"We Hold A Vaster Empire Than Has Been": Canadian Literature and the Canadian Empire

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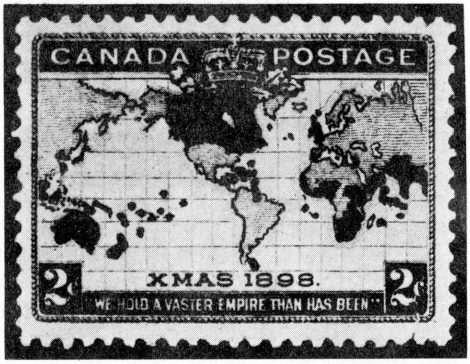

If, as Voltaire believed, history is myth rewritten by each generation, then an old tale, begun after Confederation and lingering on until the 1950s, a once-powerful, establishment fairy-tale which almost became true, compels our attention, especially now when its ideology is disparaged or repudiated.

Canada's first commemorative stamp, the two-cent for Christmas 1892, is a flat map of the world. In the middle of the map—in cultural mythology, the central high-point—under an imperial crown, is the vastest patch—Canada. The line "We Hold A Vaster Empire Than Has Been," blazoned across the bottom of the stamp, was from Sir Lewis Morris' "Song of Empire," written to celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee of June 20, 1887. Prime Minister Laurier's Postmaster-General, Sir William Mulock, designed the stamp showing a map oddly similar to the one prepared by Sir George Parkin, Principal of Upper Canada College and Secretary of the Rhodes Scholarship Trust, to be used in Canadian schools in order to show Canada as the prominent link between the far East which appears on both sides. The meaning of the personal pronoun "we" had shifted from Great Britain to (mingling then current phraseology) the Greater, Vaster, Britain of the West—Canada—and that shift is indicative

of the fervent aspirations of many of the political, economic, intellectual, and cultural leaders of the Dominion at that time.

A significant proportion of Canadian writing propounded or responded to the intoxication, hangover, and withdrawal from the heady Imperial brew. The major ingredients of this once potent Britannic cocktail were Divine command and mission, race and heritage, education stressing athleticism and militarism, and technological triumph. The dominant image and cliché of the Imperial relationship are the family adjustments of Father/Son, Mother/Daughter. Initially, in adolescence, the loving son and daughter, needing the protection and encouragement of Papa/Mama, crave the approval and strive for emulation of their illustrious parents. What follows is guilt and irritation when it is suggested that their contribution is insufficient to the increasing responsibility of the enormous family estate. As the parents age, the vigorous, white, northern children quietly assume the estate, whilst the parents enjoy a prosperous and well-earned retirement, secure in their knowledge that the loving children will enhance their inheritance. A more aggressive, masculine version is Leacock's "The old man's got old and he don't know it; can't kick him off the place, but I reckon that the next time we come together to talk things over, the boys have got to step right in and manage the whole farm."[1]

One of the most obvious reasons advanced for the decline of Imperialism was the growth of nationalism. Such a theory hardly applies to Canada after Confederation where Imperialism was one of the most potent expressions of nationalism for three reasons. Canadian Imperialism meant that Canadians might well attain a dominating influence within the Empire, become powerful enough to resist the growing strength of the American Empire, and eventually heal the ruptured Anglo-Saxon family. Sir Wilfred Laurier, the white knight of Reciprocity, branded as traitor, found his white plume besmirched in the mud of the 1911 Election because he underestimated the Superior Imperial Charger.

Nationalist critics of the 1970s—"little Canadians" in the jargon of Empire—distorted the physiognomy of the child of nations, pointing to this feature or that as un-Canadian or pre-Canadian. Their parochial, indeed insecure, Colonial approach, so reminiscent of Americans after the Revolution, has fragmented a cultural wholeness, of which Canadian literature is one expression. There was a time when it was believed that all the

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[1] Cited by John S. Ewart, "A Perplexed Imperialist," *Queen's Quarterly* 15 (1907): 90.

