His Brethren," and the other belonging to the most immediate past and exploring a secular, even technological subject such as the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

In both poems, as well as in "The Shark" and "The Titanic," Pratt emphasizes the element of risk, danger and destruction in the Canadian wilderness but he also celebrates its magnificent beauty and therapeutic qualities. And, in doing so, he follows a line which was initiated by the Confederation poets and which has never been broken as proved by the number of contemporary Canadian poets such as Patrick Lane, Dale Zieroth, Al Purdy and John Newlove, to name just a few, who have incorporated this dialectic of opposites to their work.

The poetry of John Newlove is especially significant in this respect because it constitutes a superb example of the Canadians' ambivalent attitude towards nature. In some of his poems, the emphasis is on the anxiety caused

by the vastness and emptiness of the prairie, his homeland. In some other pieces, however, it is the celebration of Canada's savage beauty that is immediately perceived, though the fearsome nature of the wilderness is always present.

John Newlove fills his poems with people who are permanently dissatisfied with their land and with themselves for no sooner do they arrive at a place than they move in the opposite direction. If we concentrate on the universal significance of Newlove's poems it is easy to identify the constant wanderings of his characters with the predicament of modern man. Alienation is the term that best describes the atmosphere created by the aimless and restless pursuit of Newlove's personae who become increasingly estranged from their environment and from themselves. Like Eliot's hollow men, the people in Newlove's poems move, robot-like, in a waste land, a mechanized world where there seems to be no possibility of rebirth or regeneration.

However, the universal significance of Newlove's message does not take us out of the Canadian prairie. On the contrary, the anxiety that pervades some of his poems brings the poet's homeland into focus for it is the limitless, featureless and solitary prairie that constitutes the main source of inspiration in Newlove's poetic production. Indeed, as soon as we delve into the poet's world we realize that the prairie is a central theme and a dominant metaphor in Newlove's poems. In "Ride Off Any Horizon," for example, John Newlove recreates the wanderings and vicissitudes of prairie pioneers and the rebellion, defeat and dispersal of Indian tribes. Then, he takes us out of the prairie into the cold and dehumanized atmosphere of big industrial cities and establishes correspondences between the "blown dry and empty" landscape of his homeland and the shallowness of modern man:

Ride off any horizon  
 and let the measure fall  
 where it may —

among the piles of bones  
 that dot the prairie

in vision and history  
 (the buffalo and deer,

dead indians, dead settlers  
 the frame of lost houses

Ride off any horizon  
 and let the measure fall —

where it may;  
it doesn't have to be

the prairie. It could be  
the cold soul of cities

blown empty by commerce  
and desiring commerce  
to fill up emptiness.<sup>14</sup>

Although this monotonous and repetitive rhythm may suggest stillness, the effect produced by the poem is not a static one. For a start, the title, which reappears at the beginning of the six sections that form the composition, triggers off ideas of movement. The term "ride" spurs us into motion towards an unreachable horizon which is none other than that of the prairie. Then, we are hurled backwards and forwards from past to present and from present to past as Newlove recreates conditions of existence on the prairie and, by extension, in the rest of the world.

The idea of movement also pervades "The Sky," where the plains, and the mountains are described as places that only inspire a desire to escape from them in spite of their beauty:

Never knowing how we got there  
one day we woke and saw the sky,  
limitless, serene, capable  
of black clouds and lightning,  
the land limitless, yellow  
with grain in summertime,  
light green in spring, stretching  
to the edge of the world  
but never ending, and it made us  
want to go.<sup>15</sup>

However, it is "The Double Headed Snake" that best reflects the dialectic of opposites present in Canadian poetry. As the title itself suggests, this composition expresses the idea that the Canadians' attitude to their land is decidedly double-edged though the emphasis is clearly on the vivifying effect of the wilderness.

