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Charles G.D. Roberts's Tantramar: Towards a Theory of the Literary Possession of Place and Its Implications

Dickens' London, Hardy's Wessex, Twain's Mississippi, Wordsworth's Lake District.... Such phrases refer, of course, to the depiction of the region that they name in the work of the given author, but they also bring with them a sense of ownership or possession.[1] By virtue of a vivid and comprehensive treatment of a chosen place, an author takes literary possession of it and—to adapt and conflate the well-known statements of Locke and Hume regarding the nature of rights in land—"remove[s] [it] from the common state Nature…placed it in" and "appropriates" or "annex[es] it to him[self] by the…relationship of property."[2] In the United States, Canada, and no doubt, other settler colonies, the notion of authorial possession of a place or region was peculiarly compelling for the obvious reason that vast areas of land were seen as awaiting appropriation through the literary equivalent of annexation through manual labour (or through the not unrelated right of first discovery). Writing in the mid eighteen nineties when Canada was saturated with the intertwined discourses of British imperialism and Canadian nationalism, Bliss Carman observed of Gilbert Parker's *Pierre and His People* (1892) that "the unknown vastness of the…northwest" had furnished Parker with "an unoccupied field" and "hunting, only to be equalled in…Kipling's India" (qtd. in Adams 6). "What *Pierre* did," Parker himself avowed in the 1912-23 "Imperial Edition" of his *Works*, "was to open up a field which had not been opened before, but which other authors have exploited since with success and distinction. *Pierre* was the pioneer of the Far North in fiction" (1: xii-xiii). No doubt, these statements are in part a reflection of the project and politics of western expansion and settlement to which Canada was dedicated in the post-Confederation period, but they also raise intriguing questions about precisely how Canadian authors "occupied," "open[ed] up," and, in effect, acquired places at this time, exactly what such authored places meant to subsequent writers, and, at further remove, whether such considerations can provide a means of theorizing the literary ownership or possession of place.

A prime instance of the literary acquisition of a place in Canadian writing can be found in the poetry of Charles G.D. Roberts, who took owner-

ship or possession of the Tantramar area of the Maritimes in the early eighteen eighties with "Westmoreland"—later "Tantramar"—"Revisited" (1883). In 1880 when Roberts burst onto the Canadian literary scene with *Orion, and Other Poems*, the Westmoreland/Tantramar area already had a claimant in the person of George W. Chandler (c.1835-95),[3] a doctor in Dorchester, Westmoreland County, New Brunswick who had proclaimed himself "the ... poet of the Tantramar marshes" and was apparently bent on defending his "'already securely established'" "'literary reputation'" against all comers ("The Bard of Tantramar"). Because Chandler was, in Bloomian terms, a weak poet he cannot have posed a serious threat to Roberts's emerging reputation, but nevertheless in 1880-81 he was the target of lampoons in the Chatham *North Star* that were probably written by the newspaper's editor, Joseph Edmund Collins, who was not only a close friend of Roberts, but also the creator and defender of his reputation as Canada's foremost poet.[4] Sarcastically describing Chandler as "the Westmoreland poet," the "poet laureate of Tantramar," and "the founder of the Tantramar school of poetry," an article in the 4 December, 1880 issue of the *North Star* ridicules his claim that such of his "'songs'" as "The Nativity" and "Sylvalla" will "'live, and long endure'" ("The Bard of Tantramar"). Seven months later, in an article of 4 June, 1881, injury provides an occasion for insult when a boating accident in which Chandler was nearly drowned is described as "a perfect God-send to…the Tantramar poet" because it has provided him with the subject of a lengthy poem ("A Chance for a Poem"). Although these jibes do not come from Roberts (at least not directly), they give the impression of a contest for territory and, in so doing, recall Northrop Frye's observation that "the creative instinct has a great deal to do with the assertion of territorial rights" (i). Of course (and as the much earlier treatment of the Tantramar marshes and other areas of the Maritimes in *The Rising Village* [1825, 1834] exemplifies), the "creative instinct" may content itself with merely celebrating the "assertion of territorial rights" in the wake of the extirpation of an area's original inhabitants, a solemnizing function that makes literature the handmaiden of colonization. To the extent that Roberts's poem takes the colonization of Westmoreland/Tantramar as a given (and, indeed, makes no mention of the area's Native peoples) "Tantramar Revisited" serves at one level as a reinforcement of British/Canadian sovereignty over the Maritimes.

