A Letter from Sir Charles G.D. Roberts (A Personal Memoir)

Diana Skala

I met the poet around 1933.† There had been rumours of Roberts over the years. My young sister would come home and relate: "You know who came to our school today? Charles G.D. Roberts! And he read his poetry." Not dreaming that I would ever have the occasion to meet him in the future, I was only casually interested. I questioned her about him. "He is grey and very old," she told me discouragingly, "and he reads in a trembling voice."

When I did get to know Roberts, he was 74 and I still in my teens. He was a stocky man, not tall, yet he many times gave the impression of height. His hair was completely grey, yet the face had the vigour of youth, and the broken nose (a reminder of a fight with a bully in his boyhood), though marring its classicism, added to its strength.

Roberts was living at the time in the Ernescliffe Apartments on Wellesley Street, Toronto. My visits were vivid and memorable. As soon as I entered, the atmosphere seemed to breathe an unmistakable charm. He would meet me at the door, a more vital projection of that magic hovering in the air all about. We crossed the narrow hall into his study, a bright, fair-sized room with a fireplace and a couch against the wall on one side. His substantial desk and chair stood at an angle within the bay windows. The windowsills were alive with plants. Through the windows, we looked across the streets and houses of the city towards Lake Ontario touching the horizon in the distance. To Roberts, ardent patriot and poet, Toronto appeared a city in a legend and this room a tower set in space. Though I no longer recall whether he used these exact words himself, he may very well have done so. He certainly left that impression with me by every implication as he gazed out in a kind of exalted ecstasy.

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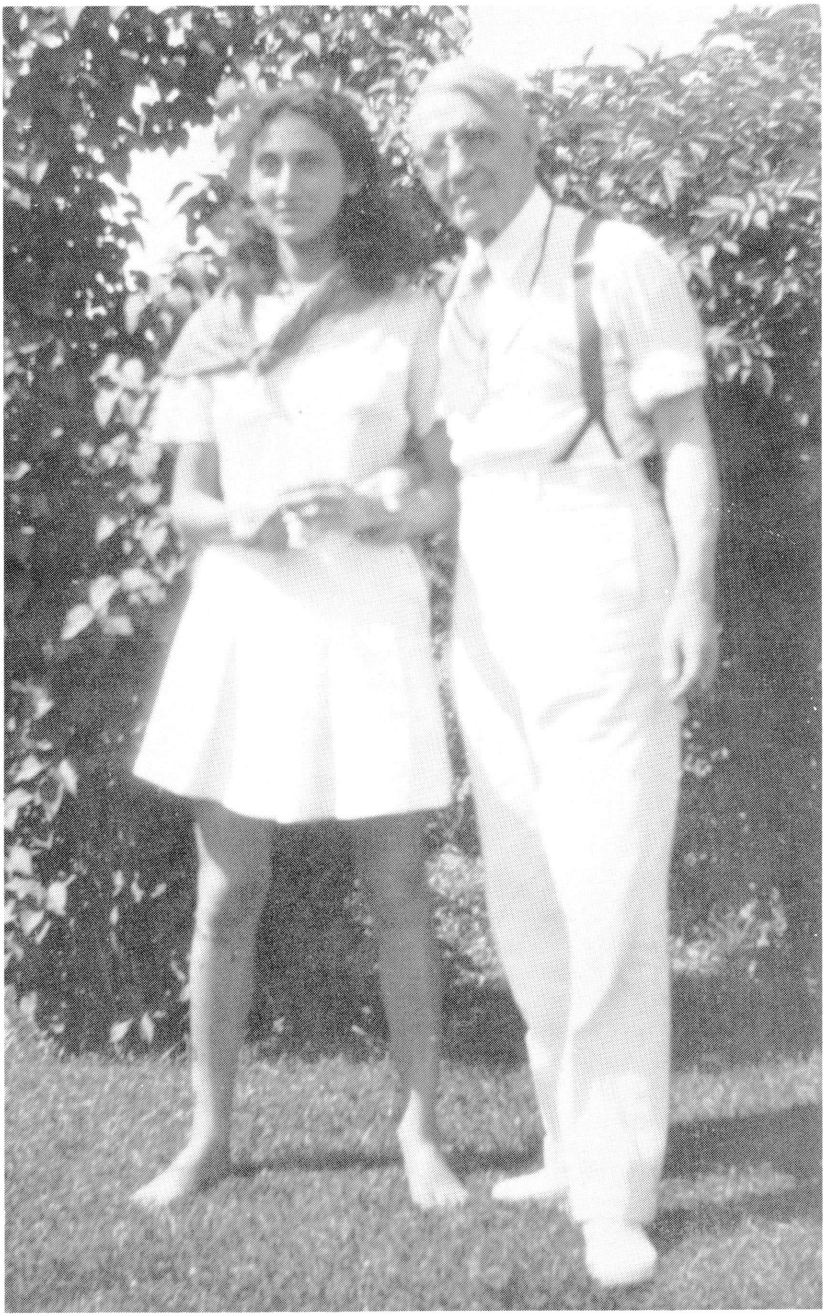
† On April 26, 1939, Roberts wrote to Lorne Pierce, "Miss Skala is a skilled stenographer and typist." She used this note-taking ability to record her conversations with Roberts, and these notes, along with the letters Roberts wrote to her, are the sources of the quotations in this memoir. Among the books donated to the University of New Brunswick by Lady Joan Roberts in 1985, there are at least two containing Miss Skala's shorthand annotations: *The Leather Bottle*, by Lloyd Roberts, and *Songs and Incantations*, by W.J. Turner. —Ed.



