

THOMAS D'ARCY MCGEE AS A FATHER OF CANADIAN LITERATURE

by
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Thomas D'Arcy McGee, a Father of Confederation and prophet of the new nationality, has been dealt with amply as a significant and influential Canadian political figure. Most recently T. P. Slattery has written a thorough biography entitled *The Assassination of D'Arcy McGee* (1968), but there are earlier studies of McGee in book-length form as well as numerous articles. Alexander Brady produced a 1925 volume for the Canadian Statesmen series and Isabel Skelton's longer biography appeared in the same year. In 1951 Josephine Phelan's *The Ardent Exile* was published. The record suggests that each generation will have its own account of McGee's life and his place in Canadian history because he was undoubtedly important in our political history and because he was the victim of political assassination.

But D'Arcy McGee was a literary as well as a political figure and curiously little attention has been given to the literary aspects of his career, even though his speeches and newspaper articles in addition to his work as a poet give ample evidence of his life-long interest in literature.¹ His poems were collected and edited by Mrs. James Sadlier for publication in 1869, one year after his death. More recently Kathleen O'Donnell has written an M.A. thesis on McGee's involvement with the Young Ireland Movement, the ballad theories of the men associated with the Dublin *Nation* in the 1840's, and McGee's application of those theories in Canada. It is not, however, with McGee's place as a poet that I propose to deal, but with McGee as a "prophet" of Canadian Literature.

For this purpose one needs to turn chiefly to the Montreal newspaper, *The New Era*, which McGee founded and edited for a year, May 1857 to May 1858, and which was one of the ostensible reasons for his emigration from the United States to the Canadas in 1857. Before the end of 1857

¹Skelton's book includes a chapter on the Canadian literary scene during the period of McGee's residence in Canada, and on McGee's contribution to that scene in *Canadian Ballads and Occasional Verses* (1858).

McGee was elected to the legislature and the weight of his political duties led to the demise of the paper, but for its short life, it was a remarkable publication. It was the first medium of McGee's vision for a united British North America and his biographers have observed the alacrity with which he began to articulate that vision after his arrival in Montreal. As early as June 10, 1857, in an editorial, "A Foreign Policy for Canada", which was a response to a Thomas Chandler Haliburton address on British North America delivered in Glasgow, McGee wrote of the inevitability of "the extension of the political sphere of these Provinces, either by Confederation or Imperial representation" and the necessity for the Canadas to choose whether the new state would be modeled "on the neighbouring Republic, or, (with deviations unavoidable), on the best patterns of Europe". He made it clear in that and other editorials that he sought a heightening of political standards by turning public attention to other than parochial issues, particularly to the prospect of a confederation which would "enlarge the public mind and . . . dignify political discussion." To judge by the responses of other newspapers and the correspondence published in *The New Era*, its influence must have been very considerable. Even in the Confederation debates in 1865, seven years after the demise of *The New Era*, McGee's early conception of the "new nationality" was alluded to, but, of course he kept that idea before the Canadian people as a politician and as a public speaker and journalist in the intervening years.

In McGee's conception of things, however, there could be no new nationality without a national literature. Therefore, articles devoted to the prospect of developing the necessary literature occupy a significant place in the pages of *The New Era*. McGee produced a series of five editorials devoted to aspects of the creation of a Canadian literature, in addition to touching on the possibilities of Canadian culture in principally political articles and addresses. Together with his *Canadian Ballads and Occasional Verses* (1858) and "The Mental Outfit of the New Dominion", an address before the Montreal Literary Club in 1867, these editorials constitute a very significant contribution to the quest for a Canadian literature in Pre-Confederation days. They precede E. H. Dewart's "Introductory Essay" to *Selections from Canadian Poets* (1864) and may, indeed, have influenced Dewart in his expression of ideas about Canadian literature.

