Canada in the Making:
Pastoral Ideology in the Poetry
of the Early Colonial Era

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After the Vikings, Cabot’s rediscovery and the mysterious disappearance of the brothers Corte-Real in the northern mists, Canadian early History is marked by the conflicting rivalry between the French and English interests in North America. Western cultures were introduced through fishing and fur-trade, and with the first permanent European settlements in the early 17th century a local literature was born. The early colonial poems, besides their own aesthetic value, are documents written in verse mainly by political dignitaries. Along with these officials with a better station in life came the people forced to immigrate and, of course, it just so happened that some were skilled in writing verse. Compared to the standards of baroque and neoclassical excellence their poems seem to lose pace, although invaluable to the understanding of the slow cultural and social growth of the future Canada. And this was made in an era when urban technological society and “aesthetic autonomy” in art were still far from sight. Thus, the poems of the early colonials and settlers-poets of the 17th and 18th centuries supply a rich source for the study of the culture(s) of the first two centuries of colonial North-America. Not only do they form the first self-conscious expression of a poetical construct of a Canadian identity: they also convey the general New World ethos or character as opposed to the European. In this early period, the cultures of French Canada, English Canada and New England, although distinct and evolving in conflicting violent ways, show a striking presence of exchanges between them. Post-colonial theory and the present growing variety of literatures in

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1 For further reading on this subject see, for example, Robert Bothwell, The Penguin History of Canada. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2006.
English and French may also help us in analyzing this process, for in all these distinct political areas the literary and cultural question to be answered is the same: how do colonial margins, as those of early Canada, respond to the expectations of the centre or centres?

Among the early groups of poets writing in and about Canada, a Frenchman, Marc Lescarbot (1570-1629), is remembered as one of the first, to produce a “pure” literary work in North America. He wrote a *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France* (1609)\(^2\) and he is most probably the founder of New France and American drama and theatre, with *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France*,\(^3\) a welcoming masque made to celebrate the return of the explorer and conquistador Poutrincourt to Port Royal, first performed there in 1606.\(^4\) In *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France* the “savages” are shown on their knees celebrating (in French) their defeat by Poutrincourt, as in this example:

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Voici la main, l’arc, et la flèche
Qui on fait la mortelle breche
En l’animal de qui la peau
Pourra servir d’un bon manteau
(Grand Sagamos\(^3\)) à ta hautesse.

Reçoit donc de ma potions
cette offrande qu’a ta grandeur
l’offre du meilleur de mon coeur.
(Lescarbot, Théâtre 26)
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An aristocratic dramatic allegory of giants and dwarfs this “baroque hymn”

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\(^5\) “C’est un mot de Sauvage qui signifie Capitaine” (Lescarbot, Théâtre, 19).
hails the expansion of Western civilization on North America, and above all Imperial France. Neptune, the classical God of the Seas, is obviously the main supporter of the conquest of the New World by Petirncourt’s exploratory army in the name of the French King. This neoclassical praise of power, empire and civilization also tragically celebrates the beginning of the defeat of the First Nations, in fact the main enemies of the imperial projects of both France and England. Other representatives of Western civilization, like the Jesuits, had a milder policy towards the First Nations in New France. Yet, Lescarbot thought, acted and wrote as a man of his times, and his prejudices against the native Indians (that is Oriental men in a Western territory) were common throughout the Western European colonial powers on the New World.

The beginnings of Canadian poetry in English were less monumental than Lescarbot’s small epic drama, and did not involve a direct praise for empire and Christianity. The baroque bias for pleonasm is shared, as well as the Renaissance cultural codes and conventions, and the general political aim. But instead of imperial praise we find a propagandist pastoral land, full of potential assets and where the alchemical elements — and seemingly their human equivalents, “the humours” — reach balance so that man may fully live. Robert Hayman (1575-1629), a merchant and early governor of the plantation at Harbour Grace, managed to publish a book of verse, called Quodlibets in praise of Newfoundland. This series of poems not only denote its author love for music but also his expertise in the use of masculine rhyme (Skeltonics). The four elements nowhere in the world reach a higher and better degree of balance than in Newfoundland:

The Aire in Newfound-land is wholesome, good;  
The Fire, as sweet as any of wood;  
The Waters, very rich, both salt and fresh;

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6 It is also good to remember that the First Nations were also waging war between them at this time.