With the publication of "Westmoreland"/"Tantramar Revisited" in *The Week* on 20 December, 1883, Roberts established his claim to the landscape of the poem by means of a far more powerful tool than the denigration of a prior claimant: literary superiority. In genres consummately

practiced by Wordsworth, Swinburne, and other major precursors—the Romantic Return Poem and the Victorian Sea Meditation—but in a form—"Ovidian elegiac metre" (Roberts, *Selected Poems* vii)—superbly appropriate to the tidal nature of the Tantramar marshes,[5] Roberts simultaneously inserted himself into the Romantic-Victorian tradition of English poetry and signed his name to the area covered by the poem. By turns descriptive and emotive, reportorial and personal, "Tantramar Revisited" is a deed in two senses of the word: a literary act and a proclamation of annexation that announces Roberts's interest (again in two senses of the word) not only in the land and seascapes of which the poem treats, but also in its histories of human habitation and conflict—its "houses, / Stained with time," the overgrown ramparts of Fort Cumberland (Beauséjour), and, of course, "the long clay dykes" of the Acadians (*Collected Poems* 78). With "Tantramar Revisited," Roberts in effect (and in Pierre Bourdieu's terms) "consecrate[d]" (or stamped) the Tantramar area with his "trademark or signature" and thereby transformed it from being "a mere natural resource" into a source of "symbolic capital," which he then proceeded by means of short stories such as "The Barn on the Marsh" (1888), novellas such as *The Raid from Beauséjour* (1894) and *Reube Dave's Shad Boat* (1895) and, almost needless to say, his other major Tantramar poem, "Ave! An Ode for the Shelley Centenary" (1892) to augment and use as a source of interest in a manner not dissimilar to that of a landed aristocrat from his country estate (262-63).[6]

Roberts might well have been flattered by this last analogy, but, predictably, his own thinking about the nature of authorship was more traditional and of its time. Subjacent to his various pronouncements in the eighteen eighties and 'nineties about the qualities that were desirable in a Canadian poet lies the Renaissance and then Romantic conception of the artist as an innate "genius" "whose talent" resides, according to Kant's famous formulation in the *Critique of Judgement*, in the ability to produce "something" whose "primary property" is "originality" (157). In his "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth defines "genius" in a similar way and then offers an alternative definition that bears more directly on Roberts's achievement in "Tantramar Revisited":

> Genius is the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe; or, if that be not allowed, it is the application of powers to objects on which they had not before been exercised, or the employment of them in such a manner as to produce effects hitherto unknown. (3:82)

In his critical prose of the 'eighties, Roberts repeatedly uses the terms "genius" and "original," but, in accordance with late-Victorian thinking about the nature of artistic creation in Britain and the United States, he places much greater emphasis on craftsmanship and workmanship: in "The Beginnings of Canadian Literature" (1883), for example, writers are "workmen" and the best writers are "original and creative workm[e]n and not…mere copyist[s]"' (*Selected* 251, 254, 258) and in "Edgar Fawcett" (1884) Fawcett is praised for his "intolerance of slovenly workmanship" and two other American poets, Thomas Bailey Aldrich and Edmund Clarence Stedman, are chided for their "disdain for careful and devoted labour" (472, 471). Elsewhere in his early essays, Roberts tropes writers as "glean[ers]" "working" in "field[s]" that, to a greater or lesser extent, remain "unharvested" and describes their artistic products as "gleanings" upon which "after-workers in the field shall find themselves of necessity dependent" (*Selected* 261, 262, 264), a trope derived from agriculture that defines Canadian writing as a product of the land and casts Canadian writers as labourers who gather consumable and saleable staples to nourish or enrich themselves, their community, and, by extension, the culture of the Maritimes and the nation, both present and future. Taken together, Roberts's insistence on "workmanship" and his conception of writers as "glean[ers]" come close to suggesting a recognition on his part that the acquisition of rights—and the resulting "wealth"—in land through creative work in the form of landscape poetry is to some extent analogous to the Lockean/Humean process of acquiring rights in common land by mixing labour with it. "[W]e have much poetical wealth unappropriated in our broad and magnificent landscapes," observed Roberts in June 1883 (*Selected* 258). In the "careful and devoted labour" of the landscape poem published some six months later, the wealth of one such "broad and magnificent landscape" was firmly in his possession.

