THE CANADIAN FORUM: *LITERARY CATALYST*

by
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[For the younger Canadian writers] *The Monthly Criterion, The Dial, The Forum* and odd copies of *transition* are their immediate textbooks, and they occasionally appear (with much fluttering in the dove cotes) in some one or another of these and similar journals.

Leo Kennedy, *The Canadian Mercury,* 1929

One of the most important agents in the development of a modern critical spirit in Canada between the wars was the *Canadian Forum.* The aim of its editors, stated in the first issue of October 1920, was "to secure a freer and more informed discussion of public questions and, behind the strife of parties, to trace and value those developments of art and letters which are distinctively Canadian." Because it provided the only forum for critical discussion of modernism in general, and Canadian art and poetry in particular, during that vital period when Canada first emerged as a modern nation, we find in its pages the intellectual context for much of our present poetry and criticism. Douglas Bush, E. J. Pratt, Raymond Knister, Robert Finch, A. J. M. Smith, Dorothy Livesay, F. R. Scott, Leo Kennedy and A. M. Klein published in the *Forum* in the twenties; E. K. Brown, A. G. Bailey, Roy Daniells, Malcolm Ross, Northrop Frye, Earle Birney and Marshall MacLuhan in the thirties; and Margaret Avison, P. K. Page, Ralph Gustafson, Patrick Anderson, Desmond Pacey, Miriam Waddington, Louis Dudek and Irving Layton during the forties. Over a period of less than thirty years, the *Forum* reflected the poetry and criticism of the major figures associated with the development of a modern Canadian literature.

Founded in 1920 by a group of faculty members at the University of Toronto, which included Barker Fairley, S. H. Hooke, Gilbert Jackson and C. B. Sissons, the *Forum* was the offspring of a University College undergraduate magazine entitled, appropriately, *The Rebel* (1917-1920).

Barker Fairley recalls that it was he who first proposed a national magazine ("Let's go to the country with it") and that Gilbert Jackson suggested the name for the new magazine.[1] The early twenties were buoyant times; Canada had just come out of the Great War as a nation and the task of building the new nationality at home now lay ahead. To this end the *Canadian Forum* directed its attention. The first editorial expressed the manifestly nationalist desire for opinion that is "Made in Canada":

> Too often our convictions are borrowed from London, Paris, or New York. Real independence is not the product of tariffs and treaties. It is a spiritual thing. No country has reached its full stature, which makes its goods at home, but not its faith and philosophy.

The magazine was designed to be a 'forum' for informed public opinion on art and literature, politics, theology, and science, with particular emphasis (reflecting Fairley's interests) on Canadian art and poetry.

During the early years when Fairley ('Inconstant Reader') was literary editor, the *Forum* was less receptive to the new poetry than it was to new political and social concerns. Nonetheless, it was the most progressive journal of the period, "our Bible" recalls the poet and historian A. G. Bailey,[2] and occupied a midway position between the university journal and the popular magazine. When compared with the popular magazines, some of which had circulations of as high as 90,000, the *Forum* possessed an extremely small list of subscribers, no more than 1900 in 1929 as estimated by one of its contributing editors, F. R. Scott.[3] Nonetheless, as the following piece of doggerel illustrates — "The intelligentsia's keen quorum/Murmurs above the latest *Forum*"[4] — the *Forum* was a trend setter whose readership extended beyond its subscription lists as copies were frequently shared. Other contemporary magazines were basically conservative. *Saturday Night* (1887-), firmly aligned with the business community, although sometimes critical of its practices, cautiously promoted Canadian literature but published little of it. *Willison's Monthly* (1925-1929) featured an article in 1926 on Wilson MacDonald, whose poetic was a continuation of the 1880's romanticism of Roberts and Carman; the *Canadian Magazine* (1893-1939) followed in 1927 with a

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[1]Interviews with Barker Fairley, June 1974 and January 1975.

[2]Correspondence with A. G. Bailey, February 1974.

[3]Interview with F. R. Scott, January 1975.

[4]From a parody by Nat Benson, Toronto poet and man of letters, as recalled by A. G. Bailey. Correspondence with A. G. Bailey, May 1975.

second article on MacDonald. In the same year, the Forum was publishing Pratt's "The Sea Cathedral," Smith's "The Lonely Land," and his impressive "Varia."

In effect the *Forum* became the first modern Canadian magazine establishing, as did H. L. Mencken's the *American Mercury* in the United States, the prevailing intellectual tone for the twenties — a tone generally firm but genial, a sometimes incongruous combination of intelligent criticism with exclamation, parody and caricature: all reminiscent of the broad 'clubby' humour of G. K. Chesterton. Several of Pratt's verses of mixed genres, including *The Witches' Brew,* were very likely a response to coterie witticisms first raised in the *Forum,*[5] and others, such as "Carlo," "The Cachalot" and "The Depression Ends" were first published there. Indeed, to follow the issues of the *Forum* throughout the twenties is to trace a transformation in literary taste. After the pale, derivative verse of the first five volumes, the humour, energy and realism of Pratt's "The Cachalot" astonishes: it is this context which explains the delight of Canadian reviewers on first encountering Pratt's 'new' and 'original' poetic voice. In the early years, references to the development of Canadian art and poetry are tenuous at best but by 1925, Barker Fairley is able to record the highly successful reception given to the Group of Seven with their London exhibition. In 1927, following the publication of Pratt's *Titans* (which included "The Cachalot"), Fairley exults:

