

# The Poet in Her Time: Isabella Valancy Crawford's Social, Economic, and Political Views

*Robert Alan Burns*

After a lifetime of solitary effort to achieve recognition as a poet, Isabella Valancy Crawford felt understandable disappointment and bitterness toward the male-dominated editorship of literary periodicals in Canada. She expressed these emotions in a letter to *Arcturus*, a newly established literary journal, which published the letter on the 19th of February 1887, a few days after her death:

. . . no contribution of mine has ever been accepted by any first-class Canadian literary journal. I have contributed to the *Mail* and *Globe*, and won some very kind words from eminent critics, but have been quietly "sat upon" by the High Priests of Canadian periodical Literature.

Nineteenth-century Canada was by no means unkind to its poets—its male poets. Sangster, Mair, Lampman, and Scott were employed by the government. Roberts and Carman enjoyed the benefits of education and social position, and Wilfred Campbell was educated in, and employed by, the established Church prior to taking up a minor government post. It may be argued that the low levels of remuneration and prestige attached to jobs such as those of Lampman and Campbell left little to choose between bare subsistence and obscurity; however, the specific cases of two individuals must be weighed against the willingness of the government, as a general practice, to do anything at all—that, during a period notorious for its philistinism, artists were accorded even token recognition and were extended in some small way the benefits of official favour.

Campbell's case was debated on the floor of Parliament, where it was argued that in recognition of his talent as a poet, he should be transferred as soon as possible from the Department of Railways and Canals to the library, a change of position that would raise his salary from \$200 to \$1000 per year, enough, in

the words of Wilfrid Laurier, to "put him above the wants of life."<sup>1</sup>

For such benefits altogether to elude Isabella Valancy Crawford may have been at once a curse and a blessing. Although her poetry would suffer from want of professional advice and editorial correction, her perceptions would remain unclouded by anything resembling comfort, security, or obligations born of patronage. Her consequent detachment would allow her to discern clearly the alliance of government, science, commerce, and religion in the abuse of political and economic power.

## I

The direction that Crawford's social and political thought would take in the final twelve years of her life is foreshadowed powerfully in "Moloch," published in the *Toronto Daily Mail* on November 6th 1874 when Crawford was not quite 24 years old. "Moloch" is an allegorical dream vision in 136 lines of blank verse. Its subject is the sacrifice of the most cherished and valuable of human qualities to what Douglas Bush has characterized as the "rapacious and soulless commercialism" that accompanied nineteenth-century industrial expansion, what Lampman called the "purely brute instinct" of "watching the pile grow."<sup>2</sup>

Moloch, it will be remembered, is the dark aspect of Yahweh to whom children were sacrificed in ancient Judah. Until recently, Moloch was thought to be the name of a deity of the Ammonites, pagan neighbours of the Hebrews of Judah.. If Crawford meant for her Moloch to be viewed as a god of ruthless money-getting worshipped in a neighbouring land, her readers would have little difficulty in guessing the identity of the Ammonites.

The poem opens in a Blakean dream-world, where a daemonic angel plays the role of messenger:

There fell a cloud; it parted and there swept  
 Before mine eyes a vision; when it pass'd,  
 Before me flew an angel, in his hand  
 Holding the interpretation of the dream. (3)

<sup>1</sup> *Official Report of the Debates of the House of Commons* (28 Sept. 1891), 6262-63.

<sup>2</sup> *Science and English Poetry* (New York: Oxford, 1950) 94; and Archibald Lampman, "At the Mermaid Inn," *Toronto Daily Globe*, 24 Sept. 1893, rpt. in *At the Mermaid Inn*, ed. Barrie Davies (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1979) 157.

Following this brief introduction, the dream-vision is revealed to the reader, commencing in a panoramic view of a city by "a mighty sea":

A city roar'd like a great beast fast chain'd  
Beside the sloping of a mighty sea so thick  
Set with white sails of commerce, that the wave  
Was one sapphire, shadowing clearly back  
The rushing wings of summer-seeking swans  
In white battalions clanging towards the south.

Three lines later, Crawford refers to the hours of "the Arctic day" indicating that the city may be Canadian, presumably Toronto, situated as it is on a "mighty" inland sea. The roarings of the "great beast fast chain'd" suggest the din of industrial activity producing goods to be carried away on the "rushing wings" of the "white sails of commerce." By themselves these images of industry and commerce seem innocently powerful and vibrant; viewed in the context of the remainder of "Moloch," however, they become fraught with sinister implications, whereby the very white of the sails of commerce connotes the antithesis of purity. The first indication of disquiet in the picture occurs with the discovery of a thick cloud covering the city

Like a great smoke, and behind the sun  
March'd in his panoply, and thrust  
His jav'lins uselessly against it; all  
Who mov'd within the city bore its shade  
On furrow'd brow, and curtaining the eye.

The cloud appears not to be a natural one, its effects like those of industrial smog, impenetrable even to the power of the sun. Now Crawford counterpoises the ebbing of the sea outside the city with "a tide/ of human life" rushing "thro' the shaded streets" toward a single point:

. . . one high Fane  
That in the grey, dim city redly shone  
Lurid as some ill planet thro' the mist. . .

The reader is carried forward by the human current, then upward "Spirit-borne" above the scrambling, clawing crowd to the flat top of a high hill, where "I found. . . / a Fane of virgin gold. . .":

Pure gold from the pavement up to the whirling vane  
Burnish'd and burning, and the very dust

Whirl'd in golden drifts, and smote my face,  
With scorpion stings. . . .