In the first of his editorials, "A National Literature for Canada", McGee establishes his basic premise: "no literature, no national life". Dewart begins his essay with virtually the same observation: "A national

²In chronological order the editorials are:

"A National Literature for Canada" (June 17, 1857), "A Canadian Literature" (June 30, 1857), "Who Reads a Canadian Book?" (July 25, 1857), "Canadian Nationality — Literature" (January 26, 1858), "Protection for Canadian Literature" (April 24, 1858).

literature is an essential element in the formation of national character". Whether the similarity of the statements is coincidental or not, it serves to show that a consciousness of the need for a literature expressive of the lives of the people was being created in the years preceding Confederation. For McGee's part, he was responding to a statement from the *Old Countryman* of Toronto (June 12, 1857) that there was no taste and no love of literature or invention in Upper Canada, and that men of invention were being starved out of the country. McGee's response to the *Old Countryman's* criticism is to explore the expectations of a Canadian literature; his favourite device for this exploration is to find historical analogues to the Canadian condition. In this first article such a quest leads him to considerations of the cultures of the Saracens and Saxons, but his favourite analogue is Scandinavia. Throughout his life in Canada McGee never wearies of setting forth Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark and Finland as examples to Canadians of northern countries which have revealed their richness in history, poetry, and astronomy. He attributes this richness to a northern penchant for "indoor labor of the brain" and fully expects Canada to see a like richness:

Cannot Newfoundland yield topics to the poet, or a new Urania to another Tycho Brahe? Cannot Canadian story supply the material for chronicles, equal in interest to those of Snorro, or to poetry as characteristic as "Frithiof's Saga"? Has not Longfellow gone for his noblest theme to the Basin of Minas, and the Old Acadian life? Have we not in our wide northwest materials equal to any that Theodore Muggé has gleaned from the Laps?

The idea of a great northern nation and its accompanying literature informs McGee's Confederation talks and his writing on literature and culture alike, but the sense of expectation did not blind him to the obstacles in the way of the creation of a Canadian literature and here again he anticipates Dewart.

Like Dewart, McGee dismisses the argument that Canada could not yet produce a literature because "the material must triumph over the ideal in a young country where everything depends on energy", noting that this is a false idea "imported from beyond the seas".³ The primary obstacle in McGee's view was an economic one. In "Who Reads a Canadian Book?", the third of his *New Era* editorials, he answers the queries of a New York newspaper by saying that if no one reads a Canadian book it is not because of any intellectual inferiority of Canadians, but because of injustice in the Reciprocity Treaty which makes the materials of literature in Canada too expensive. It is, writes McGee, "intellectual treason to ourselves" to allow

³"Protection for Canadian Literature".

the current state of things to continue. Before a Canadian literature could emerge, the Reciprocity Treaty had to be overhauled and either free trade permitted in all the materials for books, or protection provided for Canadian publishers and writers. McGee addressed the problem of unfair economic conditions again on April 24, 1858 in "Protection for Canadian Literature":

Every facility is afforded to the English or American publishers to inundate the country with their publications, whereas the Canadian publisher is obstructed by every possible means. So pernicious is the effect of this system that the North American Provinces with their present population have not a single publisher of even local fame, and have not as yet produced a name renowned in literature — if we except the *Historian of Canada*, Mr. Garneau, Judge Haliburton, and one or two others. Canada does not possess a periodical worthy of support — nor a literary newspaper — nor a review of any description. This is a gloomy prospect certainly, but the remedy lies in the hands of the public men of the country, and is much more important than some people would fain make us believe.

Here the criticism extends to copyright as well as to trade restrictions, and what McGee seeks is revision in the British Copyright legislation which will assist Canadian publishers.

Under the prevailing conditions, not only was it difficult to nurture a national literature, but the provinces were being innundated by "an unhealthy foreign substitute". McGee was always acutely conscious of the American threat to the potential distinctive character and features of the Canadian people and he argued strenuously against tendencies that would "Massechusetize the Canadian mind."⁴ To resist Massechusetization is indeed the main point of "Protection for Canadian Literature" and it emerges again as a prominent feature of his appraisal of "The Mental Outfit of the New Dominion" in 1867:

It is quite clear to me that if we are to succeed with our new Dominion, it can never be by accepting a ready-made easy literature, which assumes Bostonian culture to be the worship of the future, and the American democratic system to be the manifestly destined form of government for all the civilized world, new as well as old.

Even shortly after his move to Montreal in 1857, McGee was aware of differences between life in Canada and the United States and he wanted the Canadian difference to be allowed to flourish. According to Alexander

⁴"Who Reads a Canadian Book?".

