

# THE UNPUBLISHED AND REVISED POEMS OF CHARLES SANGSTER<sup>1</sup>

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Charles Sangster published *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay* in 1856 and *Hesperus* in 1860. Although he lived for thirty-three years after the publication of *Hesperus*, he published little more than a few "Occasional" poems. Did Sangster, who showed such great promise in his early years, lose interest in verse, or did his Muse fail him? Or, even more important, did he continue to write but withhold his work from print? Sangster, although still in his mid-thirties when he published *The St. Lawrence and Hesperus*, was recognized as Canada's leading poet. Desmond Pacey summarizes the image held of him by his contemporaries:

For some time he fulfilled the functions of an unofficial poet laureat — it was he, for example, who was asked to write the poetical address when a monument was erected at Queenston Heights to the memory of Brock — and his post in the civil service was generally regarded as a reward for his poetic contribution. He was highly praised by his contemporaries, both at home and abroad. Susanna Moodie, for example, exhorted Canada to 'be proud of her bard, who has sung in such lofty strains the natural beauties of his native land'; and the *National Magazine* (of London, England) put the same thought much more effusively:

Well may the Canadians be proud of such contribution to their native literature; well may they be forward to recognize his lively imagination, his descriptive powers, his ardent love for the beautiful and good, his never failing charity, his reverence of the godlike, his adoration of the true, his bold masterly style, and the fullness of his imagery. In some sort, and according to his degree, Mr. Sangster may be regarded as the Wordsworth of Canada.

The *Montreal Transcript* chose rather to compare him with Heavyside: 'his genius is not so prolific . . . but his taste is far more refined.'<sup>2</sup>

There are many more positive comments made by Sangster's Canadian and foreign literary contemporaries, but the puzzle remains; and the fact

<sup>1</sup>The two unpublished volumes are *Norland Echoes and Other Strains and Lyrics* and *The Angel Guest and Other Poems and Lyrics*; the revised poems are Sangster's two published volumes, *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay and Other Poems* (1856) and *Hesperus and Other Poems and Lyrics* (1860). Sangster revised and edited these four volumes for publication during the last five years of his life. The four are now being edited by the writer and are projected for publication in the near future by Tecumseh Press.

<sup>2</sup>Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1967), pp. 31-32.

that he had no serious detractors to discourage him, as did, for example, Thomas Hardy following the publication of *Jude the Obscure* in 1895, incites further curiosity.

A reading of Sangster's letters provides the answer.<sup>3</sup> On July 8th, 1888, he wrote to his friend and his co-literary executor, W. D. Lighthall,<sup>4</sup>

I have written comparatively nothing for the past 20 Years — I might say positively nothing. I came back to this [Kingston] my native city in September 1886, having been compelled to leave the P.O.D. at Ottawa on a Superannuation allowance owing to the breaking down of my nervous system, after 18 years of steady work. I took the MS of a thin volume, on my leaving here at the request of the Hon. (now Sir,) A. Campbell,<sup>5</sup> down to Ottawa, put it aside when I assumed my labors at the desk, and left it laid on the Shelf for those 18 years, but found no time either to publish, or to add anything to it for all that time, so steady were my duties, and so much did they unfit me for any, even the slightest, literary endeavor.

'The King of France, with twice ten  
thousand men,  
Marched up the hill, and then  
marched down again.'

And that was the case with my MSS. — I took them to Ottawa — I brought them back to Kingston!

Five months later, when his health had improved and his delightful sense of humour had revitalized, he wrote again to Lighthall:

When I went down to Ottawa nearly 20 years since I took a pile of M.S. of a third volume with me, as I thought 'ready for the press', but in all the 18 years I remained there I did little more than correct, my continuous desk work increasing year by year and preventing me from adding to the book beyond a few insignificant lyrics and an Ode on the Martyr McGee etc. When they get a man into the Civil Service, their first duty is to crush him flat, and if he is a fool of a Poet, or dares to think of any nonsense of that kind, draw him through a Knot or a gimlet hole a few times, pile with agony of toil, toil, toil until his nerves are flattened out, all the rebound knocked out of him, and then — superannuate him on what he can squeeze out of him thro' friends or Enemies, and tell him he should be thankful for small favors of the most microscopic pattern.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the answer is that Sangster was simply too busy to write verse that he believed was good enough to be published. Perhaps, however, contrary to his opinion in 1888, the eighteen to twenty years of nonproductivity served him well and his verse is better for it. During this period he read widely, studied deeply, matured in his views of life, and became seriously concerned about the quality of his early poetry. It was an incubation

<sup>3</sup>Sangster's letters to W. D. Lighthall between 1888 and 1893 concerning his unpublished and revised poems are being edited and prepared for publication by the writer.