Diana Skala and Charles G.D. Roberts
as photographed by his son Lloyd, c. 1933.

In his presence, I was bewitched into accepting without question the transformation of this city I had known all of my life.

In the apartment with Roberts was Betty, a black young cat with a small head and the subtle expression of a minor sphinx. She had the freedom to wander all over the apartment but not to nibble at the succulents on the windowsills, an order which she pretended did not apply to her. She would look up at Roberts with innocent eyes when he scolded, "as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth," Roberts would say to me, delightedly. He was quite disconsolate when she died. "It's funny how unhappy I feel about that animal, but I miss her little ways. She used to sleep right here on my chest and would wake me every morning by kissing me very gently on the eyelids. My poor little Betty, I do miss her so!"

Paradox. The man who was aware and could write unsentimentally of the implacable laws of nature could be remarkably sentimental in his personal relations with man and animal. He considered life full of paradox, and he underlined its ambiguity in his prose and verse. It is a continuous theme in his animal tales, short stories, and poetry.

Piles of manuscripts lay on the tables and bookcases in his study, some of them nearly as old as Roberts himself. He would point warningly: "Never throw a poem away, keep it. Many a poem I wrote years later had its origin in one of these imperfect fragments which I have kept. I have often regretted those I had destroyed."

I, a teenager, exposed to the world of poetry for the first time in such a personal manner, was completely enchanted. There were books on the shelves with intimate inscriptions and dedications to Roberts from authors such as Richard le Gallienne, Rudyard Kipling, and Don Marquis. I was full of eager inquiries, hoping to get a glimpse of Swinburne, Joseph Conrad, and others from someone who had actually talked to them and been in their company.

It was my pleasure to browse among the many books. Occasionally, I would be entrusted with rare first editions, perhaps Carman's poems or Francis Sherman's. I would walk away with them under my arm feeling myself in possession of treasure as rich as any found in fabled galleons. Swiftly scribbled words like wild poppies among wheat shot out from between the printed lines. I would turn the pages—turned by so many different hands—reverently, and feel the presences of all those unknown lovers of life leaning over my shoulder and reading and

delighting again in the perfection of the lines with me. And I, too, would not be able to resist putting my comments beside some favorite poem. I would show them later to Roberts and offer to erase the light pencilled shorthand. Roberts would look at the hieroglyphics and ask me to read them. Then, nodding in agreement, he would add emphatically: "Most definitely not. We'll leave them there."

I would watch him put the books carefully back on the mantelpiece, I, meanwhile, looking somewhat like one of the saints in a well-known painting just when the angel is about to lower the halo on his head. Roberts would turn to me and nod again as if to say: "That's that. There it remains!" And smile down like a benevolent deity. Indeed, I felt as if I had just been made a part of some immortal host.

In one of these books I came upon a hand-written little poem by Bliss Carman to Roberts:

> My glad Greek boy in love with life
> Wake the old hollows with your song,
> Where low remindful winds are rife
> With bloom of hours that burned with life,
> That all unripe desire and strife
> Over your heart prevail not long,
> My glad Greek boy in love with life
> Wake the old hollows with your song.