King's horses and all the King's men could put Humpty together again. In the words of Albert, fourth Earl of Grey, renowned for his tea and his cup for that great Imperial public-school game, amateur rugby-football: "it is only a question of time before you, the people of Canada, become, because of your numbers, if you remain united, high-souled, public-spirited and incorruptible, the most powerful factor, not only in the British Empire, but in the English-speaking world."[2] And so they did, if the English Earl's remarks about Vincent Massey, first Canadian Governor General, are to be understood, "Fine chap, Vincent, but ye know, he does make one feel a bit of a savage."[3]

Early nineteenth-century Canadian literature is fulsome in its display of loyalty "to Albion's standard true." Unpleasant facts of history, the revolting colonies, the presence of large numbers of Scots and Irish, are deluged by the rising tide of the myths of divine and racial mission shared by Haliburton, Howe, O'Dell, Stansbury, and even Alexander McLachlan in a poem beginning:

> The Anglo-Saxon leads the van,
> And never lags behind,
> For was he not ordain'd to be
> The leader of mankind?[4]

But these are best summarised in the conclusion of Goldsmith's "The Rising Village:"

> Then, blest Acadia! ever may thy name,
> Like hers, be graven on the rolls of fame;
> May all thy sons, like hers, be brave and free,
> Possessors of her laws and liberty;
> Heirs of her splendor, science, pow'r, and skill,
> And through succeeding years her children still.
> . . . . . .
> So may thy years increase, thy glories rise,
> To be the wonder of the Western skies.[5]

By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the concept of the Empire as a *super* natural

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[2] Earl Grey, Address, Nov. 29, 1906. *Addresses Delivered Before The Canadian Club of Toronto. Season 1906-1907.* ed. J.H.W. Mackie (Toronto: Warwick Bro's, 1907) 26.

[3] Apocryphal.

[4] "The Anglo-Saxon," *The Poetical Works of Alexander McLachlan* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1974) 33.

[5] Oliver Goldsmith, "The Rising Village," *Canadian Anthology*, eds. Carl F. Klinck and R.E. Watters (Toronto: Gage, 1966) 26.

agency seemed incontrovertible inasmuch as it was based upon the logic of history, science, technology, and the new psychological and social disciplines. On the Empire, the sun could not set, and once formidable nature was now subdued by the power of its mighty engines. It is difficult to find a Canadian prominent in politics, enterprise, or letters who was not even more excited by this concept than his English counterpart, probably because it seemed the way to prominence and power on the world's stage. All of the so-called Confederation poets, and I include Isabella Valancy Crawford and Pauline Johnson, supported the concept. The exception is Bliss Carman, in whom I can discern no ideological basis whatsoever. If there were a chosen people, then Canadians were the élite of the elect because of geographical position and climate. They were the most northerly of the northern race and made a virtue of a frigid climate which promoted superior moral and intellectual qualities, a bit like the cold showers of the public schools. At the same time, it eliminated the moral and intellectual laxity and physical torpor of "the lesser breeds." Fortunately, there were not too many within the Dominion, and Imperial policy meant to keep it that way; no melting pot or multi-culturalism here, though perhaps a little genocide. The French-Canadians posed no real problems, for, to the Imperial mind, were they not Bretons and Normans whose ancestors had conquered England, and so were they not really only somewhat eccentric members of the same race? As Campbell puts it in "Show the way, England,"

> They are not alien,
> Helot, out-cast,
> But blood of the old blood,
> Norman of William,
> Victors at Hastings,
> Builders of England,
> Heirs of your wonderful,
> Glorious past.[6]

Or William Henry Drummond in *The Habitant and Other French-Canadian Poems* (1898)—with an introduction, mark, by Louis Frechette:

> So de sam' as two broder we settle down,
> leevin' dere han' in han',
> Knowin' each oder, we lak' each oder, de
> French an' de Englishman,
> For it's curi's t'ing on dis worl', I'm sure you

[6] Wilfred Campbell, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Campbell* (Toronto: 1908) 306.

see it agen an' agen,
Dat offen de mos' worse ennemi, he's comin'
de bes', bes' frien'.
. . . . . .
An' onder de flag of Angleterre, so long as
dat flag was fly—
Wit' deir English broder, les Canayens is satisfy
leev an' die.
Dat's de message our faders geev us w'en dey
're fallin on Chateaugay,
An' de flag was kipin' dem safe den, dat's de
wan we will kip alway![7]

However, no French-Canadians were admitted to the Garrison Club in Quebec City, and it was only in the 1950's that a few French-Canadians of impeccable lineage were invited into the Montreal Hunt.