In much of her verse, particularly poems involving North American Indian imagery and myth, Crawford equates the colours red, yellow, and gold with life, warmth, and love. This equation is particularly true in "The Wooing of Gheezis," published in *The Mail* less than two months before the appearance of "Moloch." "The Wooing of Gheezis" (18 Sept. 1874) is a North American Indian idyll celebrating the sacred marriage of the Sun with Segwun, the spring. As might be expected, the poem is replete with vegetal and floral motifs reinforced by vivid colour imagery, predominantly red, yellow, and gold.<sup>3</sup> There is also in "The Wooing of Gheezis" a significant appearance of Crawford's favorite flower, the water lily and its attendant lily-pad, which together connote fertility.

In the context of "Moloch," however, Crawford reverses the meanings usually carried by her colour imagery. Just as the god Moloch represents anti-Yahweh, so the red and gold in Moloch's temple provide an ironic mockery of basic human values. From the open doors of the temple, a blast of wind, "a dragon's breath," obliterates sweet scents from distant meadows and pastures, drowning out "The murmur from below/ of children's voices. . . / which sing the cradlesong of sweet content." Within the fane, a voice cries out, demanding sacrifice to Moloch, but the dreamer sees "no lamps, nor doves, nor any fruits/ of the rich gardens stretching by the sea." What the dreamer does see is a huge furnace:

. . . heated till it look'd  
White as a lily when the drooping sun  
Peers thro' her petals; and the roaring came  
From flames within. . . .

Crawford's ironic use of the lily here is underscored by the subsequent effusion of images usually carrying pleasant associations with wealth: "ruby, amethyst, and gold / lurid with deadly splendours." The furnace produces "a river of red gold" and a "subtle smoke" that blinds the attendant worshippers to everything but "the golden glory of the place":

And no man saw his neighbour, and no sands  
Of Lybia were more desolate of that  
Which men call brotherhood; each man was there

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Alan Burns, "Crawford and the Indians: allegory in 'The Helot'," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 4.1 (1979) 154-61.

A world unto himself, roof'd, heaven'd with gold!  
 Past the red threshold stood a gold god—  
 A Moloch. . . .

The production of wealth, then, separates man from his fellow humans, isolating him in his greed. Still, for the dreamer, there is no sign of what the supplicants will proffer for sacrifice. Then, suddenly, the dreamer's vision clears:

. . . but those who rush'd  
 Onward, and would not be denied, were millionfold.

. . . thrust their off'rings into Moloch's hands,  
 And angel shapes I saw with every man. . .

And on the golden seals upon their brows  
 I read their names, Honour, Goodwill, and Love,  
 Faith, Charity and Peace, and star-ey'd Hope;  
 And, violet-breathing Seraph of the vales,  
 Who dwells in lowly places, sweet Content.

Given into the outstretched golden hands of Moloch, these sacrificial victims vanish, leaving the worshipper to rush on "past the grim Moloch, to the molten sea/ of virgin gold to dwell beside its wave,/ and lose all but himself . . . ."

In dramatizing the dehumanizing effects of the production of wealth by industry, "Moloch" adumbrates one of the important themes in the development of Crawford's social and political thought from 1879 to 1887. It was in June 1879 that Crawford's verse began appearing in the Toronto *Evening Telegram*, where her poems would continue to be published—at about two-week intervals—for the next seven years.

## II

J. Ross Robertson's *Evening Telegram* displayed a format nearly identical with that of its competitors, but it was a considerably smaller paper than either *The Globe* or *The Mail*, consisting on weeknights of four unnumbered pages, each page eight columns wide. On Saturday, the *Telegram* doubled its size to offer an expanded entertainment section, complete with words and music to a popular song and an extra page of feature articles.

At various times, each of the four pages of the *Telegram* carried Crawford's poems, although her work usually competed

for space in the literary section, which consisted on weekdays of a single page, sometimes half-filled with advertising and usually featuring the latest installment from a serialized novel. In fiction, the literary pages of the *Telegram* were dominated by the works of May Agnes Fleming, later to be reissued by Robertson in inexpensive pulp editions.

Except for Crawford's work, the verse appearing in the *Telegram* ranged from banal to mediocre, supplied by a corps of poetasters, most of whom are now deservedly forgotten. Mary M. Shaw, Edward D'Askwith, Busy Bee, O. P. Dildock, Robert Awde, and the familiar Will Carleton, international purveyor of interminable doggerel, provided Crawford with a neutral background against which her work must have appeared surprisingly fresh to a discerning reader. While poems by two or more of these poets often appeared simultaneously on the literary page, Crawford's poems almost invariably appeared alone. Apparently, someone of the *Telegram*'s editorial staff appreciated the quality of Crawford's work, and the frequency with which her poems were printed on the editorial page suggests that the editor in question may have been a person of considerable influence. In the *Telegram*, Crawford seems to have discovered a compatible milieu for the publication of her poems, many of which presented views similar to those expressed in *Telegram* editorials.

It is likely that the editorials reflected the opinions of the proprietor. J. Ross Robertson, like Goldwin Smith (whose thinking is echoed in *Telegram* editorials), may be classified as a politically independent philosophical liberal in the tradition of John Stuart Mill. Endorsing neither Liberal nor Conservative Party doctrines, Robertson's *Telegraph* attempted to maintain a rational, independent, and pragmatic approach to issues, its editorial position usually spanning the middle way between John A. Macdonald on the right and George Brown on the left.