"I was delighted when Carman showed it to me," Roberts said, very pleased that I liked it. He immediately sat down and made a copy of the poem for me in his own interesting script.

Once, happening to mention the influence of Lanier's poetry in my first gropings for style, I started him on a series of reminiscences. He had known Lanier's widow well and corresponded with her. He talked at length about Lanier and his poetry. Concluding, he recited, "Gautama to the burning came," the whole poem, and then said: "That's a great poem, big!" He added, "But Shelley and Keats are still my masters."

He would draw me out in discussions, asking me what I thought of various poems and poets individually, and he would say, "You have very good judgment. But when you write you must try to discipline yourself, remember discipline above all, discipline! For I believe you have genius, but you must discipline yourself."

"Genius," a word out of fashion in the modern vocabulary, could still be a criterion. I was quite reasonably proud of such

praise—for a moment. Weighing myself mentally in the balance, I found myself wanting. Interested, however, I began to question just exactly what he meant by the word. I named names and inquired whether he considered these geniuses, too. It appeared that though we agreed about English and American literature, in Canadian we were not so unanimous. I thought Roberts overrated his compatriots. Curious for his reply, I questioned, "Do *you* think you are a genius?" The answer was accompanied by one of his characteristic sphinx-like smiles: "Many people in authority, whose judgement I respect, think so. Far be it from me to contradict them."

Shortly after the publication of his book *The Iceberg,* I came to see him one evening. Roberts was at his desk, a copy of his new book open before him, reading a letter which he handed to me as I came in. I glanced at his face, which expressed grave doubt and self-distrust, quite different from his usual haughty self-confidence. The letter was from a friend of his who spoke with great admiration of "The Iceberg" poem in the book and congratulated Roberts. The friend expressed his pleasurable surprise at the vigour and beauty of the poem that the poet in his seventies was still capable of writing. It scarcely seemed a letter to be unhappy about and I said so. Roberts did not respond, only sat there unmoving, his shoulders hunched uncertainly against some abyss visible to his eyes. But this kind of mood was alien to his nature. I think he considered it bad manners to admit to failure of any kind, even when his own judgement would acknowledge such a possibility, though he felt free to acknowledge defeat in his writing, prose and poetry. In many of his narratives the heroes, human and animal, end tragically.

Sitting on the studio couch in his room, I would follow him with my eyes as he walked back and forth with his cat-like tread, stopping occasionally to write down a line, change a word. A poem or story was being created right under my eyes. He reminded me of some wild, untamed animal—a lion, of course! Later, I would stand before the cage of the king of beasts in the old Riverdale Zoo. The lion appeared rather neglected, it seemed to me, his unkempt mane looking as if he had "slept in it." But, in spite of that, his noble and haughty mien was somehow always predominant. I would feel a pang of regret and pity for this magnificent prisoner behind the bars. Then the resemblance would suddenly strike me, and I would burst out laughing at the quite inconceivable thought that the lion was only pacing back and forth, composing a sequel to *In the Morning of Time*, which Roberts had given me.

Eager to know everything about Roberts, I would pose endless questions. No matter whether intellectual or historical or even trivial, I would always get an answer. I learned much, and came to know his many faces. Outwardly, to the everyday world, his manner to all was considerate, courteous, quite "Victorian," the gentle old poet—an image that was expected of him. He would have considered it bad form not to fulfill that expectation. In that respect he was of the century into which he was born, the 19th. But his personal beliefs and conduct were highly individual, and he knew human nature in society too well to expose himself to the tender mercies it visits on those who do not conform to its standards. On formal occasions he was designated as "the Father of Canadian Poetry" and "the Dean of Canadian Literature." To his vast number of friends he was known by his initials CGD (Charles George Douglas). In the company of the young, or of his son Lloyd and his friends, Roberts seemed about half his age. To most of his close intimates, he was the leader and senior. Among these was Ned Pratt, the poet, looking like a sea-captain with his gaze fastened on some distant horizon, who always bowed to Roberts' maturer judgement. Pelham Edgar, the critic, a handsome man with violet eyes, was several years younger than Roberts, yet, standing beside him, Pelham Edgar looked the older man, to my surprise. Roberts was a regular chameleon. He prided himself greatly on being everything to everyone; he could speak to a woodsman and be accepted as an equal, or to a nobleman and be accepted on equal terms.