The poem is full of references to the eeriness and beauty of the Canadian landscape. The lines exude fear and exaltation and the whole poem is studded with images that bring forth man's dread of, and admiration for nature. These contradictory feelings account for the energy and vitality that pervades the

poem. Even though the poet speaks about the fear-inspiring nature of the Canadian landscape, this fear has nothing to do with a traumatic or paralysing experience. On the contrary, Newlove's fear is the emotive and pleasurable fear conventionally associated with the sublime and, therefore, it is a stimulating feeling that encourages man to further exploration:


... What's lovely  
is whatever makes the adrenaline run;  
therefore I count terror and fear among  
the greatest beauty. The greatest  
beauty is to be alive

Beauty's what makes  
the adrenaline run. Fear at night  
on the level plains, with no horizon  
and the stars too bright, wind bitter  
even in June, in winter  
the snow harsh and blowing.  
is what makes me  
shiver, not the cold air alone.<sup>16</sup>

Through the fusion of fear and beauty and the identification of the resulting energy with a life-giving force, the prairie, like the rest of the Canadian landscape, emerges as a forbidding but alluring environment.

Needless to say, in "The Double-Headed Snake" John Newlove is not only talking about place. As is true with most Canadian artists who describe nature, his vision encompasses far grander and more complex vistas than just those of plains and mountains. Through this poem, Newlove broods upon the polarities of life, on beauty and terror; on love and hate; on hope and despair and implies that these positive and negative aspects of existence are so inextricably intertwined that sometimes it is impossible to experience them separately. John Newlove's message is also a celebration of the Nietzschean courage to be and to progress that raises man to the level of a hero. However, as has already been suggested, this universal significance does not blur the vision of the "double-headed" nature of the Canadian landscape which is a central theme in John Newlove poetry.

Like his predecessors, the Confederation poets and E. J. Pratt, John Newlove marries contradictory terms to refer to his homeland and, like them, he implies that the Canadian landscape offers man the possibility of living on a grander scale. As may be expected, the echoes of geographical determinism so strongly heard in the poetry of the Confederation artists and, more faintly, in E. J. Pratt, are almost absent in John Newlove's

compositions. However, his themes and attitudes are unmistakably grafted on the Canadian tradition initiated by the Confederation group and continued by E. J. Pratt in the first half of this century. Indeed, with John Newlove we are able to experience the contradictions inherent to the Canadian experience from the point of view of a modern sensibility as each age has its own rendering of the same ideas. 

## NOTES

1. Wilfred Campbell has been included here because, although he is not normally considered a member of the Confederation group, his poetry reveals that he shared most of their concerns and ways of writing.

2. Wilfred Campbell, "How One Winter Came in the Lake Region," in Brown and Bennett 1982: 1.153-154.

3. Archibald Lampman, "In November," in Brown and Bennett 1982: 183-184.

4. Roy 1961: 14. Translation:

Since Wordsworth, nature was seen as a pleasurable and salutary place where man was able to escape the problems of everyday life. This feeling is present in the work of the first Canadian poets who, from the time of Charles G. D. Roberts, sought to celebrate Canada with a new voice. We are convinced that this feeling accounts for the sense of uneasiness that pervades their vision of nature. Indeed, how is it possible to reconcile the idea of nature as a healing environment with the reality of the Canadian wilderness which is sometimes cold, merciless and frightening? The majority of poets were forced to embrace the idea that nature in Canada is a shelter only for strong characters since the weak are likely to perish without ever achieving communion with it.

5. Carman 1913: 142-143.

6. Archibald Lampman, "Storm," in Brown and Bennett 1982: 181-182.

7. Duncan Campbell Scott, "The Height of Land," in Brown and Bennett 1982: 207-210.

8. Richards 1979: 137-138.

9. E.J. Pratt, "Erosion," in Pratt 1989: 1.254.

10. E.J. Pratt, "The Shark," in Pratt 1989: 1.66.

11. E. J. Pratt, "Towards the Last Spike," in Pratt 1989: 2.218.

12. Pratt 1989: 2.226, lines 830-832.

13. Pratt 1989: 2.870-887.

14. John Newlove, "Ride Off Any Horizon," in Crozier and Hyland 1987: 152-156.

15. John Newlove, "The Sky," in Crozier and Hyland 1987: 156.

16. John Newlove, "The Double-Headed Snake," in Crozier and Hyland 1987: 164.

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