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[5]In early issues of the *Canadian Forum,* there are regular semi-jocular "literary competitions" offering, for example, a prize of five dollars for the "best funeral ode on John Barleycorn" (April, May and July 1921) and a prize for a literary offering on the topic, "Does Prohibition Prohibit?" (January, February and March 1921). In the May 1921 issue, there is an article, "Wet Ways" by W. D. Woodhead, prefaced by a line from Milton's *Paradise Lost,* "Of Prohibition, root of all our woes," and in a later issue, a satire on Prohibition, "If Winter Comes" (April 1922). This latter issue also concludes Douglas Bush's amusingly forthright essay, "A Plea for Original Sin," which argues that if Canada is to have a national literature, Canadians must learn "to sin gladly." Pratt was reading the *Forum* at this period and the first printing of his poem, "The Ice-Floes," immediately follows Bush's article. Pratt's satire *The Witches' Brew* (1925), a reflection of the prevailing debate on Prohibition, attributes the fall or 'original sin' of Tom, the sea-cat, to an alcoholic apple. Not surprisingly, this action takes place within the context of a parody of Milton's *Paradise Lost.* In an early version of *The Witches' Brew* in a section entitled "The Lament of the Wets," Milton is presented as arguing for 'wet ways': "From me no further vapourings/Of nectar in the Eden springs/ . . . henceforth . . . One song I chant, one goal pursue,/'Tis of the witches and their brew." We can sssume that all of these allusions would be familiar to Pratt's friends and colleagues at the University of Toronto as many were regular readers of the *Forum* and contributors to it. The sense of an 'in-group' joke would have added considerably to the presentation of the poem when Pratt first read it aloud to friends at a dinner celebrating his fifth wedding anniversary.

> Best of all, we recognize, almost for the first time in Canadian poetry, the existence, behind and around the narrative, of a mental climate which is not Anglo-Canadian, but which truly belongs to the uncivilized world. Take any previous Canadian poet and you have to admit that an Englishman residing in Canada might have written his work. No Englishman could have written *Titans.* (February 1927)

In 1921 and 1923, E. K. Broadus rails against the unstructured new poetry ("the free verse poets . . . neglect to *build* . . . . Most of their work . . . is like broken glass, sparkling in every facet, but unassimilated to any larger purpose") and against Canadian criticism ("We may have real literary criticism in Canada — some day. But before we even begin to have it, we must learn to respect the tools of our trade, we must learn to say what we mean and mean what we say.")[6] But by 1927, we are introduced to the vigorous *vers libre* of A. J. M. Smith's "The Lonely Land," a poem which appears to have been generated in part by the *Forum*'s emphasis on the Group of Seven.[7]

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[6]E. K. Broadus, "The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet," (May 1923); "Criticism — or Puffery," (October 1922).

[7]It is possible that the relation between the new sense of landscape — vast, strong, lonely, northern — the Group of Seven and the new poetry was facilitated by the *Canadian Forum* which encouraged both art and poetry. Varley's painting "A Wind-Swept Shore," for example, is reproduced in the April 1925 issue of the *Forum;* in March of the following year, A. Y. Jackson finds in the new art a "harsher climate . . . we have a pine tree bending under a boisterous wind, with a stretch of grey broken water beyond," and the motif "of pines silhouetted against sky and water." In a review of July 1924, the British critic Rupert Lee cites "Jack Pine," "September Gale," "Solemn Land," and "Stormy Weather near Georgian Bay"; commenting on the latter, Lee emphasizes Varley's "realism" and "strength." Smith's poem "The Lonely Land," originally subtitled "Group of Seven" when first published in the *McGill Fortnightly Review* of 1926, is perhaps one of the best illustrations of the close connection between the two art forms. The title, "The Lonely Land," combines the titles of two earlier paintings: J. E. H. MacDonald's "Solemn Land" (1921) and "The Lonely North" (1913). Although Smith had not seen the 1925 Montreal Exhibition of the Group of Seven, he had seen reproductions of their work and he was reading the *Forum* during this period, which, as we have seen, discussed the art in detail and printed woodcuts of northern scenes. Certainly "The Lonely Land" reflects Smith's awareness of Thomson's "The Jack Pine" (1916-17) and Varley's "Stormy Weather near Georgian Bay" (1920). In a final version of the poem published in June 1929, a stanza is added: "This is the beauty/of strength/broken by strength/and still strong." Smith finds in "The Lonely Land" the essential quality of "strength" that Lee had identified in Varley's painting. The dominant literary influence on the poem, reflected in the first stanza, is that of H. D.'s "Oread."

Cedar and jagged fir
Uplift accusing barbs
Against the grey
And cloud-piled sky;
And in the bay
Blown spume and windrift
And thin, bitter spray
Snap
At the whirling sky;
And the pine trees
Lean one way. (July 1927)

This is followed a year later by Smith's manifesto for Canadian poetry, "Wanted — Canadian Criticism," which, like Mencken's "A Criticism of Criticism of Criticism," says what it means and means what it says. What Smith finds in existing criticism is mere Canada-consciousness, "a mixture of blind optimism and materialistic patriotism, a kind of my-mother-drunk-or-sober complex."[8] Although 'Inconstant Reader' makes continued reference to Hardy, Doughty and Goethe throughout the decade, by 1930 he is candidly admitting the greatness of D. H. Lawrence's vision,[9] and in 1929 S. E. Vaughan is commenting on the grace and force of Katherine Mansfield's short stories.[10] In the issue of January, 1931, Dorothy Livesay published a short story entitled "Beach Sunday" in which the emotional struggles of the heroine, Freda, are distinctly Lawrentian. In effect, this shift in taste over the decade represents the movement from a complacent acceptance of the practices of the Georgians to a growing awareness of modern poetry, prose and criticism.