<sup>4</sup>W. D. Lighthall and John Read were Sangster's literary executors.

<sup>5</sup>Sir Alexander Campbell, a Father of Confederation.

<sup>6</sup>November 15th, 1888.

period, in which his literary taste was so refined and so changed that in a letter to Lighthall on July 18th, 1888, he wrote of his published works, "I have a horror of quoting from any of the Old Volumes,"<sup>7</sup> and, as a postscript to the same letter, "I would be the happiest of men had I never written a line of verse." Of course this latter opinion was expressed at the peak of his illness, which he describes as "physical and nervous exhaustion." His opinion changed as his health improved toward the end of 1888.

He lived until December 19th, 1893. During these five years, from his retirement in 1888 until his death, he accomplished his objective of revising his two early volumes and preparing two additional volumes for publication. He stated his intention clearly in a letter to Lighthall on March 12th, 1889:

There will when all this [revisions] is completed be four volumes.  
VIZ:

1. The St. Lawrence, etc.
2. Hesperus, etc.
3. Norland Echoes & other Strains.
4. The Angel Guest & Other Poems.

You see there will be a good deal of work for me to do, and I must not be in a hurry.

By February 1892 the four manuscripts were essentially complete and in Lighthall's hands. Incidentals of correcting and editing, however, continued until shortly before he died. Lighthall, for reasons known only to himself, did not publish the two new major volumes. (There was published in 1896, however, a tiny pamphlet entitled *Our Norland*<sup>8</sup> which contains the single poem "Our Norland" extracted from the *Norland Echoes* manuscript.) Perhaps the reason for not publishing the major volumes at that time can be deduced from correspondence between Sangster and Lighthall in which both write of the high cost of publishing. Sangster's view at that time was not that the poems should necessarily be published immediately but "to save them, not to the world, but to 'This Canada of ours,' which, as you know, has occupied much of my thoughts in the rhyming way for many years."<sup>9</sup> Lighthall agreed — if the poems could not be published immediately (1891-92), they must be preserved until some advantageous time in the future when they could reach Canadian readers in book form.

It is, of course, unfortunate that these four volumes have remained unpublished for eighty-three years. General readers and students and scholars in Canadian literature have been reading the uncorrected *St. Lawrence* and *Hesperus*, those unrevised volumes that were so displeasing to Sangster. Equally unfortunate is the fact that the two manuscripts that reveal the creative power of Sangster in the second part of his life, the thirty-three years from 1860 to 1893, have remained unread. Particularly important to critical scholarship is the fact that all scholars have worked with texts that Sangster himself did not want read or republished until he had made the necessary corrections and revisions. The existing body of Sangster criticism, therefore, is based on poems that, in many instances,

<sup>7</sup>He is referring of course to *The St. Lawrence* and *Hesperus*, which he revised during the last five years of his life. These corrected volumes were never published.

<sup>8</sup>*Our Norland* (Toronto: The Copp, Clark Company Limited, 1896).

<sup>9</sup>From a letter to Lighthall, July 14, 1891.

have been, subsequent to first publication, either revised or discarded by the poet. Sangster's first volume, for example, *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay and other Poems* (1856) has been changed significantly. It was this work in particular that he was speaking of when he wrote to Lighthall on July 18th, 1888, from Kingston: "I have a horror of quoting from any of the old volumes. The 2nd one [*Hesperus*] is nearly alright. It is the 1st that startles, and makes me nervous . . . I would be the happiest of men had I never written a line of verse." The *Hesperus* underwent many changes as well, but alterations in the first volume are extensive.

Specific plans for revising *The St. Lawrence* volume are first mentioned by Sangster in a letter from Kingston dated July 8th, 1888, a reply to Lighthall's inquiry which Sangster received on that very morning of July 8th:

I don't think that any copies of my two Volumes can be procured at this late day. I have none except imperfect copies which I have been using in the preparation of a 2nd Edition for some years past, and which I may publish if I get any Encouragement, but of which I do not see my way clear at present.