The Indian was more difficult, and posed a problem encountered by the British also in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. The solutions were not dissimilar. The National Policy, for example, meant something very different for the original inhabitants of this "nation": dispossession, reserves, and a forced agricultural existence. It is significant that amongst the heroes of D. C. Scott, poet and head of the Indian Department, was Sir George Grey. In his *At the Mermaid Inn* column for 10 September 1892, Scott wished to have had Sir George, who had actively suppressed the aborigines of South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, as Governor General of Canada and "had all his activity and experience working for our interest."[8] There were, however, exceptional Indians like Pauline Johnson, daughter of a Mohawk chief and an English mother. Theodore Watts-Dunton, introducing her collected poems, *Flint and Feather,* gave the Empire's thanks to a people, rather like Rajah Brooke's Dyaks or the Indian Guides, who had been loyal allies for two hundred years. Pauline Johnson, dedicating her volume to the Governor General, also Chief of the Six Nations, seems to have suffered no racial or sexual identity crisis like "The Half-Breed Girl" and in poems like "Canadian Born" produces the equal of British jingo:

We are the pulse of Canada, its marrow and its
blood:
And we, the men of Canada, can face the world

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[7] "The Habitant's Jubilee Ode" (New York: Putnam, 1898) 131, 133.

[8] Duncan Campbell Scott, *At the Mermaid Inn* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1979) 146.

and brag
That we were born in Canada beneath the British flag.
. . . . . .
The Yankee to the south of us must south of us remain . . . .[9]

The racial ideal could include those who could be moulded into a northern British nation, such as Germans or Scandinavians, but remained contemptuous of Doukabors or Lithuanians or Jews and certainly excluded Orientals and Blacks. The national stew, so to speak, was basically meat and potatoes without any of the exotic spices of curry. Robert J. C. Stead in *The Empire Builder and Other Poems* writes of Canada as "The Mixer" where:

I take 'em as I get 'em, soldier, sailor, saint and clown
And I turn 'em out Canadians—all but the yellow and brown.[10]

The remittance-man, the effete English aristocrat, is not finally the butt of Canadian ridicule because "The Son of Marquis Moddle" in the invigorating moral climate of the North-West is

A son of dear old England, he's a hero, he's a brick;
He's the kind you may annihilate but you can never lick.
For he played and lost and played and lost, and stayed and took the trick;
In a world of men he'll play a manly part.[11]

The increasing anxiety of the Imperialists to take up the burden of Empire provoked increasing scorn for "little Canadians" and growing hostility to racial impurity. In "Canada," Roberts urges the "Child of Nations" to fulfil its manhood and "Seek Higher/ The place of race and age."[12] Campbell, the laureate of Empire, sees his country as "The Lazarus of Empire" and reviles "the poor beggar Colonial."

How long, O how long, the dishonour.
The servile and suppliant place?

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[9] *Flint and Feather (Collected Verse)*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Musson, 1913) 81-82.

[10] (Toronto: Briggs, 1909) 15.

[11] Stead 16.

[12] *The Collected Poems of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts*, ed. Desmond Pacey (Wolfville: Wombat P, 1985) 85.