As the most influential magazine of the period, the *Forum* is a useful indication of the changing intellectual currents within which a modern Canadian poetry and criticism came into being. Throughout the twenties, we find continued political discussions of nationalism, continentalism and internationalism and these issues are reflected in a series of debates regarding the possibilities of a national Canadian literature and its position in relation to international literature. The new nationalism identified in a *Forum* editorial of April, 1926 ("Anyone who travels much in Canada cannot but be impressed with the recent development of [a strong spirit of nationalism]") is reflected in the literary sphere by vigorous demands for a native literature. However, political nationalism was somewhat in opposi-

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[8]A. J. M. Smith, "Wanted-Canadian Criticism," (April 1928).

[9]Barker Fairley, "Preferences," (May 1930).

[10]S. E. Vaughan, Review of *The Letters of Katherine Mansfield* (March 1929).

tion to an emerging continentalism displayed in several of F. H. Underhill's "O Canada" columns and decidedly opposed to internationalism — the prevailing spirit of the twenties. Witty and incisive, Underhill points out the discrepancy between theory ("on the subject of Americanism the ordinary Canadian behaves like a fundamentalist discussing modernism") and practice ("outside of business hours we read American magazines, listen in on American radio programs, talk American slang"):

> The real problem on this continent is not the political relationship between two supposedly mutually exclusive and independent entities called Canada and the United States, but the economic relationship between the classes who make up the North American community. What is this Americanism about which we hear so much? It is government of the people by big business and for big business. . . . The question whether Canada is to become wholly American depends on which elements in her economic life will ultimately prevail . . . . If they prevail indefinitely Canada will become only a geographical expression. (July 1929)

The literary correlative of continentalism is the view that there exists a common North American literature, a view suggested by a contributor to the *Forum* in his reference to "our Sandburg" and by Mencken in the *American Mercury* when he classifies Haliburton's *The Clockmaker* as an inferior example of American literature.

More importantly, however, Canadian nationalism, whether political or literary, was in direct opposition to the then current climate of internationalism; as a contributor to the *Canadian Bookman* wrote: "It is the hope of many that the world is done with the national creeds that make war necessary."[11] A similar view appears in a *Forum* editorial of March 1930 supporting General Smuts and the "League for National Commonwealth": "Nationalism reached its apogee in the post-war settlement, and internationalism is the spirit of the age we are entering now." Ironically, the event that had precipated Canada's first resurgence of national sentiment since early post-Confederation days, the Great War, had also demonstrated the extreme dangers of an excessive nationalism. From the viewpoint of a developing national literature, it was unfortunate that Canada's strongest sense of "the new nationality" came at the very point when nationalism in all of its forms was suspect and at a time when a growing cultural continentalism made such a position difficult if not

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[11]G. R. Stevens, "War Moods and War Poetry in Retrospective," *Canadian Bookman* (December 1920).

impossible to maintain. In 1919, when Canadian nationality was confirmed at the Peace Conference of Versailles, Canada had been a Dominion in name for only fifty-two years. Partly because the colonial habit of looking abroad for cultural standards had continued, and partly because of economic circumstances resulting in an extremely weak book and periodical press, there had been little opportunity to consolidate a national literature. Lacking a solidly developed native tradition and subject to the literary internationalism that dominated the twenties Canadians found the waves of new poetry emanating from the United States and Great Britain irresistible. In literary practice, continentalism and internationalism became one.

We find in the pages of the *Forum* throughout the 1920's many of the national versus international arguments which are to dominate Canadian criticism for the next forty years, some crystallized in A. J. M. Smith's "Wanted-Canadian Criticism," others gathered up and expanded in E. K. Brown's *On Canadian Poetry* (1943) and still unresolved. In this context, it is important to note that there has been some shifting in the meaning of these terms in the past decades. One of the major issues of the forties, the debate between the 'nationalism' of the *First Statement* group and the 'internationalism' of the *Preview* group originally referred to the leftist political affiliations of two occasionally rival groups. It was secondarily and later a reaction to the "native" and "cosmopolitan" categories of A. J. M. Smith's *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943). This debate became identified in the 1960's as solely literary, largely perhaps, because it presented such a convenient shorthand for one of the central problems of an emerging Canadian literature: 'What is to be the relation between the native and the international strands of a new literature?' — a problem not without political dimensions and first encountered in the pages of the *Forum* during the twenties.

As seen by Barker Fairley, the problem of the new literature was intimately linked with Canada's unique position between Great Britain and the United States. "If we have a Canadian literature," he queries, "what sort of face shall the baby have? . . . Shall we make it turn East or South?"