7 During this era, Michel Montaigne famous essay of on cannibals (1580) is of course an outstanding exception concerning the Western prejudice towards the Indians.

8 Quodlibet means literally “something that pleases”. In music, a quodlibet was a light composition which integrated several melodies or fragments of popular melodies.
The Earth more rich, we know it is no less.
Where all good, *Fire, Water, Earth and Aire,*
What man made of these foure would not live there?
(Atwood 1)

The Canadian reality of the time was, however, at odds with a such a rhetorical pleonastic invitation to serve the English mercantile interests. These lines form a challenging discourse from a distant incipient periphery or margin to its cultural, social and political European centre, or not, depending on the point of view that is taken by the reader. The poem is also ironically prophetic as to the future of Canada as country, that is, as a political space with its proper centres of decision making, and capable of challenging the traditional power of the Western colonial and imperial centres at the time, whether in London or Paris, or rural England and rural France. The poem, for example, does not mention that Newfoundland was a region at that time divided between France and England. Yet, as we can conclude from the analysis of the poetic style of Hayman, the idea for a new centre capable of challenging its prototype (as Rome was able to challenge the Hellenistic standards) was to remain unfulfilled for many years. Hayman’s poetic agenda for Canada or America doesn’t have any explicit political or religious element. There, no Jesuits enter the land to convert the Indians and no Puritans search for the Promised Land. Nevertheless, Hayman’s idea of social perfection is in fact very different from the one that his contemporary Puritan John Winthrop was then in 1630 defending for New England — not so far from Newfoundland — and its political and religious future centre: that it should be as a “City upon a Hill” (10) so that the whole world could set their eyes on it and learn from the wonders made by the adamant faith and will of an exemplar community. In due time, some English Canadians would also show a similar metaphysical and religious purpose.

Hayman happened to be a businessmen who was a poet in his leisure time. It is hard to tell how many people he lured to immigrate to Canada from England with his alchemical message: “What man made of these foure [elements] would not live there?” (Atwood 1). In other words, what poor man would not become wealthy if he would kept honestly toiling (practical alchemy) the land (of future Canada)? Women, in this patriarchal context, were not a cause of problems or oppressed (as at that time Anne
Bradstreet in New England sometimes complained to be), but are a pleonastic example to all English women in search of a better life: “Sweet Creatures, did you truly understand/The pleasant life you’d live in Newfound-land/You would with tears desire to be brought thither.” (Atwood 1). But it is clear that behind “enthusiastic” Hayman and his dreamy propaganda the message is simple: only by working hard would it be possible for the poor settler to bring forth the balance of the alchemical elements the poem depicts, by exploring and transforming the commodities available.

Newfoundland was then mostly peopled by English fishermen during the mild months, from May to September. The vast northern land of future Canada, with its ice and fog, remained basically hostile and unknown to man. More one hundred and fifty years after Hayman’s Quodlibets, the pre-romantic Roger Viets (1738-1811), a former American Loyalist of the War for Independence and after Anglican Rector in Nova Scotia, returned to a similar pastoral ideal paving the way to the formation of a “new man”. According to Viets, in Canada: “A newborn race is reared by careful hands” (46). Although already a pre-romantic, Roger Viets, like Robert Hayman, associates music and nature in his praise for (Royal) Canada:

May all the Wise, and all the Good unite,  
With all the Habituats of Life and Light,  
To treat the Sons of Music with Respect,  
Their Progress to encourage to protect.  
May each Musician, and Musician’s Friend  
Attain to Hymns divine, which end. (47)

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In these neoclassical lines from *Annapolis-Royal* (1788) written in iambic pentameters, rich rhyme and where allegories dominate, pastoralism appears associated with the perfection in music while each accomplished man is a perfected musician, a “Son of Music” [i.e. a Canadian]. This “music” is, like the “alchemical work” of Hayman, the produce of toil, although here Hayman’s wishful thinking is more clearly replaced by fact. Viets’s verse underlines this conviction with pastoral romanticism and classical allegory:

Where this romantic Village lifts her Head,  
Betwixt the Royal Port and humble Mead;  
The decent Mansions dock’d with mod’rate Cost  
Of honest Thrift, and generous Owners boast;  
There Skill and Industry their Sons employ,  
In works of Peace, Integrity and Joy […]”. (45)