Brady's account of McGee's life and a recent article by J. G. Snell,⁵ McGee's emigration to Canada was motivated by disillusionment with the American republic and a consciousness of differences in pace of life, form of government, and the potentialities of the British Provinces. In "The Mental Outfit of the New Dominion" McGee strongly implies that he sees "a bigoted, one-sided nationality" as characteristic of the United States and in an earlier speech on "The Future of Canada", delivered in October, 1857, he deals with the source of such a spirit.⁶ He points to the dangers inherent in a common, or state controlled, educational system, the danger being that it would lead to uniformity, or, as he phrases it, the "democracy of childhood":

It can lead only to the Americanization of the future inhabitants of Canada West. The only active annexationist now in the country is the Reverend Mr. Ryerson. Let him educate one generation on the Boston and New York system, and our statesmen need not trouble themselves further about the future. Like seeks like, and men educated on this side of the Erie and Ontario, in American principles and ideas, will, of themselves, as a natural consequence, amalgamate with their contemporaries of like mind and heart on the other side.

McGee's concern for Canadian education is certainly integral with his concern for a Canadian literature and a federation of the provinces. His vision for Canada was one that allowed for diversity. In education he hoped that Canadians would retain a significant degree of domestic responsibility in order to preserve "the freshness and originality of the growing age" and to avert "a vicious theory of uniformity". The desire for freshness and originality in individuals was the companion of his hope for the "sacred regard for local rights" in a confederation of the Provinces.⁷

Objection to dominance by foreign literature was not restricted to American literature, however. Although McGee espoused the British parliamentary system and became in Canada a loyal subject of the Queen, he was not the exponent of a blind and static loyalty to the Crown. Early in his life in Canada he noted that even though Canadians are imbued with "the principles, feelings, and aspirations of the old country . . . a Canadian

⁵J. G. Snell, "Thomas D'Arcy McGee and the American Republic", *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, III (Spring, 1972), 33-44.

⁶Part II of "The Future of Canada" was reprinted in the *New Era* October 22, 1857.

⁷"The Future of Canada".

literature would tend to the creation of a thoroughly Canadian feeling".⁸ McGee's conception of a Canadian national feeling or outlook included the recognition that foreign books could not be expected to satisfy fully colonial needs:

The books that are made elsewhere, even in England, are not always the best fitted for us; they do not always run on the same mental gauge, nor connect with our trains of thought; they do not take us up at the by-stages of cultivation at which we have arrived, and where we are emptied forth as on a barren, pathless, habitationless heath. They are books of another state of society, bearing traces of controversies, or directed against errors or evils which for us hardly exist, except in the pages of these exotic books.⁹

Particularly did he see the need for the exercise of caution with respect to fiction. Without disapproving absolutely of the reading of fiction, he did "raise a warning voice against the promiscuous and exclusive reading of sensational and sensual books".

Although McGee saw inadequacies in English and American books with respect to the needs of Canadians, he did not advocate a total rejection of them in favour of an exclusive Canadianism. Such rejection would have meant the creation of the kind of "one-sided nationality" which he deplored and which he seemed to associate with the United States. Instead, in keeping with his principle of diversity, McGee consistently urged that Canadians look abroad in a cosmopolitan spirit to learn from all nations what is useful to the development of culture on Canadian soil and applicable to Canadian needs. The idea of encouraging diversity was, like his other ideas, first stated in the *New Era* articles. In "A Canadian Literature" McGee urges an "acknowledgement of all elements, foreign and provincial" and in "Who Reads a Canadian Book?" he writes, "we desire to see a Canadian nationality freely developed, borrowing energy from the American, grace from the Frenchman, and power from the Briton" in order to construct "a Grand Trunk of thought which will be as a backbone to the system we desire to inaugurate". The railway metaphor must have seemed a good one to McGee in that era of railway building for he applied it again in suggesting the opportunities of the Canadian position in "The Mental Outfit of the New Dominion". Once again he makes clear that our "mental gauge" ought not to be narrowly Canadian or isolationist:

⁸"A Canadian Literature".

⁹"The Mental Outfit of the New Dominion", reprinted in *A Collection of Speeches and Addresses* edited by Charles Murphy. Toronto, 1937.

I mean a mental condition, thoughtful and true; national in its preferences, but catholic in its sympathies; gravitating inward, not outward; ready to learn from every other people on one sole condition, that the lesson when learned has been worth acquiring.