You will be aware that Longfellow Edited a goodly collection of "Poems of Places". No. 23, *America*, will give you quite a number of Poems from both my Volumes, and especially "The St. Lawrence" but somewhat abridged, as the title of the book would indicate. *I gave no Consent as to Copyright in that Case*. I could give you the missing stanzas as to any abridgments, did you need it. Publishers: Houghton, Osgood and Compy, Boston. The Stanzas on page 88-9, "Lake of the 1000 Isles" (his own heading) contains at least a dozen stupid errors; he must have found it floating in a newspaper, and if used would require to be re-written, which I would do. All the Spenserian Stanzas in the book are portions of the Poem (2nd. Ed. unpublished) on "The St. Lawrence & the Saguenay".

It would appear from a later paragraph in this letter that revisions had been in progress for some time and that Sangster and Lighthall had earlier correspondence. In this paragraph Sangster tells Lighthall of the progress he is making and refers to a "sketch" which Lighthall requested for use as biographical data in the new volumes:

Since Saturday I have made more cuttings than you can use from "*Hesperus* etc.", and will make others to-day from "*The St. Lawrence* etc." I will send all I can under the circumstances, and the "Sketch" you require, and other particulars. I am not fit to do work of this kind on short notice, and shall have to make several "bites of the cherry", so as to send this off this (Monday) morning.

The final paragraph in this letter reveals a surprising fact about the title poem:

The leading poem in my first vol. has been thoroughly rewritten, and is twice as long as the poem in [the] first Edition, in first Volume, with notes, historical touches, legends etc besides the Rapids — all in fact has been thoroughly re-written. In the 1st draft

the Rapids are all comprised in one Stanza — in the new Edition they are all dealt with Separately, giving to each a distinctive character of its own, and generally making the Poem more complete, and more worthy of the Subject.

I hope to send off most if not all the cuttings to-day or tomorrow.

The new title poem is twice the length of the original. Five days later, July 13th, 1881, Sangster wrote a progress report to Lighthall with a further explanation of the extent of his changes to the title poem:

I have been cutting, and making a few necessary corrections, for the last few days, and flinging together an apology for a "Sketch" which I forward with this. . . . I have not given you any Extracts from the leading Poem in the first volume, "The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay", nor could you have made any with safety, as the poem has been so thoroughly re-written. Even had I mailed you the volume itself. Besides, the Poem would make a goodly sized book, with the descriptive notes, as it is more than twice as long as the first draft.

On November 15th, 1888, four months later, Sangster gave Lighthall specific detail: "The original of the poem in my unfortunate 1st Vol. contains about 100 stanzas, which have been extended to over 200, with notes, in the draft."

But Sangster's progress was slow. His ill health prevented consistent work on the manuscript, and a further delay was caused by his correspondence with his nephew, a painter-illustrator, Amos W. Sangster, who lived in Buffalo, New York, in an attempt to engage him to illustrate the title poem. Two years and four months pass before additional comment is made about the revisions. A letter of July 14th, 1891, written from Niagara, Ontario, reveals his attitude toward the alterations and the condition of his health:

As regards my first book, "The St. Lawrence etc", I have prepared the miscellaneous poems so that a new Edition can at anytime in the future be made, with any further changes yourself and Mr. Reade choose to make. I may have struck out too much, not too little (see memo. enclosed) and this also you can unitedly do to your liking. I should have greatly liked to see personally to all these changes but there may not be time or opportunity. This is a troublesome time, and uncertain.

.....  
I can no longer write, but I can read and correct proofs as clearly as ever. I was under the impression that the devilish Grip had never reached me, but I may be mistaken. My nerves are completely unstrung, and I can not articulate clearly in certain kinds of weather; and it was chiefly on account of my nervous condition that I was compelled to leave the Department.

Concerning the "miscellaneous poems" he did indeed make major changes, as will be seen shortly. The "memo. enclosed" is a detailed list of some poems to be deleted, with reasons for some deletions, and a comment on some of the additions:

*Memo.*

The Dramatic Fragment has been entirely remodeled, and rewritten.

I have saved the first part of the Poem on Morning, and struck out all the rest. You can add any portions of the remainder that you please.

The same may be said of "The Frost Kings Revel".

"Changes of a Night" is now a part of "the Dramatic Fragment". It can be struck out and the Poem itself used as before, if you please.

"*Vox Dei*", has been re-written, and is not very good copy, but legible.

"Little Libby" is struck out and rewritten, as you see.

"Aurelia" has been rewritten pretty much.