Arguing for pragmatic measures in the national interest, the *Telegram* counselled judicious and circumspect support for Macdonald's National Policy, cautioned the business community to be prudent in the conduct of its affairs, and roundly condemned the British government for its costly policy of military adventurism (1 March 1881). The fiscal waste of empire-building was only one of the *Telegram*'s objections to imperialism, however. A far more persistent editorial theme was sympathetic concern for the victims on both sides of the violence of imperial expansion. In July 1879, amidst daily dispatches on the massing of British troops against the Zulus, the *Telegram* editorialized: ". . . before the end will have been reached, the lives of thou-

sands of British soldiers will have been sacrificed to the Imperialistic idea. . . ." (15 July 1879). Later, when the British moved against the Basutos, who had been their allies against the Zulus, the editorialist remarked with pointed irony: ". . . and the glorious work of Christianizing the heathen by means of breach-loading rifles will go on" (26 Oct. 1880). It is significant that this latter comment appeared after the publication of Crawford's poem "War" on the 4th of August 1879:

Not, not alone where Christian men  
Pant in the well-armed strife,  
But seek the jungle-throttled glen—  
The savage has a life.

He has a soul—so priests will say—  
Go, save it with thy sword;  
Thro' his rank forests force thy way  
Thy war-cry, "For the Lord!" (3)

The editorialist may well have been thinking of Crawford's poem when he made his comment on the treatment of the Basutos. In later years, *Telegram* editorials would reflect Crawford's influence, and, on two occasions, the editorialist would quote from one of Crawford's poems.

In "War," for the first time, Crawford attacks the alliance of Church and State:

See! the white Christ is lifted high,  
Thy conqu'ring sword to bless;  
Smiles the pure monarch of the sky—  
Thy king can do no less.

If, like the sun, his throne doth shine,  
Thou art that throne's prop.

The Christ of "War" is the Christ of the established Church, passive and inert, who must be lifted as a lifeless icon to bless the iniquitous effect of the slaughter. In this context, the whiteness of Christ suggests far more the pallid hue of death than it does purity or innocence. Even as the Church blesses, so does government, represented here by the king for whose throne war is the prop.

Science "in her cell" creates the materials and means of war, and commerce provides the motive:

Go! feast with Commerce, be her spouse;  
 She loves thee, thou are hers—  
 For thee she decks her board and house. . .

. . . leans  
 Upon thine iron neck. . . .

United as a force for the pursuit of material progress, the institutions of society ironically controvert their declared purposes by wreaking destruction so great as to defy measurement. In order to end her poem on this thematic note, Crawford shapes a metaphor in which the ultimate paradox of military accomplishment is identified with ironic perfection:

War, build high thy throne with graves,  
 High as the Vulture's wing!

Although "War" was occasioned by the Zulu campaigns, it was no isolated outburst of pacifism and anti-imperialism. Rather, the poem marks the appearance in print of the first variation on a complex thematic pattern that would become central to Crawford's work. Less than four months after the appearance of "War," "Wealth" was published in the *Telegram* (26 Nov. 1879). On the surface, "Wealth" seems to be a simple equation of riches with tyrannical power, but a closer look at the poem in the context of events of the time reveals an ironic illumination of the semantics of oppression.

There are two voices in "Wealth," God and the faithful. In the first two stanzas God speaks as the defender of his people, especially of the poor and helpless among them, exhorting the personified tyrant Wealth to "doff thy jewell'd crown of gold,/ thy sceptre strong" and quit the "Christian mold" where "Thou canst not buy a slave." The imagery of wealth and power is mingled in God's exhortation, suggesting a Marxist identification of politics with economics. Presumably, God would have little sympathy with such a combination, and so He appears to set himself at odds with the tyranny of Wealth. The faithful react predictably to their champion's eloquence:

God spake—we listened—loud his voice.  
 High o'er the noise of waves  
 Arose our anwer: "Laud, rejoice,  
 No more shall blood of slaves  
 Enrich our soil." From sea to sea  
 Roll'd God's grand watchword, "Liberty." (3)



The rejoicing of the multitude, however, is marred in the fourth and fifth lines of the stanza. Apparently, Wealth is no newcomer attempting to intrude upon the sanctity of Christian territory. The blood of former slaves having enriched "our soil" suggests that while the deity may be a powerful orator, He lacks effectiveness as a protector of the downtrodden. Indeed, in the fourth stanza, the faithful express chagrin to discover not only that the tyrant has not yet left the country but also, seemingly indifferent to divine rhetoric, that he has set about the business of enslavement. The faithful are appalled at the tyrant's effrontery:

Can it be thy mighty foot is set  
 On necks of men bowed down?  
 And dost thou smile with fierce lips lock'd?  
 Is God, by despot wealth, still mock'd?

The phrase "still mock'd" in the final line suggests that Wealth has a history of mocking God and that God's speech may be a routine gesture, giving lip-service to the principle of liberty. Now God's people direct their cries to heaven, appealing to their divine protector:

Look down, O God, whence comes this train,  
 Yok'd to the tyrant's wheel? . . .

Art thou not mock'd, eternal God?  
 Are these not serfs on freedom's sod?

God replies:

Out fool! this is a Christian land,  
 And they but idly rave  
 Who clamour that yon grisly band  
 Contains a single slave. . . .

Initially, "Out fool! this is a Christian land" seems a repetition of God's command to Wealth at the outset of the poem. By the conclusion of the stanza, however, the reader discovers that the deity is exercising his skill in semantics to disqualify "yon grisly band" from the category of slaves, the "fool" in this case being the faithful who have brought forward empirical evidence to the contrary.

In the final stanza, God becomes an apologist for Wealth, affirming that "Wealth is no despot—owns no slave," that "his dole" is accepted freely by those who have "a choice, the yawning grave!" God's sarcasm places Him firmly on the side of tyranny, arguing against the evidence of the senses in true

casuistical fashion. In the final couplet, God shifts the blame for suffering away from Wealth to make famine the sole culprit:

Is wealth a tyrant if he thrives,  
When famine strikes at lowly lives?