The gloomy side of the pleasant and harmonic reality depicted by Viets is found fifty years before in the scarce and occasional verse of the explorer Henry Kelsey (c.1667-c. 1724), reportedly the first European to reach the Canadian prairies and their peoples, and to observe animal species, such as the buffalo and the grizzly bear never seen before by the white man. This hero of the History of early English Canada wrote, somewhat surprisingly in 1692, a rhyming introduction to the journal he kept of his laborious and painful exploration of the northern Prairies, that was to remain unpublished until 1928, when historian Charles Napier Bell (1854-1936) edited it.11 Viets did not have the poetic talent of Sir Walter Raleigh or even Hayman, but his rhyming couplets are colored by a realistic note which is absent from Hayman’s potential ideal society. Kelsey’s expedition was extremely hard, and this may help in explaining his use of verse in the introduction to the depiction in his diary of the lonely experience of the bleak hostility of a unknown space:

For many time I have often been opprest  
With fear and Cares [yet] I could not take my rest  
Because I was alone and no friend could I find

And once [that] in my travels I was left behind
Which struck fear and terror into me
But still I was resolved this same country for to see
Although through many dangers I did pass
Hoped still to undergo [them] at the Last. (22)\(^{12}\)

As in Lescarbot, the Indians reappear as merciless antagonists to the scientific and political explorations of Kelsey. Notwithstanding the nobility and heroism of the task, the exploration of new vast northern regions is shown as awful, the journey as endless, and almost not worthy of the self-sacrifice involved, albeit the strong will to undergo such an ordeal.\(^{13}\)

All these poetic and cultural experiences make a decisive contribution to the early Canadian literary history. These impressive natural harsh conditions would also have a strong impact in Britain, namely during English romanticism, in William Wordsworth who happened to have read Samuel Hearne’s *Journey from Prince of Wales’ Fort in Hudson Bay to the Northern Ocean* (1795).\(^{14}\) Hearne (1745-1792) went even more northwards than Henry Kelsey did, being the first European to reach the Arctic overland.\(^{15}\) Wordsworth perspective of the Indians was not anymore that of Lescarbot, Kelsey or Hearne. As a matter of fact, he included in the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) the dramatic monologue “The Compliant of a Forsaken Indian Woman”, a poem inspired by the *mores* of Canadian Indians who, living in a ruthless environment, show no seeming mercy for the sick, old and weak who are left behind, although “covered over with Deer-skins, and […] supplied with water, food, and fuel, [and] informed of the track [the] companions intend to pursue […]” (Wordsworth 109).

\(^{12}\) The words in brackets and bold are my own. I want to thank my colleague Dr. Tom Grigg for the help provided in establishing them.

\(^{13}\) The tragic irony of Kelsey’s fate reflects and foreshadows that of many British explorers of the icy unknown, from Samuel Hearne to Robert Falcon Scott (1868-1912), the explorer of the South Pole who died tragically in Antarctica in 1912.


\(^{15}\) Hearne is also considered the source of inspiration to Coleridge’s “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner” (1798).
And this was also true for an helpless sick young Indian mother:

When I was well, I wished to live,
   For clothes, for warmth, for food, and fire;
But they to me no joy can give,
   No pleasure now, and no desire.
Then here contented will I lie;
   Alone I cannot fear to die. (Wordsworth 109)

This romantic perceived raw cruelty (justified by the context) is explored by Wordsworth, through emotional appeal (pathos) in order to intensify the primitivist myth of the Noble Savage by forging a tragic humanist allegory,16 where the sick Indian woman forced to leave behind her child is presented as archetypical heroine.

It is, therefore, not surprising that in the first decades of the 20th century a strong negative feeling about Canada was recurrent among Europeans, namely British, which openly contradicted the enchanting alchemy of Hayman’s “music” of the 17th century. This happens to be the case of a English modernist, Basil Bunting (1900-1985) who, in another dramatic monologue “The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer” (1930), exposes the anxiety of those forced to immigrate to the bleakest regions of North America:

Canada’s a cold land.
   Thou and I must share
   A straw bed and a hind’s wages
   And the bitter air.