I never met B. K. Sandwell, the editor of *Saturday Night,* though I had spoken to him on the telephone when he told me that he liked my poetry, and I have several lengthy letters from him. Roberts considered him a powerful brain, someone who should have gone into the diplomatic service. He said to me that no one really knew what precisely Sandwell thought about Canadian or world politics or which side he was on. Roberts believed that Sandwell favoured a balance of power, a policy Roberts evidently approved. Hugh Eayrs, the editor of the Macmillan Publishing Company, was a long-standing admirer and friend of Roberts and had helped to get his numerous books into print. Eayrs was a short, jolly-looking man with a humorous smile, not at all the frightening editor of a famous publishing house which I had anticipated. Since he had kissed my hand in appreciation of a clever manuscript report I had done for him, I found him utterly charming. Dr. Lorne Pierce, the editor of the Ryerson Press, spent quite a long time with me discussing a chapbook of my poetry that he wished to publish. It was only afterwards that Roberts told me Pierce was deaf: "He is so sensitive and intelligent and does lip-reading [so well] that, unless

you know about it, I doubt you will notice anything out of the ordinary. A brilliant young man." There were more whom I could name. All these men esteemed Roberts as someone exceptional and superior to themselves in some way.

The God Roberts fervently believed in would not have fitted into the strict ritual of the Anglican Church, in spite of Roberts' upbringing and the clergyman father whom he loved. But a part of him was firmly traditional, and he chose to be buried under the aegis of the church. One day when I arrived at his apartment I found him in high spirits. He informed me, jubilantly, that he had made his will; his lawyer had just left. Without looking at me, and walking back and forth, a long column of ash on a fragment of cigarette protruding from his lips (an absent-minded feat at which I always marvelled), he told me all about it. I stared at him. Turning suddenly and gazing closely into my face, he became even more exact and reasonable in his manner and speech. He told me of the funeral parlor that would take care of his "earthly remains," where he would be cremated, and where his ashes would be buried. He mentioned long-dead members of his family by name, his father and his son Athelstan, with profound affection and in a tone of voice as though they awaited his coming at some family gathering. He spoke with exultation:

"Wasn't it well done?"

"'Bravely, Spirit,'" I whispered under my breath, "'thou shalt ere long be free.'"

"That's from *The Tempest* by Shakespeare," he said pedantically, giving me a sidelong glance. I understood him to mean that he thought Prospero's words belonged more properly to himself. It was his favorite play.

"I suppose you even chose the music they should play at your funeral—"

"O, yes," he answered, "Chopin's *Funeral March.*"

I was on scholarship at the Toronto Conservatory of Music (the Royal Conservatory of Music of Toronto, now) in piano and composition. I remembered striking the dark chords on the upright Heintzman in my parents' house where I lived, and how the mortal decay of the corpse, the very smell of death, seemed to come at me from that movement of the Sonata. I said so. He put up a restraining hand. His face seemed to have fallen in and assumed all the ravages of that music.

"But the following movement is one of Chopin's strongest and most beautiful. It is the hope of Resurrection after death, I think."

"Yes," he caught up eagerly, "they will play both parts."

After a pause he said: "You will come to my funeral? It will be quite near you, at St. Stephens. You won't have far to walk. It's right near where you live. Haven't I made it convenient for you?" He smiled down at me.

"Yes."

His playfulness seemed to augment my sudden awareness of his imminent death.

"And will she come?" he asked softly.

I recall I exclaimed that if he died I would not lift a foot to see him. He laughed into my grave face: "What does she think, I am immortal and will live forever?" And I, being very young, joined Shakespeare and all the poets who put up their fragile defences against death. I must have answered "Yes." Very clearly in memory I still see his face and hear his voice. With eyes dancing, he said: "Thank you, my dear."

Shortly before his death I went to visit him in Wellesley Hospital where he had been taken. Joan (Lady Roberts) met me and told me he was sleeping. She had not slept the last few days, and looked even more ethereal than her usual self. We talked. She told me he was under sedatives but quite happy and without pain. He had wakened singing the other day, she told me, and she had bent over and said, "That is lovely music, Charles." He pressed her hand and smiled.

Joan had remarked to me once that he was the haughtiest man she had ever met. Roberts was quite naturally élitist, though his "élite" might be chosen from right across all humanity, past class distinctions and barriers of race and religion. Because he was an expert woodsman and knew his animals well, the animals in his stories were, as he claimed justly, representative of their kind. But the hero protagonists were usually a little swifter than their fellows or the strongest of the litter, outstanding in some way, though true to their species. Roberts was interested in the unique, human or animal. This may be one reason why his work is not popular today. Our society frowns on such content and slant. "Superman" and "Luke Skywalker," the blow-ups of the commonplace, are the heroes of our time.