Two Poems "With the Iron Duke" of the period of the St. Lawrence etc. have been added. They were unfinished, and I furnished them up & added them. I intend to complete a series, but only two were flung abroad through the papers.

"Fanny" is a little reminder of my brothers wife but I dont see that I can keep it — the versification is deficient. Two Poems on "*The Soul*" are nonsense & must go. Can You save any part of "Edith to Harold"? "*The Wreck*" page 158 *Struck out*. "*I dreamed*" 161 & 162 — "*A Plea for the Woods* 180 & 181 — *Let them Boast as They will* 188, 189 — "*Lament of Shingwaken*" — 222 etc — "*Limerick Bells*" 190 — all struck out. And "*England and America*". And *The Chieftains Last Sigh* — And "*Holy Ground*" (unless you decide differently) And the *Elegy* on Page 101 — And *Henrys Grave* — And *Death of the Old Year if you please*. The Past 209 out.

I will correct a copy of Hesperus by mail and send you.

Two days later, July 16th, 1891, Sangster wrote to Lighthall from Niagara to tell him that the "Miscellaneous Pieces" had been mailed to him "this A.M."

Aside from the title poem which, as Sangster writes, is twice the length of the original, the "miscellaneous poems" are greatly altered. The overall structure is changed from three sections to seven. The original design was

- |   |            |
|---|------------|
| (1) The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay         | ( 1 Poem)  |
| (2) Miscellaneous Poems                       | (81 Poems) |
| (3) Bertram and Lorenzo — A Dramatic Fragment | ( 1 Poem)  |
|   | (83 Poems) |

The revised has been expanded to

- |                                       |            |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| (1) Introductory Poem                 | ( 1 Poem)  |
| (2) The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay | ( 1 Poem)  |
| (3) Miscellaneous One                 | (18 Poems) |
| (4) Miscellaneous Two                 | (19 Poems) |
| (5) Miscellaneous Three               | (20 Poems) |
| (6) With the "Iron Duke"              | ( 5 Poems) |
| (7) Bertram and Lorenzo               | ( 1 Poem)  |
|                                       | (65 Poems) |

This overall change in design (and the reduction in number of poems from eighty-three to sixty-five) is incidental to detailed alterations

contained in the final manuscript: changes range from the deletion of entire poems and major changes in the stanzas and lines of remaining poems to minute refinements in words and punctuation. A brief summary of the principal changes will indicate the extent of these alterations:

A. <i>Punctuation</i>			
<i>Commas:</i>	Added	—	138
	Deleted	—	181
<i>Semicolons:</i>	Added	—	54
	Deleted	—	41
<i>Dashes:</i>	Added	—	15
	Deleted	—	24
<i>Question Marks:</i>	Added	—	5
	Deleted	—	5
<i>Exclamation Points:</i>	Added	—	9
	Deleted	—	83
<i>Periods:</i>	Added	—	17
	Deleted	—	33
B. <i>General</i>			
<i>Structural divisions:</i>	number of sections		
	in original volume:		3
<i>Number of poems:</i>	number of sections		
	in new volume:		7
<i>Titles changed:</i>	(a) original volume:		83
	(b) deleted:		24
	(c) added:		6
	(d) revised volume:		65
<i>New Sonnet Sequence:</i>	(7 poems)		22
<i>Complete lines:</i>	added:		1
	replaced:		522
	deleted:		116
	changed position		195
<i>Number of "lines"</i>	within a poem:		227
<i>with multiple words:</i>	(a) replaced:		287
	(b) added:		1
	(c) deleted:		1
<i>Number of "lines"</i>	(a) replaced:		205
	(b) added:		18
	(c) deleted:		11
<i>Number of words with capitalization changes:</i>	(a) added:		23
	(b) deleted:		181
<i>Hyphens:</i>	(a) added:		15
	(b) deleted:		5
<i>Italics:</i>	(a) added:		10
<i>Footnotes:</i>	(a) added:		1
	(b) deleted:		1
<i>Parenthesis:</i>	(a) added (three line segment)		1
<i>Spelling corrections:</i>			7

These nineteen category changes and over two thousand alterations in text suggest extensive aesthetic implications.