Canada’s a bare land
   For the north wind and the snow.
Northumberland’s a bare land
   For men have made it so. (96)

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16 Wordsworth’s poem echoes Montaigne’s essay on cannibals (1580), but also the poems of his American contemporary Philip Freneau, such as “The Dying Indian, Tomo-Chequi” (1784), “The Indian Student” (1787) and especially “The Indian Burying Ground” (1787). All these examples show similar idealized humanist, although unpopular, views of the Indian.
The interior of Canada is here, as in Henry Kelsey, a vast, desolate and frozen northern space of exile, a “bare land” of isolation, much feared by small destitute farmers of northern England and southern Scotland who, nevertheless didn’t have any choice but to immigrate.

Yet, as we have noticed in the “up-beat” verse of Hayman and Viets, Canada has been also something other than the cold, bare and icy desert of Bunting’s poem, for the experience of this land also gave remarkable contributions to the self-reliant ethos of the Americas. A remarkable example from the beginning of the 19th century of this New World assertive stance is found in the poem by Oliver Goldsmith (1794-1861), “The Rising Village” (1825). This Canadian poet was the nephew of his name sake Oliver Goldsmith (1728-74), the much influential Anglo-Irish pre-romantic and voluminous writer. The European Oliver Goldsmith is best remembered, among other works, for his sentimental and desolate poem “The Deserted Village” (1770, 1782).17 Later on, as an answer to this decadent European perspective of his predecessor, the Canadian Oliver Goldsmith writes an optimistic “The Rising Village”18 in which a synthesis is made of major Canadian colonial cultural and literary themes. In both poems we find the same village of Auburn. But while in “The Deserted Village” Auburn is the ideal place suited for the fashionable European rural decadence of early romanticism, in “The Rising Village” Auburn is the practical example for the laborious victory of the lonely settler over a hostile environment, under “Acadian skies”:

How great the pain, the danger, the toil,
Which mark the first rude culture of the soil.
When, looking round, the lonely settler sees
His home amid a wilderness of trees:
How sinks his heart in those deep solitudes,
Where not a voice upon his ear intrudes [...]?
(Davis 55)


But fear and despondency are soon won, for the rising of a new village in a hostile place is clearly an optimistic example within the Canadian context. Simultaneously, these lines illustrate the social dialectics between the Americas and the Old World, where success is achieved (or happiness) and decadence overcome through skill and hard work:

So may thy years increase, thy glories rise,  
To be the wonder of the Western skies;  
And bliss and peace encircle all thy shore,  
Till empires rise and sink, on earth, no more.  
(Davis 70)

This new Auburn is in the end projected in a future beyond Canada and the Americas. Almost like a post-imperial and post-national utopia made of “bliss and peace”, the new village stands at the “end” of an accomplished vision of History without frontiers, a persistent cultural narrative that since Oliver Goldsmith’s time has been smashed and felt to be true, over and over again.

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Abstract

Poetry in present day Canada begun almost simultaneously with the European colonization of those regions of the New World. Many of their first poets had been forced to immigrate into these unknown parts of the world. Albeit the stylistic belatedness (as compared to their European standards and contemporaries), their poems remain invaluable documents for the understanding of history of the literary of cultural growth in Canada, and of its social and political contradictions and tensions. In fact, long before the urban shift in North-American in late 19th century, Canadian English poets had been giving a significant contribution to the building up of a national identity, mostly through their exploration of the pastoral myth. This essay interprets some significant moments and authors of this process.

Keywords

Canadian Literature, Canadian Poetry, Colonial Period, Search for Identity, French in North America.

Resumo

A poesia no actual Canadá começou quase em simultâneo com a colonização europeia desta região do Novo Mundo. Muitos destes primeiros poetas foram imigrantes forçados e, embora revelem muitas vezes um estilo anacrónico — quando comparado com os modelos europeus contemporâneos dominantes — os seus textos constituem um conjunto documental precioso para o melhor entendimento da História do crescimento literário e cultural do Canadá, das suas contradições e tensões actuais. Com efeito, muito antes da emergência do paradigma cultural urbano norte-americano em finais do século XIX, os poetas canadenses de língua inglesa deram um contributo significativo para a construção da identidade nacional do seu país, em particular através da exploração do mito pastoril. Este ensaio interpreta alguns autores e momentos significativos deste processo.
Palavras-Chave

Literatura canadiana, Poesia canadiana, Período colonial, Busca de identidade, Literatura de língua francesa na América do Norte.