> Those who watch the signs carefully enough can easily distinguish in our literary life a British-American tug-of-war, less ostentatious than the political one which we all know so well — the venerable tug-of-war headed by Goldwin Smith on the one side and Lionel Curtis on the other — but not less real and — who knows? — possibly more important in the long run. Or at least more symptomatic. For the way the literature goes, that way the deeper spirit and instincts will go, and the country's politics will trim its sails accordingly. (February 1929)

Fairley perceives that the issue is a complex one; those who bristle with rage at the sight of the stars and stripes on a yacht in the Georgian Bay are probably at the same moment sitting on the rocks "reading Carl Sandburg and damning Tennyson in their hearts. Which is the deeper instinct," he wonders, "the hating Tennyson or the hating the Stars-and-Stripes?" It is this curious bifurcation of Canadian life which is to persist for the next forty years: on the one hand, an acceptance of British or American literary culture but, on the other hand, a rejection of both Britain and America as political entities because of the threat they represent to an emerging national life.

To follow the discussions of Canadian literature in the *Forum* for the first decade is to recognize a similar bifurcation in the attitude to Canadian literature. Ostensibly, the *Forum* wanted a literature and a criticism that was "Made in Canada" but, offended by the boosterism of the newly-formed Canadian Authors' Association and appalled by the weakness of so-called "Canadian literary classics," the *Forum* writers, like Barker Fairley, Douglas Bush and A. J. M. Smith, advocated in practice a literary internationalism. Ultimately, the argument refers back to a critical standard: a Canadian literature was desired but it had to be a Canadian literature that could be judged in relation to international literature.

One of the first volleys in the battle between the national and the cosmopolitan views of poetry is fired by H. K. Gordon in the first volume of the *Forum* (March 1921). Gordon was an advocate of the national approach yet he could not countenance a break with the British tradition. "Despite flattering reviews of 'excellent and truly Canadian poetry,' " he remarks, "English Canada fails to produce a distinctive verse of literary value;" arguing that "only by the reality of its impression can poetry succeed," he suggests that poetry is hampered by a "false Canadianism" of imported diction and sensibility. "A deep knowledge of Canadian life does not seem as yet to run deeply and unconsciously through the being of our poets." Although he believes there should not or could not be "any drastic break with English literary traditions," he nonetheless insists: "Before a poetry can achieve universality it must paradoxically achieve nationality."

> . . . if we are to produce poetry of any value, we must shun derivative expression and sentiment as we would the devil and follow our characteristic bent as eagerly as we are learning to do in other spheres. We have our own expression and names for the features of the countryside ('bush' is as poetic as 'grove') and above all we have a characteristic spirit. We must learn to use and purify them, and develop a native tradition, or die to literature. (March 1921)

This debate is to continue in the second volume of the *Forum* but with the additions of the literary versus commercial antithesis which Fairley

finds in the combining of the Canadian Authors' Association with Canadian publishers for the purposes of promoting a Canadian Book Week; with speculations as to whether a young country can be expected to produce anything other than an infant literature; and with assertions by the scholar-critic Douglas Bush that Canadian society is too moral and hence too overly repressive to allow a realistic modern literature. The question to which all of these arguments are implicitly addressed is articulated by Bush as that "familiar query, 'Why haven't we a real Canadian literature?' "

In response to a letter from B. K. Sandwell (December 1921) supporting Canadian Authors' Week and protesting that "the Canadian author does not receive from the Canadian public the attention which, in proportion to his merits, he deserves . . . . for reasons partly geographical . . . [he] has also to compete for the attention of a public extraordinarily preoccupied with the literary output of other countries," (a point to be picked up and developed at length in E. K. Brown's *On Canadian Poetry*). Barker Fairley trenchantly replies:

> We cannot say yet of any Canadian book that it expresses the strength and character of the Canadian people as the great living writers of England and France, Anatole France and Thomas Hardy, express their countries . . . . But instead of facing the fact resolutely . . . we belittle the noble words of poetry and literature . . . [and] abandon ourselves to an orgy of mutual congratulation.
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> The Canadian Authors Association, far from setting resolutely about the task of remedying this undesirable condition, has made it distinctly worse. (December 1921)

This assertion brings an indignant response from Basil King (January, 1922) who argues: "A literature is the product not of an individual but of a life."

> That Canada should have a full grown literature is out of the question, seeing that even now Canada is only struggling toward a corporate national life. Any man in the sixties can easily remember a time when there was no such life at all, nor any Canada whatever in our present sense. The societies which produced *The Dynasts, The Everlasting Mercy,* and *L'Orme du Mail,* were two thousand years in the making . . . . We cannot compete with them, of course; but it is surely to our credit that in less than two generations we have produced a few modest poems, a few modest novels, and a *Canadian Forum,* as a start.