"Wealth" explores the role of organized religion in supporting tyranny while pretending to take the side of the oppressed. By denying that slaves are slaves, the Church affirms the Orwellian slogan that "freedom is slavery," counselling the poor to make a virtue of submission.

### III

A discerning reader might well have identified "Wealth" as an allegory of events taking place in Ireland at the time. When the poem appeared, a famine was imminent in Ireland, and conditions would worsen through the winter. As famine approached in Ireland, the *Evening Telegraph* responded with increasing attention to the plight of the Irish peasantry, devoting over one hundred editorials and news articles to Irish matters between August 1879 and March 1881. On the Irish question, the editorial stance of the *Telegram* was often equivocal and contradictory. Not knowing whom to blame for the troubles in Ireland, the *Telegram* took turns at assailing nearly everyone, Parnell and the Land League, the peasants themselves, the landlords, the Roman Catholic Church, and the British Government. If, pontificated the editorialist, the Imperial government had "paid one-tenth as much attention to bettering the condition of the Irish peasantry as it has paid to the semi-savages of Afganistan and Zululand, the evil would be remedied by this time" (2 Oct. 1879).

On the issue of land reform, the *Telegram* took the conservative position that "true land reform in Ireland is first of all a reform of Landlords," a viewpoint later reflected in Crawford's serial romance *Monsieur Phoebus* or, *Some Adventures of an Irish Gentleman*.<sup>4</sup> By 1880, however, agitation in Ireland had shifted the emphasis from reforming landlords to redistributing the land.

Chief among those who would bring about land reform in Ireland was Charles Stuart Parnell, the renegade protestant Anglo-Irish landlord who championed the cause of home rule in the British Parliament and agitated for reform as President of the

---

<sup>4</sup> MS, Lorne Pierce Collection, Queen's University, Ch. 13.

Irish Land League. On March 6th 1880, Parnell made a speech in Toronto—a speech Crawford may well have heard—in which he reiterated his view that “the suffering of the Irish was not due to the providence of God, as many supposed, but to the wickedness of men,” these men being “grasping landlords.”<sup>5</sup> Parnell went on to cite instances in which tenants had been deluded into believing that the land they worked was their own and that their rent payments were mortgage installments, a tactic contrived to increase tenant productivity. Implicit in such deception is an acknowledgment of the view held by Parnell and the Land League that repeated famines in Ireland were attributable to the “inequitable system of land tenure which prevailed there, and the only remedy was for those who tilled the ground and improved it to own it.” Such sentiments must have struck a sympathetic response in Crawford, who echoed them in “A Hungry Day,” a poem celebrating opportunities for Irish famine victims to relocate on their own land in Canada.

In “A Hungry Day” (15 Feb. 1881), the poet turns from the agonies of peasants starving in Ireland, where “just to dhraw/ the breath of life was one long hungry pain,” to their success as immigrants through sacrifice and hard work in Canada:

But thin I left the crowded city streets,  
 There men galore to toil in them an' die,  
 Meself wint wid me axe to cut a home  
 In the green woods beneath a clear, swate sky. . .

'Twould make yer heart lape to take a look  
 At the green fields upon me own big farm;  
 An' God be prais'd all men may have the same  
 That owns an axe! an has a strong right arm! (3)

This is the Canadian Dream, a formula repeated by Catherine Parr Traill, by countless pamphlets promoting emigration, by politicians such as William Macdougall, and by Crawford herself, who continued to emphasize the importance of individual land ownership in her writing.

For instance, similar sentiments to those expressed in “A Hungry Day” are repeated in “A Fragment” (4 June 1881), this time in the words of a French peasant:

And one may say that one is free, but if a strong

<sup>5</sup> Reported in the *Telegram*, 8 March 1880.

man's toil  
 May never serve to buy his length of his own  
 native soil,  
 O blessed saints! that man, no doubt, is—Ciel,  
 why he is—free  
 And he may till the fair blue sky, and reap grain  
 from the sea;  
 And listen friends, believe it true as holy mass  
 and hymn,  
 Unless the peasant owns the soil, the soil  
 possesses him! (3)

Crawford develops this theme further in "Malcom's Katie," where Max Gordon makes an explicit contrast between the forced labour of serfs and the equally hard work performed by Canadian settlers:

O such a battle! had we heard of serfs  
 Driven to like hot conflict with the soil,  
 Armies had march'd and navies swiftly sail'd  
 To burst their gyves. But here's the little point—  
 The polish'd di'mond pivot on which spins  
 The Wheel of Difference—they OWN'D the  
 rugged soil,  
 And fought for love—dear love of wealth and  
 pow'r. . . . <sup>6</sup>

Here, Max implies that truly free men are capable of aspiring to wealth and power, and it follows that, as such men pose a threat to those already in power, it is in the interest of the Church, the state, and the wealthy to promote—each in its own terms—the illusion of individual liberty while withholding the means by which genuine independence may be achieved. If freedom is slavery and rent is disguised as mortgage payments, it should come as no surprise that wealth may thrive on famine. Contraries and ambiguities were beginning to accumulate in Crawford's verse, complicating with increasing irony the skepticism with which she viewed men's dealings with one another and their treatment of the world around them.