Roberts considered that the body of a writer's work should include his poorer efforts as well as his successful ones, in order, he said, to give a complete picture of the whole man and set off his best more accurately. I never could quite see his point. But he might perhaps have escaped the derision to which some of his poetry is exposed had he not followed that idea. He was capable of recognizing the temper of the times. Even towards the end of his life, he was eager to know (although he was not always in sympathy with) the prevalent currents of thought. The young members of the Canadian Authors' Association considered him as one of them, "their most youthful member." When F. R. Scott's "Canadian Authors Meet" appeared in *Canadian Forum* in December, 1935 (388), I recall asking Roberts whether it was an accurate description. He gave his characteristic smile and said: "Unfortunately, yes." One young poet, Nat Benson, related to me gleefully how, at one of the important Association meetings, Roberts, after making vain attempts to put the discussion on a more fruitful track, finally gave up and walked outside for a smoke, cursing under his breath. Nevertheless, he insisted that I be a member of the Canadian Authors' Association and the Literary Society at the Heliconian Club. In spite of their shortcomings, he considered they were necessary for the development of literature in the country.

Roberts was a critic of keen insight and level judgement and, except for one or two mistakes which he regretted all his life,[1] his assessment of people and literature was astute. He had prejudicial loyalties, which gave him the outward appearance of a hard-dyed conservative. But his conservatism, like his élitism, was uniquely his own. His intellect and his personality were naturally open to new ideas. One could very well say that when Roberts at 83 married Joan Montgomery, 33, the discrepancy in age had been merely chronological.

In his Introduction to his *Selected Poems,* Roberts quotes another poet on so-called "modern" poetry: "There is no such thing and never has been. Nor is there ancient verse. There are only oldish men in each generation misunderstanding what is being written now, side by side with youngish men misunderstanding what was written then. Verse itself cares nothing for the oldish men nor the youngish men, nor indeed for anything but itself." It expressed his own point of view. His Preface to Bliss Carman's *Sappho* is a beautiful essay on the woman-poet. But he also thought "David," by Earle Birney, "a fine Canadian poem."

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[1] When Roberts was editor of *The Week*, a young poet, Isabella Valancy Crawford, sent him her poems. He returned them with a rejection slip. Later, he told me, he regretted it very much and never could account to himself how it was that he failed to recognize her talent as a poet at the time, and left it to someone else to discover her.

For himself, he said, he found he preferred to work with the fixed traditional forms. That did not prevent him from recognizing the validity of Eliot's *Four Quartets.* "The Dry Salvages" was a favorite. And it was Roberts who introduced me to Rainer Maria Rilke by presenting me with a copy of Rilke's *Selected Poems* as a gift. He told me that Rilke was considered the father of modernism by all the young poets and it was important for me to know him.

Roberts' own books, given to me with inscriptions from him for my birthdays or at Christmas, I had read with pleasure. *In the Morning of Time* (scientifically accurate, Roberts assured me), with its long, rhythmic, poetic lines; his animal stories; and even novels such as *The Heart of the Ancient Wood* or *Barbara Ladd* (though these are not always completely successful) contain passages that convey something fundamental, I told myself. Those perfectly written and profound short stories, *Earth's Enigmas,* with their authoritative realism and deep insight, had held me spellbound when first I came upon Roberts' work. Roberts intended "Heliodore of the Myrtles," a short story that appeared in *Queen's Quarterly,* to be part of a group of stories on classical themes that never was completed. The beauty of style that captures the Greek gesture surely deserves a place with his memorable work, yet no one mentions it. The lighter, historical novels were pot-boilers, written to make a living, Roberts said.

Critics consider poems like the "Rose of Life" "artificial" and "imitative" but, knowing his person, I disagree. It may strike people as strange and inconceivable that Roberts, bred and brought up in an ecclesiastical, Anglo-Saxon environment, should exhibit such Baudelairian feelings and ideas. It is, of course, still in the English tradition, though an individual stream, as exemplified in Wilde, Swinburne, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, for instance. Roberts' verses were not "appropriated from others." They were very much his own. The poems, not as fine as Swinburne's or Wilde's or Rossetti's on similar themes, are adequate. Likewise, his love songs contain some beautiful lyrics, among them "In the Night Watches," written to no particular woman evidently, but to the "Helen of my dreams," he told me.