King's premise is to be echoed in Brown's bleak conclusion in *On Canadian Poetry:* "A great literature is the flowering of a great society, a vital and adequate society."[12] Yet King's stand is basically optimistic: the value of Canadian literature, he concludes, is not in its achievement but in its promise: "Unless we are permitted to make a start, with a start's crudities, we shall never go on to a finish." This last observation is tacitly accepted by the poet Lyon Sharman in the next issue of the *Forum;* however, King's analogy of infant country, infant culture is promptly denied:

> Canadian literature is the child and heir of all literature written in the English language . . . . It is not starting afresh on a basis of no culture and no past. It starts just where any other literature in English starts in this generation. . . . Does Mr. King realize that the first English tragedy, *Gorboduc,* preceded Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* by little more than thirty years? (February 1922)

The argument takes a new tack in the June 1922 issue of the magazine when J. Addison Reid facetiously lists the supposed distinctions between various classes of Canadian writers: Class I, for example, "Born in Canada/Living in Canada/Interpreting Canada" is contrasted with Class IV, "Born in Canada/Living in Canada/Interpreting anything." Reid's categories are sufficiently close to those of the Introduction to Wilfred Campbell's *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (1913) to suggest parody. Moving quickly to the moral, Reid makes the serious point that in Canada aesthetic distinctions have a close relation to practical economics:

> The greatest novelists, I would say, are those who are masters in the interpretation of human emotions, which are not national but universal. But such an author, if he is to live by his art, cannot live in Canada, or if he does, he must market his wares elsewhere. He is usually forced by circumstances to expatriate himself . . . . Now if an author living in Canada and writing of Canada, and without the protection of copyright which he would have in any other country, is able to win a place and public in Canada against the fiercest kind of competition from the current literature of all the English-speaking world, it little becomes us to sneer at and belittle his work. (June 1922)

Without a Canadian Copyright Act consistent with the Berne Convention and the Imperial Copyright Act, writers publishing in Canada were

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[12]E. K. Brown, *On Canadian Poetry* (2nd ed. rev., Toronto, Ryerson Press, 1944), p. 27.

regularly subject to piracy of their works, especially by American publishers. Reid's point that the Canadian author must expatriate himself because he has no audience in Canada is one which is also developed later by Brown.

Coming back to the old problem, "Why haven't we a real Canadian literature?" Douglas Bush in "A Plea for Original Sin," a tongue-in-cheek inquiry into Canadian letters, briskly identifies the most severe obstacle as that of an excessive Puritanism: "The evil . . . is simply that Canada is too moral."

> We are so firmly entrenched behind our rampart of middle-class morality that we are afraid, even in imagination, to look over the top. Such an atmosphere, of course. . . . makes the artistic impulse impossible . . . . One can see no future for Canadian letters until Canadians learn to obey the fine injunction, to 'sin gladly.' (April 1922)

The validity of Bush's analysis of Canadian society might be inferred from a prompt rebuttal by an irate correspondent who complains: "A Plea for Original Sin" . . . is written with an elusiveness which makes it difficult to pin the author to any positive plea for sin."[13] Bush's letter of reply exhibits a pained explicitness:

> My little piece was . . . only a modest fire-cracker placed under the chairs of the twin Muses of Canadian literature, Sentimentalism and Insipidity. I was trying to say that morality and art in Canada are hand in glove, when they ought to be strangers; that there is not, among the general public, the state of mind which appreciates and encourages artistic honesty . . . . If a D. H. Lawrence or a Sherwood Anderson arose among us . . . a dozen societies would undertake their suppression. (June 1922)

Bush's view of Canadian Puritanism, ultimately perhaps that of H. L. Mencken's "Puritanism as a Literary Force," is to re-appear in Brown's *On Canadian Poetry:*

> Imagination boggles at the vista of a Canadian Whitman, or Canadian Dos Passos. The prevailing literary standards demand a high degree of moral and social orthodoxy; and popular writers accept these standards without even . . . a rueful complaint . . . . If Puritanism operated simply to restrain the arts within the bonds of

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[13]W. A. Langton, letter to the Editor, (June 1922).

> moral orthodoxy, its effects, though regrettable, would be much less grave than they now are. Puritanism goes beyond the demand for severe morality: it disbelieves in the importance of art.[14]

Several years later, in "Making Literature Hum," Bush again takes up the cudgels for literary excellence:

> The trouble is that, born to hew wood and draw water, we are trying desperately to be literary, to have a real renaissance. In the literary way Canada is probably the most backward country, for its population, in the civilized world, the quickest way to get rid of this unpleasant family skeleton is to abolish critical standards and be a booster. (December 1926)

His objections appear to be directed primarily at the great flood of Canadiana which had appeared in the preceding three years; a tide of activity augmented by the Canadian Authors' Association and not to be rivalled until the 1960's. Following Ray Palmer Baker's *A History of English-Canadian Literature* (1920), were J. D. Logan's and D. G. French's *Highways of Canadian Literature* (1924), Archibald MacMechan's *Head-Waters of Canadian Literature* (1924) and Lionel Stevenson's *Appraisals of Canadian Literature* (1926), as well as a series of monographs on Canadian authors: Isabella Valancy Crawford (1923), Stephen Leacock (1923), Marjorie Pickthall (1922), T. C. Haliburton (1926) and Charles G. D. Roberts (1925).

Predictably, Bush's strictures drew an angry reply from Watson Kirkconnell who defended the Canadian Authors' Association against what he saw as Bush's "smart ignorance."[15] Despite sarcasm (Bush is tagged as an "ex-Canadian, writing from an exalted seclusion among the Brahmins of Massachusetts"). Kirkconnell fares badly in the debate; but Bush's reply, accusing him of incoherence and "moral incandescence," also misses the point, largely, because Kirkconnell marshals his argument badly. Like Reid, he is attempting to point out that the absence of protective Canadian copyright laws and of a native market mitigate against the development of a Canadian literature just as severely as the absence of critical standards, and that the Canadian Authors' Association was founded to remedy just this deficiency. However, this economic argument becomes lost and it is not to be adequately developed until Brown's *On Canadian Poetry*. Nonetheless, Kirkconnell's parting shaft at Bush's 'smartness' does hit the mark, for Bush's tone, particularly as it relates to

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[14]E. K. Brown, *On Canadian Poetry,* p. 22-3.