For the *Telegram*, as for Crawford, one solution to the troubles in Ireland was emigration. In Ireland itself, however, the political unrest was becoming increasingly violent. On the 7th of March 1881, the anniversary of Parnell's speech in Toronto, the Dublin-born poet expressed in "Erin's Warning" her

---

<sup>6</sup> *Old Spookses' Pass, Malcom's Katie, and Other Poems* (Toronto: Thomas Bain & Sons, 1884) 42-43. Further references will be given in the text as *OSP*.

sympathy for Irish nationalism in deep conflict with her concern over the rising level of violence and terrorism in Ireland:

Could I mount my throne again,  
 Sun-like plac'd in freedom's air,  
 Harkening as the nations say:  
 "Midnight murders placed her there!"  
 Could my sunburst proudly float  
 Glorious o'er my ancient land;  
 Were its mighty folds let loose  
 By the dark assassin's hand. (4)

#### IV

In the month following Parnell's Toronto speech, as the famine in Ireland worsened to the point of disaster, a new poem of Crawford's appeared in the *Telegraph*. In "Coming Days" (13 April 1880), the speaker yearns for a future golden age of "Peace" and "Plenty" replete with "Joy," "Wisdom," "Truth," and "Love":

When Pagan lands by purple seas,  
 And Christian isles on ruder waves  
 Yet other bonds shall have than these,  
 Famine's deep groans and shallow graves,  
 Something beyond shrill cries for food,  
 To tell of common brotherhood! (3)

In "Wealth," "Liberty" had been the deceptive watchword of a hypocritical God. Here, "plain, simple Honesty" would become "Life's watchword" as Pagan and Christian would coexist, sharing in "common brotherhood" the means to defeat famine. Such brotherly cooperation presupposes an equality inconsistent with the notions of social Darwinism, the doctrines of discovery and conquest, and the intolerant, proselytizing zeal of Christian missionaries. Like "War," "Coming Days" attacks the forces that prevent the coming of the peaceable kingdom:

When Commerce shall have soul to spurn  
 Her robe of cheater and shame;  
 When Science' lamp shall strongly burn,  
 Nor trickster Cunning claim her name.  
 And thou, Religion, cease to be  
 Twin-fac'd with vile hypocrisy.

Again religion and commerce are accused of perpetrating war and famine, and in the final stanza the poet returns to the

polarities of wealth and poverty, expressing her hope that the former "o'ergrown" shall not "throw/ its widespread shadow on the soil" and so prevent the poor from gaining "at worst. . . fair wage for honest, manly toil." "Coming Days" shows that Crawford has moderated her earlier condemnation of science to a criticism of the misuses of science by "trickster Cunning." Furthermore, she combines the savages from "War" with the poor from "Wealth" in an expanded category of persons oppressed by the growth of economic and political power. Crawford portrays such oppression as a means, not a by-product, of economic imperialism. In "Malcom's Katie," Max underlines this strongly radical position:

Or Commerce, with her housewife foot upon  
Colossal bridge of slaughter'd savages,  
The cross laid on her brawny shoulder, and  
In one sly, mighty hand her reeking sword;  
And in the other all the woven cheats  
From her dishonest looms. . . . (OSP 43)

Crawford uses the Helot of ancient Sparta as a type of slave particularly suited to represent both the free native and the economic slave exploited by the building of the nation in nineteenth-century Canada. In her long narrative "The Helot," she shows the slave being plied with drink by his Spartan master, much in the way North American Indians were debauched by whiskey traders:

"Lo, the magic of the cup!  
Watch the frothing Helot rave!  
As great buildings labour up  
From the corpse of slaughter'd slave. . . . (OSP 30)

Here, the relationship of oppression to nation-building is clear, but Crawford seems determined that her meaning not be mistaken. In the same poem, she returns to this theme, again equating the physical and psychological brutality of oppression with the creation of wealth and the building of cities:

Bruteward lash thy Helots—hold  
Brain and soul and clay in gyves;  
Coin their blood and sweat in gold,  
Build thy cities on their lives. (35)

In a later reference to nation-building at the expense of oppressed populations, religious imagery and Christian myth suffuse the passage. In *Hugh and Ion*, section IV, Hugh, the Métis protagonist, grows aware of "the infant city nursing on the

breast/ of unhewn woods," a city like nineteenth-century Toronto, finding its "virile voice to shout/ the cry of eighteen hundred years ago":<sup>7</sup>

"Loose us Barabbas! —he will rear us high;  
Will lay his gold upon our organ pipes;  
Will beat his stolen silver in our bells;  
And stain our windows with the blood he robs  
From the free Helot's heart. . . .

The blood of the free Helot in this context is clearly the blood of the free natives of the North American wilderness, those still unmanacled by the developing commercial and industrial economy, represented in *Hugh and Ion* by the allegorical figure of Barabbas. In order to escape the encroachment of urban-industrial Canada, Hugh abandons the city for the wilderness, where he hopes to establish an utopian community. He plans to populate his community with the urban poor, ironically starving in a city surrounded by the bounty of the Canadian wilderness:

With illimitable wilderness around  
From the close city hives rang up the groan  
"So little space! —we starve—we faint, we die! (7)

Unlike the immigrant Irish peasant, who might with luck take up a homestead and succeed in making it prosper, the urban poor comprised a landless, hopeless, and often helpless repository of cheap unskilled labour for growing Canadian industries. During times of recession, the chronically underemployed were often out of work altogether and consequently were either forced to accept charity, the "dole" of wealth, or starve. Organized charitable societies provided immediate relief to those of the suffering who were considered to be deserving, but such organizations, made up of the class of people most responsible for the suffering, did not address the causes of urban poverty. An editorial in the *Telegram* entitled "The Poor of Toronto" called attention to the logistical problems associated with the distribution of charitable relief:

It is a matter for congratulation that the citizens of Toronto are so charitable, but it is not a matter upon which they can plume themselves that newspapers have to find out deserving cases of charity. Were every newspaper reporter in this city to devote his time, all day and every day, to discovering cases of charity, we are convinced

<sup>7</sup> *Hugh and Ion*, ed. Glenn Clever (Ottawa: Borealis P, 1977) 6.

that not one-half of the extent of the destitution in this city would be revealed. . . the poverty of this city is far beyond the control of any societies, however ardent their hearts.<sup>8</sup>

Although the membership of these societies was drawn from Crawford's own social class, her financial circumstances probably would have qualified her as a potential recipient, rather than a donor, of charity. Consequently Crawford's response to urban poverty was initially divided, probably growing out of a shared sense of need on the one hand and a disposition toward noblesse oblige on the other.

