

FRANK PREWETT, A CANADIAN GEORGIAN POET

Donald Precosky

The fifth volume of Edward Marsh's *Georgian Poetry* series contains eight poems by a young Canadian writer, Frank Prewett. Though Prewett has been long forgotten on both sides of the Atlantic, for a few years immediately following the Great War he mingled with the members of one of England's most illustrious literary salons, that of Lady Ottoline Morrell, where he was something of a favourite.

It all began in 1917 while Prewett was recovering from a serious War wound. In hospital he met Siegfried Sassoon and they became fast friends. Sassoon describes Prewett in his autobiography:

the greatest luck I had was in finding among my fellow convalescents one who wrote poetry. His name was Frank Prewett. Everyone called him "Toronto," that being his home town. He was a remarkable character, delightful when in a cheerful frame of mind, though liable to be moody and aloof. This could be explained by his having served in the Ypres Salient, from the horrors of which he had been delivered by a huge shell bursting near him. His alternations of dark depression and spiritual animation suggested a streak of genius. He was quite young, and the verses he was writing were blurred and embryonic, but there was a quality in them that interested me and raised my expectation. This was justified by the small volume which he published about five years later. Thoughtful and sensitive in their nature observation, these poems have a distinctive strangeness of tone and expression. It was a disappointment when he abandoned poetry and became a farmer. Hitherto almost neglected, I can well believe that *The Rural Scene* will some day be rediscovered by a discerning anthologist. In the meantime our friendship was mutually advantageous. I encouraged and advised him in his writing, and he provided pleasant company for bicycling expeditions.¹

¹Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey* (1946; rpt. London: White Lion Publishers, 1972), pp. 75-6.

Sassoon introduced him to Lady Ottoline and her circle, and "Toronto" stayed at Garsington, her estate, while he awaited repatriation to Canada.²

By 1920 Prewett was back in his homeland and miserable. He wrote of his discontent to his patroness:

Ottoline's most loyal correspondent in 1920 was Toronto, now exiled on the edge of a remote bay in Ontario. She kept him in touch with civilization by sending him copies of the London newspapers and *The Times Literary Supplement*. He told her he was afraid of becoming a "veneered barbarian" in a land where "everyone becomes married and a bank clerk with slicked hair." Canada, he told her, was an intellectual Siberia: "Man cannot live by bread alone, and Canada offers only the bread." He couldn't return to England until he had attained a chest expansion of four inches and he was working on this. (Darroch, p. 215)

When Prewett returned to England Ottoline's husband offered him a job at Garsington, but in 1922 he fell under suspicion of keeping back farm earnings and this "led to Toronto being given his marching orders" (Darroch, p. 233).

Aside from these episodes with Sassoon and Morrell, little is known about Prewett. However, some biographical facts can be garnered from Robert Graves' introduction to Prewett's *Collected Poems*³ and from "Farm Life in Ontario Fifty Years Ago," a prose reminiscence appended to that volume (pp. 47-63). In the latter Prewett describes the customs and living conditions on a turn of the century farm in Southern Ontario but provides few hard facts about himself. Since Graves' is the only available account of his life, I shall quote it in full:

Frank Prewett was born in 1893 on his grandfather's Old Ontario farm, and brought up as a strict Protestant. Three broadcast talks about his childhood are printed at the close of this book. Though he does not mention the strain of Iroquois blood in his mother's family, it was manifest in his high cheek-bones, dark colouring, graceful walk, and fiery heart. From school at Toronto, he won an exhibition to Christ Church, Oxford, just before the First World War. He then joined the Royal Artillery; first serving as a battery officer, later in trench

²Sandra Jobson Darroch, *Ottoline* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1975), p. 210.

³Frank Prewett, *Collected Poems* (London: Cassell, 1964).

mortars, and finally as a staff officer. He was seriously wounded under shell fire and invalided out in 1917. He returned to Oxford, took his degree and married an English girl.

I met him in 1920, while he was farming near Oxford, and at the same time lecturing at the University School of Agriculture and Forestry. He had privately published a small pamphlet of poems with the Hogarth Press, Richmond, sent me by Siegfried Sassoon. Three of these stuck in my memory, and despite my disappointment with *A Rural Scene* (Heinemann, 1924), another small collection too often influenced by the facile Georgian style then in vogue, I still reckoned him among the few true poets. In 1926 we both left Oxford and lost touch. I saw no poems of his published anywhere, and concluded that he had gone back to farm in Canada. Nor did any news reach me of him until 1962. Apparently the farm had failed, his marriage had gone wrong, and he drifted about England until the Second World War broke out. He then married again, and joined a bomb-disposal squad at Birmingham during the Blitz. Later he was employed in operational research at H.Q. Fighter Command, and sent as adviser to the Supreme Command in South-East Asia. After the war, he continued working at the Air Ministry and H.Q. Technical Training Command. In 1954, he retired because of ill health to a Cotswold cottage, where he struggled against pain and decrepitude, working the land and writing poems. On 16 February 1962 he died at Raigmore Hospital, Inverness, after a Christmas visit to a Scottish friend. (*Collected Poems*, viii-ix)