A similar condition exists with regard to Sangster's second volume, *Hesperus and Other Poems and Lyrics* (1860). Sangster wrote to Lighthall on February 10th, 1892, from Ottawa to explain why Lighthall had not received the *Hesperus* manuscript:

Today Mr. Curtis of the P.O. Department will mail a roll of MSS. which has been in the Dead Letter Office since last summer, containing a large portion of the small vol Vol II which seems to have gone astray. I hope this will complete the Series of rolls sent from Niagara.

So the *Hesperus* was completed at approximately the same time as the *St. Lawrence*: the summer of 1891. Again, changes are extensive. There are eleven general kinds of alterations, ranging from small punctuation corrections and additions to major changes in some poems and the addition of large segments to others:

- A. *Headings*
- B. *Punctuation*
  - (a) *three commas*
  - (b) *five semicolons*
  - (c) *six colons*
  - (d) *one period*
- C. *Spelling*  
Four corrections
- D. *Capitalization*  
Twelve changes
- E. *Single words*
  - (a) *six words deleted*
  - (b) *five words added*
  - (c) *thirty-nine words changed*
- F. *Multiple word changes within one line*  
nineteen
- G. *Complete line changes*
  - (a) *three one line changes*
  - (b) *one two line change*
- H. *Lines added*
  - (a) *one section of two lines*
  - (b) *one section of four lines*
- I. *Position of lines changed within a poem*  
two lines
- J. *Stanza changes*
  - (a) *one stanza deleted*
  - (b) *one stanza replaced*
- K. *Major changes*
  - (a) *two poems with extensive changes*
  - (b) *one poem added to the volume*

As it must be apparent from these overviews of *The St. Lawrence* and *Hesperus*, changes affect the rhythm, tone, and total expression of many of the poems.



Two new volumes complete Sangster's project. *Norland Echoes and Other Strains and Lyrics* contains fifty-nine poems, nine of which are a sonnet sequence entitled "Midnight Sonnets." Only a few of the fifty-nine were previously published, and those in scattered journals and newspapers. His themes are many, perhaps best summarized by his own phrase "This Canada of Ours"; but although Canada is the setting in most of the poems, the deeply significant preoccupation is generally spiritual: the speaker's personal spiritual awareness and commitment to other persons and to God. From this spiritual base Sangster has written descriptive poems of Canadian landscape, poems of Canadian history, patriotic poems, occasional poems, poems lamenting the death of family or friends, and poems of love. Tones range from quiet meditation to dramatic action. Particularly interesting and pleasing is the nine-poem sonnet sequence, "Midnight Sonnets," which expresses the speaker's mood on New Year's eve. Each of the sonnets represents one New Year's eve. The sequence is an artistic parallel to certain biographical comments contained in Sangster's letters to Lighthall, especially those involving a discussion of the restriction of creative power by long and tedious routine work.

The final book in Sangster's project is *The Angel Guest and Other Poems and Lyrics*. This work contains thirty-seven poems, many of which are long narratives. His thematic range includes poems lamenting the death of family or friends (especially children), poems on the role of the poet, on the transience and mutability of life, lyrics of the sea, a ballade of Scotland, domestic poems, Indian and National legends, moral and religious themes, occasional poems, and lyrics of friendship and love; the latter dominates the volume. The strong spiritual foundation and meditative tone in *Norland Echoes* is absent from *The Angel Guest* in which tones generally express external conflicts which result from man's attempts to live harmoniously with himself and others in a selfishly material world which, too often, breeds hostilities.

Poetry was the central preoccupation of Sangster's life. Although he told Lighthall that he did little more than revise or "correct" his poems while he was in Ottawa, the result was substantial; and although he completed the final manuscripts in the summer of 1891 and mailed them to Lighthall at that time, he continued to send revisions to him until a few weeks before he died. A postcard, for example, dated simply "Kingston Ont. October 1893," asks Lighthall,

Will you please add a note to the little Poem on the Stanzas to "Christian May" in one of my Small volumes in one of my Volumes of MS. in your hands to say that She was a daughter of Revd Bishop Wilson, Wilson of the Reformed Episcopal Church in Ottawa.

Sangster died a few weeks later on December 9, 1893. His two revised and edited volumes of 1856 and 1860 and his two new volumes constitute the final revised and complete canon of Sangster's poetry. Aesthetic implications are significant. It is to be hoped that a new and comprehensive appraisal of his complete work can now be made<sup>10</sup> and that a more thorough understanding of the artistic achievement of this early and important Canadian poet will thus emerge.

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<sup>10</sup>The writer is presently making a critical analysis of the major poems, which is projected for publication in 1978.