Viewed from the perspective of an American writer whose ideas had a deep impact on Roberts and other members of the Confederation group, part of the power of "Tantramar Revisited" as an instrument of annexation is its formal, imagistic, and emotional coherence or unity. "The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms," writes Emerson in "Nature" (1836):

> Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty deeds give no title. (5)

"When I behold a rich landscape," Emerson adds later in his essay, "it is less to my purpose to recite correctly the order and superposition of the strata, than to know why all thought of multitude is lost in a tranquil sense of unity" (33).[7] In "The Poet's Possession" (1895), Archibald Lampman also claims for the poet something like "the best part" of the farms that he sees, cautioning the "Master of the well-tilled field" against the folly of thinking that his land belongs to him alone and envisaging the poet as a reaper of sorts who garners from the field an "after-yield, / A second tilth and second harvest… / …of images and curious thoughts" (157). Arguably the effectiveness of "Tantramar Revisited" as a literary "warranty deed" resides not only in the integrative skill and "sense of unity" that it displays, but also in its specificity and individuality, two qualities that are especially evident in the "images and curious thoughts" of its powerfully affective final lines, where the scents of "honey and salt" awaken an "Old-time sweetness" in the speaker and he nevertheless decides "not to go down to the marshland" but "rather remember and see,— / Lest on too close sight…[he] miss the darling illusion, / Spy at their task even here the hands of chance and change" (*Collected Poems* 79).

A sense of the degree to which the Tantramar area was seen as Roberts's possession in the wake of "Tantramar Revisited," "Ave!," and other works can be gathered from the work of two of his fellow poets, John Frederic Herbin and E. Pauline Johnson. For Herbin in the second of two tributary sonnets "To the Singers of Minas" in *The Marshlands* (1893), Acadia is "a later Greece" in which Roberts is "a classic come to life again": "The broad green plain of level Tantramar / Is but the Temple of thy ancient time," intones Herbin; "The tides, and all the Fundean crystal ways / Live as thy blue Aegean was in far / Dim yesterdays" (51). For Johnson in "The Singer of Tantramar" in the first number of *Massey's Magazine* (January 1896), the Tantramar area was "unheard of, unknown" until Roberts "made the name" Tantramar "familiar to the greater portion of the poetry-loving world" and now "[T]he marsh-lands ... the sea voices, the tides, the wet salt breath of the margin winds—all are Roberts, and all are his atmosphere…. For another to sing of Tantramar would be almost plagiarism…. The great Maritime marsh is not only his lyrical possession, it is *himself*" (15, 17-18).[8] Of course, Johnson's statement is only partly true for the obvious reason that, even as he annexed the Tantramar area to himself so completely that, in her eyes, the two were inseparable, he also left it in a poetically enriched state in the public domain, where it remained available for the use, not only of contemporary but also of future writers. In the realm of lit-

erary land annexation/acquisition/ownership/possession, publication precludes privatization.

One of the best known poets to make use of the association of Roberts with the Tantramar marshes that Johnson represents as identity is Douglas Lochhead, whose "lines for a diary" about the marshes, *High Marsh Road* (1980), contains explicit references to Roberts. In the first of these (9 October), Lochhead finds in "Tantramar Revisited" a comforting precedent for his own perspective on the marshes:

> The total glimpse of it as Roberts
> took to Tantramar. using his telescope
> his eye revisisted. now I search the
> same dykes for details of shore-birds.
> the weirs hold straggler ducks. it is
> good to have such footsteps.

Like the painter Alex Colville, whose *Crow with a Silver Spoon* (1972) figures in an earlier diary entry (1 September), Roberts has left an imprint on the "high marsh road" through his presence and his work. Both are strata in the thickening cultural sedimentation of the area to which Lochhead himself hopes to become a learned and memorable contributor. With the second diary entry in which Roberts appears (31 October), the High Marsh Road of Lochhead's title becomes a conduit between the present, the past, and the future:

> ...something will turn up.
> something will come of it all. the
> road will remain. echoes of all
> this picked up. Charles G.D.
> Roberts, pince-nez and tails, flies
> like an angel by Stanley Spencer over
> this place.