> Are we Britons who batten upon her
> Or degenerate sons of the race.[13]

Likewise Stead in "The Charity Ward":

> But ye know the load is heavy and ye do not
> stoop to lift;
> And her's is all the burden, and yours is all
> the shame—
> The Charity-Ward of the Empire, a nation only
> in name.[14]

Stephen Leacock toured the Empire and propagandized his vision, increasingly concerned that heritage and destiny might be sullied:

> Poles, Hungarians, Bukowinians and any others who will come in to share the heritage which our fathers have won. Out of all these we are to make a kind of mixed race in which is to be the political wisdom of the British, the chivalry of the French, the gall of the Galician, the hungriness of the Hungarian and the dirtiness of the Doukobor.[15]

His friend, Sir Andrew Macphail, speaking as a medical man, warned that the melting-pot meant racial impurity. It "means that instead of the pure race from which we have come, we shall have a mongrel race, and this mongrel race is making itself known in Canada as a result of the immigration we have had."[16]

A further anxiety was that the mission which was divine in its origins and therefore to be directed to moral and spiritual ends was distorted by economic and material power and by an overweening pride in technology. The inevitable consequence, as with Rome, was decline and fall. The classic and most widely copied expression of this belief was Kipling's "Recessional,"

> God of our fathers, known of old—
> Lord of our far-flung battle line—
> Beneath whose awful hand we hold
> Dominion over palm and pine—

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[13] Campbell, "The Lazarus of Empire" 234.

[14] Stead 92.

[15] Stephen Leacock, "The Political Achievement of Robert Baldwin," *Addresses Delivered Before The Canadian Club of Ottawa, 1903-1909* ed. Gerald H. Brown (Ottawa: Mortimer P, 1910) 164.

[16] Andrew Macphail, "The Immigrant," *Canadian Club Year Book, 1919-1920* (Ottawa: 1920) 171.

> Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
> Lest we forget—lest we forget!
> . . . . . .
> Far-called, our navies melt away—
> On dune and headland sinks the fire—
> Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
> Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
> Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
> Lest we forget—lest we forget![17]

echoed in Campbell's "Canada,"

> O Canada, my own, my own;
> Your children, they have dragged you down
> And trampled all your old renown,
> As some base harlot of the town,
> O Canada, my own, my own.[18]

and is the reason why Lorne Murchison's vision in *The Imperialist* is rejected: "In the scrolls of the future it is already written that the centre of the Empire must shift—and where, if not to Canada?"[19]

In the words of Jan Morris, it is the "intangibles" of Empire which last longest,

> manners, customs, ways of thought, beliefs. Altered and adapted by successor systems, developed into new techniques, perverted into superstition, degraded into parody, they are likely to survive when the last imperial palace is just a pile of stones.[20]

Canadian literature continued to be engaged with such intangibles, and an awareness of the subtleties of Empire can only extend our understanding of such writers, for example, as Pratt or MacLennan or Richler.

In spite of modern criticism fascinated by the scientific jargon of Pratt's work, he is not a modern poet. Only two critics, Fred Cogswell and Northrop Frye, have accurately described, but for the wrong reasons, Pratt's sensibility. To account for Pratt, Frye goes back to the Anglo-Saxons, whilst Cogswell

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[17] Rudyard Kipling, *Kipling's Works*, 10 vols. (New York: Collier, n.d.) 10: 193.

[18] Campbell 316.

[19] Sara Jeannette Duncan, *The Imperialist* (1904; Toronto: McClelland, 1971) 229.

[20] Jan Morris, *In Quest of the Imperial Style* (New York: Vendome P, 1968) 11.

attributes the concepts of materialism, giantism, and infantilism to the crassness of North America. But Pratt is an Imperial Victorian and a belated one at that. The similarities between Pratt and the two most popular voices of Imperial England, G. A. Henty and W. E. Henley, would be weird unless we understand that they were the products of a similar cultural ethos. All were sickly boys who grew up with a vicarious fascination with heroism, great deeds, violence, and power. Victorian Anglo-Saxon and not North American, but very John Bull, Pratt, living in various Victorian manses in the Old Colony, was in, but not of, the outports; but this new-found-land veneer, often fallacious, was eventually exotic in that most imperial of cities and universities, Toronto. Pratt's writing seems always directed to the boys of the stag: no sex; the only permissible female figure, mother; a kind of boys' public-school audience with rather raw North American additions, poker and booze. His technological obsession is that of many Victorian writers—steam, especially as it manifested itself in the very machines of Empire, ships and locomotives. We have heard much of Pratt's interest in the collective, common man, but he clearly participated in that Victorian phenomenon of heroes and hero-worship when he created such a muscular Christian as Brébeuf (and isn't he really English, shades of Campbell?).