Less than three months before the appearance of this editorial, Crawford herself had suggested that acts of charity to the poor should replace outworn conventions to commemorate the deceased. Her rejection of traditional funeral customs seems emphatic:

O, where shall we write them? in temple or grove,  
On pillar or dark chancel stone? . . .

No! give to the sorrowful comfort: bestow  
On the starving a morsel of bread;  
Scatter blessings benign on the living below,  
In the beautiful names of the dead.<sup>9</sup>

To Crawford, charity is neither a simple virtue born of generous impulse nor a ritualistic, token distribution of money and goods to assuage the conscience of the giver. Rather, the poet's notion of charity subsumes and transmutes such contrarities into an egalitarian principle of sharing, comprehending moral, political, and religious dimensions.

As I have already shown, "Coming Days" looks forward to a millennium when greed and oppression will give way to cooperation and brotherhood, and charity in its narrow, conventional sense, i.e. the "dole" of wealth, will yield place to opportunities for the poor to be employed and be adequately compensated. These are ethical and political aspects of charity in its larger sense, reflected in the two direct references to God in "Coming Days":

When nation's bulwarks shall be built,  
Of simple, earnest, God-hewn right. . . .

---

<sup>8</sup> 20 Jan. 1880: 2.

<sup>9</sup> "The Beautiful Names of the Dead," *Toronto Evening Telegram*, 8 Nov. 1879.



and

And where, obeying God's grand plan,  
Man dare to be—an honest man!

"Coming Days" presents God as He should be in an ideal world organized according to the highest ethical principles. As such, the poem makes an implicit protest against things as they are, including organized religion and its God. The just God of "Coming Days" is neither the pale Christ of "War" nor the deceitful God of "Wealth." The just God is a god of the future, while the pale Christ and the God of "Wealth" function in the present world, extending to slaughter and tyranny the sanctions of institutional religion.

Morality, politics, and religion seem to have been inextricably interwoven in Crawford's mind, and, as she grew older, her sense of moral commitment—as it is reflected in her poetry—remained firm as her politics became increasingly radical. Since such modes of thought would be likely to have little popular appeal to the newspaper-reading public of nineteenth-century Canada, Crawford's use of indirection and ambiguity increased as the radical nature of her thought became more fully developed. Nowhere does her use of indirection and irony point up more emphatically her divergence from popular opinion than in the series of poems comprising her response to the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. All of these poems are susceptible to ambiguous readings, appealing to popular sentiment on one level and criticizing the government by subtle implication on the other.

On March 29th, 1885, only three days following the victory of the Métis over the Northwest Mounted Police at Duck Lake, the *Telegram* was commenting on the rapid mobilization of the volunteers, the desirability of eliminating the Indians altogether, and the popular hope, apparently shared by the editorialist, that, as a reward for their patriotism, the volunteers should at least be able to enjoy a "brush" with the insurrectionists. Two days later, the *Telegram* articulated its position on Riel, a position from which the paper did not deviate: "Everybody sees now what ought to have been done with Riel on the occasion of the last rebellion. He should have been strung up." On April 2nd, the popular response to the Métis rising was expressed in the second of a series of "Volunteer War Songs" written for the *Telegram* by Robert Awde:

## FOR CANADA OUR HOME

Hark! hear the bugle call. It comes from afar.  
 Riel and his Metis crew have challenged us to war  
 And we will answer him with a hip, hip, hurrah  
 For Canada our home! . . . (2)

A fortnight later, Isabella Crawford's dissenting view was published (17 April 1885):

## ON A TEXT HEARD IN THE STREET

"Oh! God, Mary, they've taken my boy with them!"

Glory marches thro' the town  
 Shrill the bugles blaring;  
 One walks clinging to his hand  
 Half his triumph sharing.

Who is she whose tears are rue,  
 And her garments gory?  
 Who is she who weeping walks  
 Hand in hand with Glory?

Lo! they tread the throne steps  
 Salvoes burst in thunder.  
 Who shall wrench her clasp from his?  
 Pluck the twain asunder!

See they climb the dais high,  
 Cannon roar the story,  
 She between the eagles sits,  
 Side by side with Glory.

Lo, the throne is built for two,  
 Rear'd from ages hoary,  
 Sorrow queens it royally,  
 Spouse to Martial Glory! (3)

The body of Crawford's poem dramatizes the ironic marriage in war of the polarities of glory and sorrow. As such, the poem hardly constitutes a demurral from the call to arms to suppress the Métis. It is the text of the quotation, the "text heard in the street," that fixes the poem in its context. The title of the poem directs the reader to the quotation first; hence, it seems clear that the poem is meant to be understood *in this context*. Consequently, the real grief and terror of an actual mother in the

streets of Toronto reverberate throughout the body of the poem to transform a general allegorical statement into a critical comment on the mobilization of "volunteers" for the campaign.