[15]Watson Kirkconnell, letter to the Editor, (January (1927).

the whacking of the "booboisie,' is suggestive of the Mencken of *The Smart Set* and *A Book of Prefaces* (1917).

It is A. J. M. Smith's "Wanted — Canadian Criticism" that provides a summation of the period. Like Bush, Smith deplores the absence of standards, especially the "critical enquiry into first principles which directs a new literature as tradition guides an old one." Like Fairley, he argues that the confusion is one between commerce and art.

> If you write, apparently, of the far north and the wild west and the picturesque east, seasoning well with allusions to the canada goose, fir trees, maple leaves, snowshoes, northern lights, etc., the public grasp the fact that you are a canadian poet, whose works are to be bought from the same patriotic motive that prompts the purchaser of Eddy's matches or a Massey-Harris farm implement, and read along with Ralph Connor and Eaton's catalogue. (April 1928)

To counter what he, like Bush, sees as an all-pervading Canadian Puritanism which seriously restricts the writer's choice of subject and its treatment (realism, he says, is feared, irony not understood and cynicism felt to be unmanly), Smith recommends the "critic militant." Yet the most interesting task, Smith argues, is reserved for the "critic contemplative" whose task it will be "to examine the fundamental position of the artist in a new community." This will engage him in tasks shared by contemporary French and English critics and will lead him to pay careful attention to the position of Canadian poetry in time as well as in space. This awareness, he concludes, "is the nearest we can come to being traditional."

> To be unconscious or overconscious — that is to be merely conventional, and it is one of these two ways that our literature to-day fails as an adequate and artistic expression of our national life. . . . Modernity and tradition alike demand that the contemporary artist who survives adolescence shall be an intellectual. Sensibility is no longer enough, intelligence is also required. Even in Canada.

Smith's target is those Canada-conscious bards (very probably the popular Wilson MacDonald and his *Songs of the Prairie Land,* 1918) who spontaneously hymn the native soil but never pause to consider their position as interpreters of the modern world of 1928. Until they do, Smith proposes an action as drastic as Bush's earlier wish for a Canada-wide epidemic of "writer's cramp"; he proposes that writers "will have to give up the attempt to create until they have formulated a critical system and secured its universal acceptance." This assertion was to prompt F. R. Scott's sally in a subsequent issue of the *Forum:* "As well hope to hasten the

harvest by amassing the harvesters in May."[16] Nonetheless, Smith was justified in his call for a consideration of critical first principles; in his rejection of the merely conventional in verse; and in his insistence that poetic intelligence was a necessary correlative to excessive sensibility.

In 1929, with the termination of the modernist 'little magazine', the *Canadian Mercury* (1928-1929), the *Forum* took over its subscription lists becoming, in effect, almost a poetry magazine. The fact of growing unemployment, the financial crash of 1929 and the long decade of the depression were all reflected in an increasingly sober tone in the magazine. F. R. Scott, then a member of its editorial board, recalls:

> Over the dreary years of the 1930's when there was not much to unite Canadians, the *Forum* was the focal point which brought together the large number of young Canadians who were beginning to awaken in the various arts and disciplines in every part of the country. You could feel a kind of identity developing: a common outlook and common standards of taste. There was no question that the *Forum* did this in English Canada more than any other journal. The CBC did a great deal later. After the death of the *Canadian Mercury,* we considered the *Forum* as almost a poetry 'little magazine.'[17]

As poet and critic, Scott played a major role in developing a modernist spirit in the pages of the *Forum* throughout the thirties. By 1931, in his two part article, "New Poems for Old," we find a fairly comprehensive introduction to the new poetry. Rejecting the old poetry and the romantic habit of mind which produced it, Scott argues that modernism is not merely a change of attitude toward war but a revolution in sensibility: "Every line of investigation explored intelligently seemed to lead to the same conclusion — that the orthodox was wrong."

> The old order of politics needed no consideration; the fact of the war was proof enough of its obsolescence. The old order of Deity was shown by anthropologists to be built not upon rock, but upon the sands of primitive social custom. Socialism and Communism cast overwhelming doubt upon the value of the economic order. Psychologists unearthed buried portions of the temple of the mind . . . . The universe itself, after Einstein's manipulations, ceased to be an easy movement of heavenly bodies through infinite space, and became a closed continuum as warped as the mind of man . . . . Morality disappeared in mere behaviour. Amid the crash of systems, was Romantic Poetry to survive? (May 1931)

[16]F. R. Scott, letter to the Editor, (June 1928).

[17]Interview with F. R. Scott, January 1975.