> The family name was known to chivalry—
> In the Crusades; at Hastings; through the blood
> Of the English Howards; called out on the rungs
> Of the seige ladders; at the Castle breaches;
> Proclaimed by heralds at the lists, and heard
> In Council Halls:—the coat-of-arms a bull
> In black with horns of gold on a silver shield.[21]

Brébeuf dies, "a lion at bay," giving his over-awed enemies "roar for roar," for the Imperialist (here the situation is reversed) always admired a worthy opponent, no matter what his face or colour.

> So 'ere's *to* you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, at your
> 'ome in the Soudan;
> You're a pore benighted 'eathen, but a
> first-class fightin' man;
> An 'ere's *to* you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, with
> your 'ayrick 'ead of 'air—
> You big black boundin' beggar—for

[21] E. J. Pratt, "Brébeuf and His Brethren," *The Collected Poems of E. J. Pratt*, 2nd. ed., ed. Northrop Frye (Toronto: MacMillan, 1958) 246.

you broke a British square![22]

"The Titanic" is not the expression of an original thinker but an elaboration of a familiar, by now, Edwardian theme. The seemingly indestructible, unsinkable *Titanic* appeared to be the quintessence of an Empire, above and beyond the limits of natural law. After the sinking, the pulpits of Empire resounded to sermons like that of the Bishop of Winchester on the Sunday following. "When has such a mighty lesson against our confidence in power, machinery and money been shot through the nation? The Titanic, name and thing, will stand for a monument and a warning to human presumption."[23] The irony is that the mighty engine of Empire is destroyed by an iceberg, a native product of Britain's oldest colony and Canada's youngest province, and so moves us to Pratt's National Imperial Epic, "Towards the Last Spike." Here Pratt celebrates what was called The Queen's Highway, a route which many Imperialists regarded as the most important of the thousands of miles of track throughout the Empire because it was a secure, all red route to the Orient. Once again Pratt dwells on the doers of Empire, politicians, businessmen, and engineers. The Laurentian monster is not original but a variation on Victorian nature slain by (North-American anyway) St. Van Horne. F. R. Scott's "Where are the Coolies, Ned?" is irrelevant, for in an Imperial conception they are where they should be—in the mounds beside the tracks of Empire.

"Hugh," we are told by his cousin, "came back from Oxford with the richest possible Oxford accent it was possible to produce . . . Hugh MacLennan who had been chosen to go to Oxford to be made into the nearest thing to royalty we had ever imagined."[24] For a goodly portion of his life, MacLennan seems to have had a love/hate relationship with England, perhaps because the England of *Barometer Rising* never really allowed her admirers beyond the butler's pantry. In his first published novel, in 1941, the theme is a late expression of the belief that, within the Empire, Canada will become "the central arch," "the keystone" of the great Anglo-Saxon nations. Geoffrey Wain has mistakenly been seen as the Imperialist when, in fact, he is the Colonial who believes that his country can never be more than third-rate. It is the young Neil Macrae who is the new Imperialist, anxious, like Leacock's boys, to run the estate. The improbable plot which allows Neil to end up practically standing on his degraded and fallen enemy has all the emotional satisfaction of

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[22] Kipling, "Fuzzy-Wuzzy" 98.

[23] Geoffrey Marcus, *The Maiden Voyage* (New York: Viking P, 1969) 298.

[24] Elspeth Cameron, *Hugh MacLennan* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1981) 71.

those vignettes of Empire in which the white hunter bestrides his trophy.