Three of the poems in Crawford's Northwest Rebellion group register the poet's disapproval of war by celebrating the courage and fortitude of non-combatants. While "The Red Cross Corps" (20 April 1885), "Nurse Miller" (24 June 1885), and "The Gallant Lads in Green" (22 July 1885) in no way disparage "our soldiers lads," they focus the reader's attention on the saving of lives, claiming a share of glory for those who "fight fierce death for booty" as "the Gatlings shriek, . . . the rifles speak," and "the shrill shells fall. . . .":

Share with the Corps, the Red Cross Corps,  
The star of the soldier's glory.  
A place on the page of the passing age,  
A part in the Nation's story. (1)

For the medical corpsman, the enemy is death, the "booty" the saved lives of the wounded.

In "Nurse Miller," Crawford differentiates between the martial glory of the soldier and the recognition due the battlefield nurse, "Peace's dear daughter," in whose "breast the iron bands/ of courage and strength were wed":

Thou hast thy awful treasures, War!  
The names and deeds that blaze and burn  
Upon thy brow—the warrior dust  
That moulders in the star-set urn!  
The stern, glad mem'ry of thy sons—  
The joy in heroes' blood well shed  
Peace hath her Pearl—'tis she who plac'd  
The flow'r beside the soldier's bed. (3)

The ambiguity of "stern, glad mem'ry" and the equivocal joy in "blood well shed" are resolved in favor of "Peace" in the final two lines of the poem.

"The Gallant Lads in Green" were those who stood in reserve during the storming of Batoche. This poem compares the gallantry of the soldier who "waiting leans upon his shield/ and hears the fight afar" with that of the red coat "who shouting springs/ against the ready foe." Both deserve to win the "living laurel" argues the poet, although in the final stanza, she clearly indicates her preference for waiting over fighting:

To wait, —with ev'ry pulse aflame,  
 To curb the lion soul!  
 To hear—nor tread—the battle march,  
 To see—nor seek—the goal;  
 To wait—while bugles wind and blare  
 While distant cannon burst—  
 I almost think the men who wait  
 Should have the laurel first! (3)

“The Gallant Lads in Green” was the second of the Northwest Rebellion group dealing directly with the Battle of Batoche. The first was “Songs for the Soldiers,” published in the *Telegram* on the 17th of July 1885. “Songs for the Soldiers” praises the courage of the common soldier and, as well, expresses national pride for the Toronto volunteers who died in the battle:

“Come, now, my son, spell the three names aloud  
 Brown, Moor, and Fitch—Ay, right, my lad—  
 Be proud of them! It was a joyous day!  
 For us they made the bold burst at Batoche,  
 And with their dead flesh built a wall about  
 Our riving land.” (3)

Within the context of the poem, these are the words of a father to his son, set off in quotation marks. The possibilities for ironic reading are several, beginning with the passing from father to son of pride in death and joy in killing. The wall of dead flesh recalls the throne of “War” built high with graves, “High as the Vulture’s wing.”

The next stanza, presumably the words of the poet’s persona, is equally susceptible to equivocal reading:

There’s glory on the sword  
 That keeps it scabbard-sleep, unless the foe  
 Beat at the wall, then freely leaps to light  
 And thrusts to keep the sacred tow’rs of Home  
 And the dear lines that map the nation out upon  
 the world.

the casual reader easily interprets these lines as a justification for the suppression of the Métis at Batoche. The first two lines of the stanza, however, glorify the *unused* sword “unless the foe/beat at the wall. . . .” Assuming the wall to be the national border, “the foe” in this case would have to have been beating from within, since “the dear lines that map the nation” had been extended in 1870 to include the Northwest Territories. Granted, as an act of political expediency, Riel declared a provisional

government in 1885. By doing so, however, he was merely repeating the strategem that had provided him with a bargaining position in the Red River rising of 1869. That Riel might have in any way threatened "the sacred towers of Home" would have seemed as ludicrous in 1885 as the fear of an assault force of North Vietnamese landing on the beaches of southern California in 1970. Even the bellicose *Evening Telegram* acknowledged that the insurrectionists comprised "a few score. . . of half-breeds" and "a tribe or two of half-starved Indians" (20 May 1885). The armed rebellion of 1885 was simply the last desperate act of a tiny minority whose interests had been ignored by Ottawa in the process of opening up the Northwest Territories for development. It is clearly possible, then, that the stanza following the father's patriotic speech in "Songs of the Soldiers" is meant as an ironic critical commentary on Batoche, since that battle in no way qualified as a threat to national security.

In the remainder of "The Songs for the Soldiers," the focus becomes increasingly personal, narrowing from the ingenuous patriotic pride of the soldier's mother to the love of wife, child, and sweetheart. As in the case of the earlier, more famous "The Rose of a Nation's Thanks," the final emphasis in "Songs for the Soldiers" rests on love rather than war.

"The Rose of a Nation's Thanks" (11 June 1885: 1) was the best known of Crawford's poems during her lifetime. Written on the occasion of the return of the volunteers from Batoche, the poem influenced at least two *Telegram* editorials, being quoted in the second of them:

. . . How glad our men will be to find  
 themselves once more in Toronto! And how  
 glad everybody will be to see them here,  
 bearing on their breasts "the rose of a  
 nation's thanks."<sup>10</sup>

In the poem, the poet's persona addresses those who would welcome the homecoming soldiers with triumphal celebration, suggesting that it is far more important for wives and mothers to greet their young men than for the young men to be lionized:

A welcome? Oh, yes, 'tis a kindly word, but  
 why will they plan and prate

---

<sup>10</sup> 24 June 1885: 2.

Of feasting and speeches and such small things,  
While the wives and the mothers wait?