The younger poets, led by Smith, believed they were totally rejecting the old romantic tradition: they decried the sentimental, nationalist verse of their immediate contemporaries and predecessors; they wished to counter an old romanticism with a new realism, rhetoric with imagism, conventional metrics with the subtlety of half-rhyme; above all, they wished to broaden the subject matter of poetry. In the second part of this article, Scott satirically delineates the difference between romantic (or merely Georgian) poetry and the new poetry by quoting Roy Campbell's "examination paper" for those who wish to know if their verse would be acceptable for inclusion in a typical Georgian anthology. Citing a number of sample queries which include "Have you ever been on a walking tour?", "Do you suffer from Elephantiasis of the Soul?" and "Can you write in rhyme and metre?" (obligatory), Scott remarks:

> This paper would do admirably for Canadian poetasters desirous of winning their Canadian Authors Association laurels, if two or three compulsory questions were added dealing with the True North Strong and Free, The Bonds of Empire, the Dominion Stretching from Sea to Sea, and so on — with possibly an option on the Fathers of Confederation. (June 1931)

Asserting that poetry must be released from this "pretty garden" if any advance is to be made, he continues: "The modernist kicked poetry rather rudely out into the street to seek amongst the haunts and habits of living men for the stuff from which a vital and humane art might be created." In this new world of poetry, the role of the imagination decreased while that of observation increased; the "concrete instance" took precedence over the "abstract generalization"; a rediscovery of humour occurred — all of these shifts requiring the new techniques of imagism, free verse and the more subtle effects of imperfect rhyme. Concluding that no more great poetry will be written in that orthodox manner "typified in the milk-and-honey late-Victorian God-and-Maple-Tree romanticism of Bliss Carman;" he adds, "Perhaps that fact will some day sink even into the heads of our university and school teachers of literature."

Scott's article, a necessary preliminary to the new poetry, marks the turning point for *Forum* verse. After 1931 the verse is socially orientated and often satirical, reflecting not only the depression and the social protest poetry of Auden, Day-Lewis and Spender, but also the *Forum*'s editorial connection with the newly-founded League for Social Reconstruction and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation. The social poetry of the thirties — Scott's socialist "An Anthology of Up-to-Date Canadian Poetry," Pratt's humanist "The Depression Ends," Klein's "Barricade Smith: His Speeches," and Norman Bethune's "Red Moon" — demonstrate varieties of political affiliation.

And this same pallid moon tonight,
Which rides so quietly, clear and high,
The mirror of our pale and troubled gaze,
Raised to a cool Canadian sky,

Above the shattered Spanish mountain tops
Last night, rose low and wild and red,
Reflecting back from her illumined shield,
The blood bespattered faces of the dead. (July 1937)

Earle Birney's "Proletarian Literature: Theory and Practice," provides a justification of the new literature of social concern. The continued centrality of the *Forum* as a vehicle for poetry is also indicated by Birney's recollection that his first published verse was printed as 'filler' when he was acting as literary editor for the magazine.[18]

The dominantly social and national poetry of the thirties carried into the early forties with studies of the individual as cog in the social machine and with an increased interest in the 'Canadian' poem. That the *Forum* continued to provide an important function in the forties is indicated by A. J. M. Smith's letter of July 1944 to the editor:

> When I recall that within the last two or three years you have published Birney's "David," Klein's "Autobiography," Avison's "Break of Day," Page's "The Stenographers," Gustafson's "Epithalamium in Time of War," Anderson's "Summer's Joe," and Pratt's "The Truant," I realize that the *Forum* is not only Canada's leading journal of political opinion but a true cultural force. Such penetrating reviews as Margaret Avison's on Livesay and the recent essays on Canadian poetry by Dorothy Livesay and Northrop Frye are an indication that our poets are not without the help of genuine criticism.

Smith's remarks emphasize the *Forum*'s contribution to Canadian poetry and criticism; it is this aspect of the magazine's role which is most interesting to the student of literary history. Despite Pratt's efforts as editor of the *Canadian Poetry Magazine* from 1936 to 1943, the *Forum* remained until the forties the only magazine which published an appreciable amount of modernist verse and criticism.

Furthermore, one of the most important Canadian literary events of the 1940's, the publication of Smith's anthology, *The Book of Canadian*

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[18]Interview with Earle Birney, May 1970.

Poetry, was a response to a need identified by early *Forum* contributors, including Smith. It was this collection, informed by aesthetic standards rather than the chauvinism that had characterized Campbell's anthology, *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse,* that was to demonstrate to Canadians the existence of a respectable body of native poetry. It was also to demonstrate to Northrop Frye, who reviewed the book for the *Forum,* "a unity of tone" indicating "a definable Canadian genius." In his review, "Canada and its Poetry" (December 1943), Frye concedes that "a great deal of useless yammering has been concerned with the 'truly Canadian' qualities of our literature" but he then goes on to state, with some modification, that *The Book of Canadian Poetry* unconsciously proves the existence of just such qualities. Suggesting that Canada suffers from a kind of "creative schizophrenia" in which "certain preconceived literary stereotypes are likely to interpose between the imagination and the expression it achieves," he argues, as does Brown in *On Canadian Poetry* that Canada is culturally colonial:

> The colonial position of Canada is therefore a frostbite at the roots of the Canadian imagination, and it produces a disease for which I think the best name is prudery. By this I do not mean reticence in sexual matters: I mean the instinct to seek a conventional or commonplace expression of an idea. Prudery that keeps the orthodox poet from making a personal recreation of his orthodoxy: prudery that prevents the heretic from forming an articulate heresy that will shock: prudery that makes a radical stutter and gargle over all realities that are not physical: prudery that chokes off social criticism for fear some other group of Canadians will take advantage of it. (December 1943)

Frye's "prudery" has strong affinities with the "Puritanism" of Bush, Smith and Brown and with the merely "conventional" of Bush and Smith.