Sassoon says that Prewett's poems "have a distinctive strangeness of tone and expression" (p. 75) and Graves adds that "he felt it his duty to write at the orders of the daemon who rode him" (viii). This "daemon" must have been a minor god of gloom for the poems are consistently pessimistic. Sassoon attributes this negativity to the war which, he says, made him "moody and aloof" (p. 75). One can also trace the influence of Hardy in Prewett's depiction of nature as impersonal and at times malevolent. In "Burial Stones" (*Georgian Poetry*, v, 146) Prewett links the war with the idea of an indifferent nature. The poet scans a vast war cemetery and notes in his mind the contrast between the desperate battles which are in the near past and the quiet of nature:

For they are gone, who fought,
But still the skies
Stretch blue, aloof, unchanged,
From rise to rise.

Prewett's own objectivity — there is no emotion in his description — is in line with the impersonality of an "aloof" nature.

“Snow-Buntings” (*Georgian Poetry*, v, 146) suggests a denial of Christ’s words. God may see the little sparrow fall, but He does not care for humans:

What hand doth guide these helpless creatures small
To sweet seeds that the withered grasses hold? —
The little children of men go hungry all,
And stiffen and cry with numbing cold.

This stanza illustrates the unWordsworthian temper of the poem and of Prewett’s verse in general. Communion with nature does not lead to happiness. Man is left outside of nature’s beneficence. It also exhibits the two chief weaknesses of his verse: an excessive reliance upon poetic inversions and unnecessary archaisms.

“I went Out Into the Fields” (*Collected Poems*, pp. 3-4) betrays a similar attitude toward nature. The troubled poet

went out into the fields
In my anguish of mind,
And sought comfort of the trees
For they looked kind.

But all he finds in the woods is evidence of a confusion and sadness greater than his own. “On rolled the world with fools’ noise,” he observes, and then “the troubled sun turned black,/ Earth heaved to and fro.” Nature is hardly a comfort to the unhappy mind.

The poetry does not contain many descriptions of Canada, but in his most specific comment upon his homeland Prewett makes it clear that he is not enamoured of the Dominion’s climate:

Here, mother, there is sunshine every day;
It warms the bones and breathes upon the heart;
But you I see out-plod a little way,
Bitten with cold; your cheeks and fingers smart.
 (“To My Mother In Canada, from Sick-Bed in Italy,”
Georgian Poetry, v, 143)

Another aspect of Prewett’s pessimism is his fascination with death. Indeed, he seems to have had a death wish. This is perceivable in poems like “If Dead, Free” (*Collected Poems*, p. 7) where he says “I laughed and knew, if dead,/I was free” and in “I Stared at the Dead” (*Collected Poems*, p. 12), which is remarkably like accounts given by persons who have been revived after being clinically dead:

I stood and stared at me dead:
 Well folded my hands on my breast,
 My stretch easy as in my bed,
 And I grew troubled at my quest.

Just what his "quest" is is not clear, but he seems to be referring to his life in general. He describes his own end with coolness. There is no fear, only fascination.

Prewett's most pessimistic poem is "Hated By Stars" (*Collected Poems*, p. 27). The main thought is explicit in the title. The cosmos is not merely neutral, it is hostile. In the stars there is no "home for heart." Only man has the warmth of life and love, and the stars "hate me for heat that is mine." Prewett has reached a most extreme position of alienation from the natural world.

His gloomy attitudes toward nature, Canada, and life in general make Prewett an interesting contrast to contemporaries such as Arthur Bourinot who was also born in 1893 and W. W. E. Ross who was born a year later. These two, like most Canadian poets writing in the first quarter of this century, reflected the Dominion's nationalistic optimism and depicted nature as good and beautiful. One can understand Prewett's unwillingness to remain in Canada, for he was out of harmony with the attitudes which dominated the nation's literary and intellectual milieu. Indeed, Prewett is interesting because he was different. He was, to my knowledge, the only Canadian war poet to take on the pessimism one finds in British writers such as Sassoon and Owen. He reflected a Georgian influence when many of the Canadian poets of his generation were more apt to imitate the imagists. And he succeeded, through *Georgian Poetry* and his Garsington friends, in finding a more international audience than any of his Canadian contemporaries.