Elsie Pomeroy's unquestioning adulation of Roberts and his work borders on the infantile and no doubt lends itself only too readily to criticism. W.J. Keith's underlining of Roberts' animal stories and his appraisal of the novels and important poems are just. Desmond Pacey's appreciation of the poem "Tantramar Revisited" as a Canadian masterpiece would have won the nod of approval from Roberts' impartial judgement. Roberts was very proud of the poem and pointed out to me the difficulty of the

feat in this classical metre that he had managed to carry off to his own satisfaction. Some of the assumptions made about Roberts by these critics are not quite correct. To consider "Philander's Song," a bit of verse of a kind that Roberts turned out skillfully all through his life, worthy of comparison with the "gaiety" of Yeats' later poems is very generous but scarcely deserving. Roberts did not make that mistake about it.

It is fitting that I should end this sketch with the incidents leading to my eventual meeting with Roberts. To end with a beginning would have pleased him. It was in agreement with his philosophy of life.

I had been writing poetry since my childhood. Though now my ambition is to attain the brevity of a Borges, I began with long epics. I showed my poems to Tom Hastings, my younger sister's teacher at the Duke of Connaught Public School, who used to drop in on occasion at our home. He was very impressed by my literary gift. He would read my verses and humbly wonder how I ever got the idea to write such things. Although I was flattered to be able to impress an intelligent adult and occasionally luxuriated in the thought that I was a poet, I had moments of doubt and a lack of confidence in myself, too. My teacher-friend, happening to visit me in one of these moments, became unsure. Perhaps I was not a promising young poet, after all. He asked me if I would give him my poems to show to a friend of his who "knows Charles G.D. Roberts well." I agreed and gave him some of my poems but not what I considered my "best." It was one thing for me to doubt my own powers, but I did not expect my friends to do so. As soon as he left me that day, I picked out four of my "best" poems and sent them away post-haste with a letter to Charles G.D. Roberts. If I was to have my fate decided, then I would hear my judgement directly and through no faint-hearted intermediaries.

About Roberts' writing I knew very little, only some of his weakest verses in the school books and his story from *Earth's Enigmas,* "Do Seek Their Meat From God." It was to the writer of that story that I directed my letter. Roberts was busy and could not answer, as I found out later. But as week after week went by and no word came from the "Oracle," I decided I must have been mistaken, that my friends were indulgent and that I was no poet. I resigned myself to my fate. Then came the letter. It was a long letter. It ran in part:

The Ernescliffe (25)
Wellesley St
Toronto, May 24/ 1933

My dear Miss Skala—

It is not my custom to reply at all to the too numerous letters, accompanied by sheaves of verse, which I receive almost daily from young aspirants. If I did, it would take up most of my time. I merely take a glance at the verses, perceive that they are valueless, and lay them aside to be called for. I have not the heart to tell the authors that their verses are valueless, so I am content to lay myself open to the charge of discourtesy.

In your case I had only to glance at the opening lines of the "Italian Serenade" to see that here was an authentic voice. I read the whole batch through with eager interest, that was before I left for Kingston—and laid them aside till my return, to see if, on re-reading, they would prove to be as good as I thought they were!

I find them really better than I thought they were! They are all good. They are *essential poetry.* They are full of a rare, very rare, lyric ecstasy. They have an adequate thought content, adequately fused in their emotion. They have imagination, and music. And they have good craftsmanship—which most young poets lack.

I find *nothing* to criticize—unless it is a semi-occasional matter of very minor detail. . . .

When my first poems appeared in the well-known Toronto publication, *Saturday Night,* I remember protesting that the introduction sounded as though I were a new piece of land on which Roberts had planted his flag "in the name of king and country and Charles G.D. Roberts and with about as much right as those early explorers." Roberts smiled (how many young poets would have been only too grateful to be presented to an inclement world under the aegis of Roberts) and assured me that it was just a matter of form.

Reading some of the critics and detractors of Roberts I happen to come across, I find their patronising manner somewhat presumptuous. I do not think they comprehend at all the

measure of his work or the stature of the man and his intellectual grasp.

As for myself, I was very lucky, indeed, to have known personally someone of the calibre of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts.

Toronto