The comparison between Roberts as he appears in photographs from the late nineteen thirties and an "angel" by the English visionary painter Stanley Spencer risks intellectual ostentation in the interests of evoking a vivid and original image of the poet as an enduring presence and tutelary spirit in the Tantrama marshes. In "Ave!," P.B. Shelley is made present in the landscape by means of a somewhat forced analogy between the "perpetual unrest" of his "compassionate breast" and the "endless...ebb and flow" of the tidal waters in the marshes (*Collected Poems* 147), but in *High Marsh*

Road Roberts's presence is a given that carries with it a hope, if not quite a conviction, that in certain places at least new Canadian works exist in a Canadian literary continuity.[9]

Support for that hope can be found in the work of the Saskatchewan poet Elizabeth Brewster, who in "Tantramar Remembered / (*Gloss on Charles Roberts' 'The Tantramar Revisited'*)" (2000) uses a meeting with "a woman…who came from Tantramar" as the occasion for recalling the years in which she herself "lived near the marshes, / the haunts Charles Roberts wrote about" (28). An elegiac lyric, Brewster's poem focuses, first on the flora, fauna, and human structures in the Tantramar marshes and the nearby village of Sackville, New Brunswick, and then on the death of her "mother[,] / Friends and lovers" while she was living in the area in an "old wooden house that looked like a ship / sailing the meadows over the clover foam." As indicated by the echo in these lines of the hoary trope of the prairie as a sea of grass, an intriguing dimension of Brewster's poem is its retrospective perception of the Tantramar landscape as akin in certain respects to the prairie landscape. Early in the poem, this kinship is made explicit in a passage that begins by echoing and modifying Roberts's "winds freighted with honey and salt" (79) and then offers up a comparison between the sky "above the marshland" and "prairie sky" in a dismaying welter of thumping alliteration, clanging internal rhyme, and banal observation:

> the winds smelling of salt and clover,
> the hayfields with their huts for harvest
>
> where grasses bowed and bellowed,
> skies above the marshland
> almost as wide and high as prairie sky.
> It was a world governed by the seasonal.
> (28)

Immediately following this passage is the opening line of "Tantramar Revisited" ("*Summers and summers have come, and gone with the flight of the swallow"*) that reflects Brewster's use of the first four lines of Roberts's poem as an epigraph, as a structuring device, and as a series of conclusions for her own meditations. Besides ensuring that Roberts and his poem are a vital element of "Tantramar Remembered," the technical brilliance and affective power of the quotations from "Tantramar Revisited" ensure that Brewster's poem never exceeds its role as a "*Gloss*" or chal-

lenges Roberts's claim to the Tantramar landscape, but, on the contrary, draws on his legacy to sustain and, in truth, enhance itself.

A very different and more pretentious voice is heard in George Elliott Clarke's contribution to the poetry of the Tantramar area, Blue Elegy I.v in *Blue* (2001). Beginning with a reference to the '"Historic Gardens"' of Annapolis Royal on the west coast of Nova Scotia and later offering up pedantic allusions to John Thompson's *ghazals* and Bliss Carman's "Low Tide on Grand Pré" as well as a smattering of non-English words and phrases ("*fillette*, "*comine des pleûtres,*" "*Kaput*"), Clarke's poem consists of a series of half-truths and untenable generalizations tucked among observations of the natural world whose effectiveness is greatly undermined by awkward shifts in levels of diction and by a heavy-handed use of lists and alliterations:

> Naturally: Love poems wither in our bleak, stony,
> frigid, hostile, brutal Canuck anthologies.
>
> Maybe all hardy Canadian poetry erupts lavishly
> from some solitary, sullen naturalist's handbook.
> See! A last bee, still stockpiling pollen, hums hotly
> against this Octobral creep of cold. Octopoid
> networks and wires of downward branches and briars
> and twigs, prickling and muddling and needling, obscure
> a scrappy bit of light....
>
> (119)

And so on past a "subsidiary pond, wafting orange-green-brown lily pads / And a certain tangy, tart stink" to "The *bizz* of wispy, final, waifish insects." "Everything here is allegory for allegations" asserts Clarke as he turns to describe the marshes in lines that are marred by the same stylistic problems as the early part of the poem, but are nevertheless evocative of "Tantramar Revisited":

> Look! The dyked marsh is sucking, slurping, the Fundy –
> the tall, hay-like grass, hay-smelling, springs
> out of rank black mud, crabby, with fronds and fringes of muck,
> then sodden, mud-coralled water....
> Nearby accumulates a pungent cascade of leaves,
> then the thick, gigantic stalks of marsh grass,
> with sunlight baying in – nostalgic, regretful, imploring....
>
> (119-20)

These last three lines are perhaps especially unfortunate for their stylistic infelicities and extravagances, but they are not inconsistent with the overall quality and tone of a poem that, like Brewster's and Lochhead's before it, suggests that there are very good reasons for Charles G.D. Roberts's continuing ownership of the Tantramar area—indeed, for continuing to think of it as Roberts's Tantramar.