Even supposing it were possible to dispose of such "colonial cant," Frye goes on to argue, there would still remain two distinctively North American problems: one the cliché that Canada is still a young country; the other, the fallacies usually raised in relation to the creative process itself. Like early contributors to the *Forum,* Frye rejects the "infant country-infant literature" analogy; like Smith in "Wanted — Canadian Criticism," he invokes literary tradition although, interestingly, in view of the development of his own criticism, he argues that because Canadians experience a sense of disconnectedness from the European tradition, the need is to reconnect. Invoking *First Statement* polemics, with a reference to what Frye calls the "Ferdinand the Bull" theory of poetry ("this theory talks about a first-hand contact with life as opposed to a second-hand contact with it through books"), he suggests it is more important to be

"original" than "aboriginal." Here originality is defined in relation to literary tradition: "practically all important poetry has been the fruit of endless study and reading, for poets as a class are and must be, as an Elizabethan critic said, 'curious universal scholars'." Frye's view of tradition, then, like Smith's, evokes T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

Nonetheless, Frye does strongly support the theory of a native poetry. Developing a view of Canadian poetry implied by Smith in a discussion of the 1880's poets in his Introduction to the anthology ("if their theme was narrow, it was an important one . . . . In general terms, it was nothing less than the impingement of nature in Canada upon the human spirit"), Frye suggest that "according to Mr. Smith's book, the outstanding achievement of Canadian poetry is in the evocation of stark terror."

> The immediate source of this is obviously the frightening loneliness of a huge and thinly settled country. When all the intelligence, morality, reverence, and simian cunning of man confronts a sphinx-like riddle of the indefinite like the Canadian winter the man seems as helpless as a trapped mink and as lonely as a loon. His thrifty little heaps of civilized values look pitiful beside nature's apparently meaningless power to waste and destroy on a superhuman scale, and such a nature suggests an equally ruthless and subconscious God, or else no God.

Frye's discovery of a "definable Canadian genius . . . neither British nor American" and his depiction of the essential quality of Canadian poetry derived in part from the selections contained in Smith's anthology and, in part, as his discussion shows, from a close reading of Pratt's poetry, was to provide the critical framework for much of the present writing and study of Canadian poetry. It is reflected not only in his own masterly conclusion to *The Literary History of Canada* (1964) but also in thematic studies of Canadian poetry as diverse in tone and function as D. G. Jones' *Butterfly on Rock* (1970) and Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972).

The pages of the *Canadian Forum,* then, are a chronicle of the development of modern English Canadian poetry and criticism. The *Forum* was itself a response to a growing nationalist sentiment and it served in turn as a literary catalyst. Individual poems such as Pratt's *The Witches' Brew* and, to a lesser extent, Smith's "The Lonely Land" can be related to particular issues of the magazine. This latter poem, together with Pratt's "Newfoundland," Scott's "Old Song," and W. W. E. Ross' "Rocky Bay," belong within that central line of modern Canadian poetry that began to emerge in the 1920's. Largely imagist in technique, this poetry depicted the rugged northern landscape which the *Forum* through its emphasis on the Group of Seven helped to foster. Throughout the 1920's and 1930's

when a true little magazine could not be maintained in Canada for any length of time, the literary section of the *Forum* provided this function; throughout the 1940's, after the emergence of *Contemporary Verse, Preview* and *First Statement,* the *Forum* provided a neutral meeting ground for poets of opposite camps.[19] Through its continuing emphasis on modern literature and especially through the debates on an emerging Canadian literature, the *Forum* educated its readers. Had it succeeded in educating only E. K. Brown, literary editor in the early 30's, such an accomplishment would have been substantial. The title essay of Brown's book, *On Canadian Poetry,* has not been supplanted as a classic exposition of the problems of a Canadian literature. An awareness of the historical context from which this book developed is helpful because it reveals that Brown's arguments, supposedly products of the 1940's, were largely derived from *Forum* discussions some ten to fifteen years earlier. As such, they may now require re-evaluation. Similarly, an awareness of the historical context of A. J. M. Smith's *The Book of Canadian Poetry* shows that this anthology is the logical culmination of a demand, fairly widespread throughout the 20's, for higher literary standards in Canada. The necessity for such standards may be determined by the contemporary reader by surveying the verse printed in the *Canadian Bookman* for the decade 1920 to 1930.

The pages of the *Forum* are also helpful in reaching an understanding of the historical intertwining of the 'national' and 'international' in Canadian poetry and criticism. In particular, the political and literary columns of the *Forum* continue to remind us that a national literature can only develop in a supportive national context. One of the initial aims of the *Forum* was to attempt to provide such a context, "to trace and value those developments of art and letters which are distinctively Canadian," and there is no doubt that the magazine has provided a sense of literary community for several generations. Pratt, Bush, Smith, Livesay, Scott, Kennedy, Klein, Ross, Frye, Birney, Gustafson, Avison, Al Purdy, Alice Munroe and Margaret Atwood all published their early work in the *Forum* and the list of contributors can be extended to include the majority of contemporary writers. To read through successive issues of the *Forum* from October 1920 to the present is to discover the essential continuity of our literary past and present.

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[19]Ann Stephenson Cowan, "*The Canadian Forum* 1920-1950: An Historical Study in Canadian Literary Theory and Practice," M. A. Thesis, Carleton University, 1974, p. 15.