It appears that McGee, recognizing the varied ethnic nature of Canada, was striving for a moderate nationalism that would be characterized by "justice and courtesy, and magnanimity".¹⁰

In addition to expressing his expectations of Canadian literature and culture generally, and the obstacles in the way of those expectations, McGee had positive suggestions to make about what needed to be done to fulfill them. At the simplest level he could and did recommend, along with other critics such as Dewart, that there ought to be a relationship between Canadian geography and climate and the tone of the literature:

It must assume the gorgeous coloring and the gloomy grandeur of the forest. It must partake of the grave mysticism of the Red man, and the wild vivacity of the hunter of western prairies. Its lyrics must possess the ringing cadence of the waterfall, and its epics be as solemn and beautiful as our great rivers. We have the materials; — our position is favourable; — northern latitudes like ours have ever been famed for the strength, variety and beauty of their literature . . .¹¹

He could be more specific as well. His background in Ireland included participation in the Young Ireland Movement designed to stimulate Irish nationalism, and one of the theories of that movement was to write ballads which, by reflecting the characteristics and history of the people, would inspire national pride.¹² It is not surprising then that McGee published *Canadian Ballads and Occasional Verses* in 1858, hoping to introduce into Canada a technique that had proved successful elsewhere:

It is, indeed, glorious to die in battle in defence of our homes or altars; but not less glorious is it to live to celebrate the virtues of our heroic countrymen, to adorn the history, or to preserve the traditions of our country. From Homer's age to that of Scott, Moore,

¹⁰"The Mental Outfit of the New Dominion".

¹¹"Protection for Canadian Literature".

¹²Kathleen O'Donnell, *Thomas D'Arcy McGee's Irish and Canadian Ballads*. An unpublished M.A. thesis, The University of Western Ontario, 1956.

and Beranger, Patriotism has been the passion of the noblest succession of sweet singers the world ever saw — and the civic virtue they celebrated has, in turn, immortalized their own names.¹³

McGee endeavoured to show the potential for patriotic literature which resided in Canadian history by creating ballads on such famous persons as Jacques Cartier, Sebastian Cabot, Henry Hudson, and LaSalle, as well as on legendary materials. He also included poems devoted to ideas of difference between Canada and the United States. "Freedom's Journey" and "Arm and Rise", for example, associate Canada with the ideas of freedom, individuality and respect for domesticity which "The Future of Canada" deals with explicitly in its analysis of Canadian potential:¹⁴

from Freedom's Journey

She sought through rich savannas green,
 And in the proud palmetto grove,
 But where her altar should have been
 She found not liberty nor love,
 A cloud came o'er her forehead fair
 She found no shrine to Freedom there.
 Back to her native scenes she turn'd
 Back to the hardy, kindly North,
 Where bright aloft the pole-star burn'd
 Where stood her shrine by every hearth,
 "Back to the North I will repair,"
 The goddess cried, "My home is there!"

from Arm and Rise!

On the round Canadian cedars
 Legends high await but readers —
 From the oaks charm'd shields depend
 Strike! thou true and only champion,
 Lord of the first land you camp on!
 Strike! and win your crown, my friend!

McGee acknowledges that Canadian cultural difference would not be achieved or maintained easily, but would require tremendous effort;

¹³*Preface to Canadian Ballads*, vii.

¹⁴*The Poems of Thomas D'Arcy McGee*, edited by Mrs. J. Sadlier, New York, 1869, pp. 161, 164.

An era is not made in literature — still less is a new literature made — without self-devotion and self-sacrifice.¹⁵

Therefore, he urged the young men of Canada to make their public, not to expect it to emerge spontaneously for them. On the other hand, he noted the general responsibility for culture and sought the “co-operation of all our forces, the Colleges, the Churches, the Government, and the popular favor, to produce a literature”.¹⁶ Once again, Scandinavia is his model. In “Canadian Nationality-Literature” he attributes the achievement of Scandinavian literature to the close association of literary men and universities, to the encouragement of statesmen and princes, and to the applause of the people:

Busts and statues of their poets, orators and historians, adorn the parks and squares of Stockholm and Copenhagen; garlands are annually, in the season of flowers, placed upon their tombs, and choruses in their honor are chaunted around them on their anniversaries. Thus is the noble passion for mental distinction kept actively alive in successive generations of Scandinavian people.