After all, each of the young men already bears "The Rose of a Nation's Thanks," that is, bears his life back to his loved ones. Throughout the poem, patriotism and martial pride are subordinated to the personal feelings of the women whose young men have returned. There is no mention of the battle, no mention of the enemy, and no mention of government or military leaders.

Isabella Crawford was very much caught up in the social and political currents of her time. Her opposition to the "Imperialistic idea" was consistent and unequivocal, and she repeatedly criticized what she perceived to be the complicity of the intellectual, political, industrial, and religious communities in the ruthless expansion of the second empire. She hated war, poverty, and hypocrisy, and if her political philosophy was not exactly Liberal, it was certainly anti-Tory. Crawford's poems of social and political criticism employ indirection and irony, often attacking conditions and large institutional structures, such as poverty, war, science, and commerce, rather than specific individuals, companies, or government offices. When her targets do become more specific, she resorts more and more to indirection and ambiguity, as in the case of the Northwest Rebellion group.

Between the appearance of "Peace" on the 8th of August 1885 and her death in February 1887, only three of Crawford's poems were published in the *Telegram*, one of those a reprint of "The Rose of a Nation's Thanks" (5 Feb. 1887: 2). During this same period, her work began appearing in the *Toronto Globe*, which carried eight of her poems between October 1885 and June 1886. Since these poems are generally longer and more technically ambitious than the *Telegram* poems of the same period, it is reasonable to conclude that Crawford decided to end her long relationship with the *Telegram* in favour of a more prestigious and probably better-paying vehicle for the publication of her poems. The over-all reduction in her poetic output suggests that success in marketing her fiction may have made her less financially dependent on the publication of verse.

The shift to the *Globe* may have been motivated by political considerations as well. On many issues, the editorial positions of the *Telegram* and the *Globe* were similar, but seldom did they agree altogether. Both advocated land reform in Ireland, for instance, but only the *Globe* supported Parnell's agitation for home rule. To the *Globe*, home rule seemed as natural for Ireland as for Canada (4 Sept. 1885: 4). On the domestic side, both

papers agreed that Riel deserved to hang, but the *Globe* took the position that he should not be executed by a government more culpable than he (15 Sept. 1885: 4). Crawford may have shared this view, and by the time of Riel's execution, she may have already begun work on *Hugh and Ion*, a long narrative poem involving an idealistic Métis who dreams of returning to the Canadian wilderness to establish an utopian community. While the lyrics from *Hugh and Ion* were published before the rebellion, two critics have suggested that the lyrics were written first and later worked into the narrative text.<sup>11</sup> This would account for the completeness of the lyrics in the rough, fragmentary narrative framework. The Riel story, then, may have provided Crawford with the narrative and thematic bricks and mortar to hold the lyrics together in an integrated whole.

On the 18th of November 1885, the *Globe* carried a commentary on Riel's execution, which had occurred two days earlier (2). On the recto opposite, there appeared a poem by Isabella Valancy Crawford entitled "All Men Are Born Free And Equal," in which the poet contrasts the lives of two men, one born to wealth, the other to poverty. Through ten stanzas, Crawford traces the successive stages of the rich man's development from his silk-lined cradle to his adult life of ease and luxury. For the "gutter-child," however, the story is different, as can be seen in the contrast between the educational experiences of the two young men:

"All men are born free and equal". Lean  
   Learning left his cell,  
 And Wisdom lifted high his torch to guide  
   the child-heir well;  
 All are born free and equal. From the first  
   it still befell  
 The gutter-babe's staunch teachers were all  
   graduates of hell.

Educated in the street, the poor man's son "Slunk, mid famine's/ ghastly brood,/ the wolf-cub of the city, with man's hate and/ fear for food." Here the tyranny of poverty in turn creates a tyrant, one who sinks ever deeper into crime and degradation as he "stalk's thro' the quaking town." In stanza eight, the natural death and Christian burial of the rich man are contrasted with the figure of "the son of famine" lying "at the bottom of/ life's slope/. . . shadowed by the Christian drop and

---

<sup>11</sup> See Glenn Clever, Introduction, *Hugh and Ion*, xvii-xviii; and Dorothy Livesay, "The Hunters Twain," *Canadian Literature* 55 (1973), 75-88.

rope."<sup>12</sup> Of course, we do not know if Crawford was thinking of Riel when she wrote "All Men Are Born Free And Equal." We do know, however, that the poem was dated November 16th, the day Riel was hanged, and we also know that editors of the *Globe* chose to display the poem in obvious proximity to their comment on Riel's execution.

Riel's death marked the end of any semblance of national unity. In Québec, the Conservatives steadily lost support, and provincial and federal Liberals from Québec, Ontario, and Manitoba united against Macdonald and his policies. Even though Macdonald would manage to be re-elected in 1887 and 1891, it was clear that National Policy had failed, that prosperity had not materialized, and that sectionalism was breaking up the Conservative monolith. The decline of the hope that had buoyed the nation in 1878 is reflected in "The Pessimist," the last of Crawford's poems to be published in the *Globe* (29 May 1886):

Build slightly builders, in the modern fashion,  
 Your temples and your homes,  
 Build no fine vigour of the builder's passion  
 In with your sills and domes.  
 Build slightly builders—as the quick wind rearing  
 The towers of leaping spray;  
 Build slightly, with swift laughter, swift despairing—  
 Your work is for a day! (14)

In the myth of the return of Chaos, Crawford marks an end of a cycle in Canadian history, a period characterized by heroic boldness and effort, yielding in failure to a "modern fashion":

Build slightly builders! From enslaved nations  
 Burst the blind human tides,  
 And on their necks, thro' night of desolations  
 Again old Chaos rides.

University of Guam

---

<sup>12</sup> Apparently, Crawford remained anti-Christian to the last.