To the very extent that the literary ownership or possession of a place is not literal, it is, of course, metaphorical and, as such, remains available to all comers. Not only is the privatization of a landscape by means of writing an impossibility, but so too is any attempt to capture and convey in a text or body of texts the feel, the complexity, the flavour, the essence of a place or, for that matter, any aspect of it. During the last century and more, Charles G.D. Roberts, Douglas Lochhead, Elizabeth Brewster, George Elliott Clarke, and others have all written feelingly and perceptively about the Tantramar marshes and the adjacent areas, and all have succeeded to a greater or lesser degree in making portions of it metaphorically their own. But, however feelingly and perceptively, effectively, and affectively it is treated by even the strongest of writers, a landscape ultimately remains democratically available to anyone who perceives it. Natural "beauty… cannot be portrayed / By words, nor by the pencil's silent skill," asserts Wordsworth in *The Excursion* (1814), "But is the property of him alone / Who hath beheld it with care, / And in his mind recorded it with love" (9:512-17).

Notes

1 There are, of course, significant legal differences between "ownership" and "possession" (see Gillese), but for the present purposes they are not greatly important because of the metaphorical rather than literal nature of the kind of ownership/possession being discussed (and see also the texts of Emerson and Archibald Lampman shortly to be quoted above).

2 See Locke 134 and Hume 125-26n.

3 Not to be confused with Amos Henry Chandler (1837-), the co-author, with Charles Pelham Mulvany, of *Lays*, *Songs and Sonnets* (1880).

4 For a discussion of Collins's role in the formation and disintegration of the Confederation group, see my *The Confederation Group* 24-55 and 290.

5 See *The Confederation Group* 333 n.23 for Harry A. Woodworth's suggestion in "Roberts' Poetry of the Tantramar" (1895) that the alternating hexameters and pentameters or, in Roberts' phrase, 'Ovidian elegiac metre," of "Tantramar Revisited" "fittingly tells the story of the rising and ebbing of the tides of Tantramar" and 576-68 for a detailed discussion of the poem as a whole.

6 Of course, in Bourdieu's argument, the "objects" that a writer or artist "consecrates" are

works of literature or art rather than what they portray, but the distinction between object and subject is blurred in works of a realistic nature, particularly, for present purposes, works consisting in large part of a landscape poetically described in such a way that it becomes "seen" in and then through the work. Bourdieu's subsequent argument that publishers and art dealers are "impresario[s]" who "proclaim the value" of writers and artists and help them to gain membership into the equivalent of a "select club" (263) has an obvious analogy in the work done by Collins to advance and secure Roberts's reputation, not merely as the best poet Canada had produced, but also as a poet of the same order as the best English poets of the day. See also Bourdieu's comments on the struggle of writers and artists to "stay in view and those who cannot make their own names without relegating to the past established figures" and his observation that "each artistic act which 'makes history' by introducing a new position into the field 'displaces' the whole series of previous artistic acts"—a displacement that even as it "sends…[a] work into the past…ensures it a form of survival…[in] the sad eternity of academic debate" (289, 291, 293).

7 In *Landscape into Art*, Kenneth Clark famously asserts that "[f]acts become art through love, which unifies them and lifts them to a higher plane of reality; and, in landscape, this all embracing love is expressed by light" (16), a statement that sounds quaint today but nevertheless resonates strongly with Roberts's Tantramar poems.

8 Johnson's reference to "plagiarism" may have been prompted in part by the brouhaha that followed William Wilfred Campbell's charge some six months earlier that Bliss Carman was a plagiarist (see *Confederation Group* 275-82). The larger context of her reference was the interest in copyright and the related issues of originality and plagiarism that followed the passage of the Berne Convention in 1883 and, closer to home, the Canadian Copyright Act of 1894. It is notable that an article by Collins on "International Copyright" shared space with "Westmoreland"\/"Tantramar Revisited" in the first issue of *The Week* and that articles and editorials on copyright appeared regularly in the same periodical as well as in other Canadian publications throughout the eighteen eighties and 'nineties, but in clusters in 1888-90 and 1894-95.

9 See my *Mnemographia Canadensis* 1: 292-332 for an earlier approach to the relationship between Canadian writers and places by way of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* as well as some of the concepts of rights in land that figure in the present essay. See also Lochhead and Thaddeus Holownia, *Dykelands* (1989) for a collaboration between poet and photographer that captures the stark horizontality of the Tantramar marshes that is also reflected in the long lines of "Tantramar Revisited."

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