To Thomas D'Arcy McGee, the urgent need for a similar attitude of love and respect for intellectual achievement in Canada was obvious.

With this need in mind McGee addressed the new nation's capability for the necessary co-operation in his major cultural statement, “The Mental Outfit of the New Dominion”. Ever conscious of the American threat to the possibility of Canadian culture, McGee begins by observing that if one were to take a thousand of the most intelligent of our citizens he would find “that Boston books and Boston utterances sway the minds of one-half of them”. It was necessary, therefore, to look closely at the foundations upon which the New Dominion had to be built and this McGee proceeds to do by considering statistics on population, the distribution of reading matter, the kind of reading matter distributed, the institutions of higher learning, and the status of our learned professions. His statistics compel him to conclude that Canadians are a reading people, but, of course, that much of what they read comes from Britain and the United States and that works of fiction form the largest class of books. That fiction constituted forty-four percent of sales, according to Samuel Dawson, a Montreal bookseller, led McGee to make a cautionary statement about fiction urging, not that fiction be abandoned, but that the best fiction be chosen and that the reading of fiction be balanced by the reading

¹⁵“A National Literature for Canada”.

¹⁶“Canadian Nationality — Literature”.

of biography and books of travel. Although the large preference for fiction in the peoples' choice of books was one weakness in the cultural climate, a far more serious one was the lack of public libraries in any of the chief towns of the new nation.

McGee's survey also emphasizes the importance of "newspaper literature" in that it formed the largest segment of reading matter in the provinces and was enormously important in shaping the life of Canada. The weakness of newspapers was that they were too largely composed of extracts from foreign journals. McGee stressed the responsibility of editors to lessen the reliance on foreign sources and to assume their proper roles as moral and intellectual leaders by effecting stylistic and substantive improvement in newspaper writing. Readers also were urged to bring about improvement by accepting responsibility to read more selectively and to be reflective about what they read. The theme of cultural responsibility was applied to the learned professions as well. Educated men of all specializations, McGee observes, ought to allow some of their energies to "flow out in secular channels for the benefit of lay societies, and the general elevation of the public taste."

In spite of the serious weaknesses, McGee's assessment is that the New Dominion was reasonably well-equipped to produce works of intellectual distinction and international importance, but he was faced with the fact that so little had been achieved: "no thinker of the reputation of Jonathan Edwards or Benjamin Franklin; nor any native poet of the rank of Garcilaso de la Vega — The Spanish American." Still he was able to cite the beginnings of a literature in the broad sense in the works of such men as Henry Morgan, Daniel Wilson, J. W. Dawson and J. MacPherson Le Moine. Morgan had recently prepared *Bibliotheca Canadensis* (1867), a compilation which would show what writing had been done in Canada, and which is still important to scholars interested in nineteenth-century Canada. Wilson, Professor of History and English literature at University College in Toronto, had written many articles on archeological subjects for the *Canadian Journal of Science and Literature* and he was noted for his *Prehistoric Man: Researches into the Origin of Civilization in the Old and the New Worlds* (2 vols. 1862). J. W. Dawson was Principal of McGill University and a well-known geologist. His first book, *Acadian Geology*, was published in 1855. In addition to many geological papers, Dawson wrote essays and addresses on education and moral and religious questions raised by discoveries in science, especially the theories of Darwin. Probably Le Moine more than any of the other men mentioned here had a direct relationship with literature and poetry. He produced *Maple Leaves: A Budget of Legendary, Historical, Critical and Sporting Intelligence*, the third series of which had been published by 1867. The first series (1863) included several Quebec sketches, among them "Legends of Chateau Bigot", "Legend of the Golden Dog", and "La Corriveau, or the Iron

Cage", all of which were important to William Kirby in writing *The Golden Dog* (1877).

With the work of these men and others presented as evidence that important books could be written by Canadians, McGee proceeds to reinvoke that sense of necessity and expectancy that informed his early *New Era* editorials on national literature and nationality. Therefore he writes positively and encouragingly about his favourite themes: the New Dominion could not be satisfied with books produced elsewhere, but it would be necessary to seek out in other cultures what is most pertinent to our needs in order to create "a genuine, modest, deep-seated culture" characterized by "northern energy" concomitant with our northern situation. As the consistent exponent of such themes, McGee deserves recognition as an early advocate and explorer of Canadian literary culture.