When Empire disintegrates, when parents find themselves in an old people's home, genteel still but shabby and impecunious, the children become melancholy, irritated, self-doubting, bewildered, and anxious as they face who they are, where they are.

In at least three novels—*Duddy Kravitz, St. Urbain's Horseman,* and *Joshua Then and Now*—Richler is keenly aware of the adapted, parodied, and perverted intangibles of Empire. The richest response is in *Duddy Kravitz,* a splendidly original variation on the boy of Empire on the threshhold of manhood. If Duddy is an apprentice, a learner, a novice, who is his employer, teacher, master? Since the "Captains and the Kings" have departed, the remaining grotesqueries do not act according to the rules. If the game is no longer cricket, what is it? Joshua's father, for example, clad in shorts and diamond socks, breakfasting on a Labatt's, confronts his eleven year-old son, not behaving the way fathers behaved in G. A. Henty novels or in *Boys Own Annual.* The English of Montreal, a city which has seen the withdrawal of two Empires, are depicted by Richler rather like Paul Scott's characters in his "staying on" novels. The situation is still, uniquely in Canada, Colonial, but on the point of disintegration. However, Westmount remains, "with a cricket pitch and its own police force. Where the snow was cleared instantly, and if even a crack, never mind a real pot-hole, opened on the streets a French-Canadian came running with a shovel of hot tar—"Yes, sir. Right away, boss";[25] Selwyn House, with its rosy-cheeked pupils in blazers and flannels; and McGill, with its Oxbridge architecture and its Jewish quota. But "the skies of loyal Westmount are troubled, a colony beseiged."[26] Duddy begins by destroying his teacher, a Scotsman of once impeccable principles and dedication, by driving him to drink and then Verdun. Duddy is a reluctant and temporary part of the once proud militarism of the Empire; the deserting, out-of-step Cadet Corps led by Commander-in-Chief W. E. James (Jew spelt backwards) cannot survive the march through the ghetto, leave alone "thirty miles . . . through rain and mud that was knee-deep. 'Is that what I pay school fees for?'"[27] Duddy cannot run with the McGill crowd—those poor little lambs who have gone astray—though Irwin and Duddy's brother, Lenny, become in-

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[25] Mordecai Richler, *Joshua Then and Now* (Toronto: McClelland, 1981) 92.

[26] Richler, *Joshua* 93.

[27] Mordecai Richler, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Toronto: McClelland, 1974) 44.

gratiating anti-Semitic parodies. He exploits the pastoral heir, little Eve, who also aids and abets Duddy in buying up the French-Canadian farmland and is initially willing enough to come to the city to be his girl-Friday, a novel variation on an earlier Empire myth. He cripples Virgil or what remains of the classical curriculum of the public school and Colonial America. But he is really driven, not to create anew, but to re-create the caste and colour power structures of Empire. "Neither of the two hotels that were still in their hands admitted Jews, but that, like the British raj that still lingered on the Malabar Coast, was not so discomforting as it was touchingly defiant. For even as they played croquet and sipped their gin and tonics behind protecting pines, they could not miss the loud, swarthy parade outside."[28] Here, as in other Colonial contexts, all that is desirable is epitomized by the white man, in this case Hugh Thomas Calder, who has perverted his inheritance and stimulates his jaded appetite by dropping $100 bills in urinals. Calder's issue is his rich bitch daughter who has just had an abortion, and, when Duddy ceases to be amusing and exotic, Calder drops him, too. So eventually Duddy occupies, but cannot inherit, the house of Uncle Benjy, which represented his idea of how an English lord lived. Duddy pillages it because he is "not a British lord and this isn't the old ancestral home."[29] He is the new Barbarian.

It would seem that when an accredited ideal, with its attendant beliefs, morality, and customs, fragments, grotesque adjustments follow. The infertile, crippled, maimed, and diseased characters of Richler have their counterparts elsewhere in Post-Empire literature.

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[28] Richler, *Apprenticeship* 75.

[29] Richler, *Apprenticeship* 383.