My Canada is Still Unborn: Nation, Region, and the Politics of Poetics in British Columbia, 1918-1945

by Forrest D. Pass

Most students of Canadian literature are familiar with F.R. Scott's 1927 satirical poem, "The Canadian Authors Meet." Frustrated with the literary pretensions of the tea-quaffing "virgins of sixty" who populated organizations such as the Canadian Authors' Association, Scott was particularly exasperated by the boilerplate patriotism that flowed from their pens. He concluded his poem, "O Canada, O Canada, O can / a day go by without new authors springing / To paint the native maple…" (lines 21-22). Not nearly so well known, but equally searing in its indictment of the facile nationalism of much interwar Canadian literary activity, is "How to Write a Canadian Poem," by the Vancouver poet Alexander Maitland "A.M." Stephen. Probably written in the late 1930s, but not published until three decades later, Stephen's poem marked well the conceits of his patriot peers:

> Hang a wreath of wilted maple
> On the framework of your lyre,
> Splash a dash of Autumn's scarlet,
> Snatch a whiff of brushwood fire.
> ...
> Let your rhyme be chaste and harmless
> Soothing to the spinster soul
> Nature (but not human nature)
> Is the cure will make us whole.
> (lines 1-4, 17-20)

Like Scott, Stephen derided traditional Canadian poetry's fixations on nature primeval and moral purity, and poked fun at the putative asexuality of the country's female poets. However, while such derision comes as no surprise from the Montreal-based Scott, a consistent proponent of the "modernization" of Canadian poetry, it is puzzling to find it in the work of his British Columbian contemporary. Throughout his career, Stephen was an enthusiastic member of precisely the literary circles that Scott criticized

for their mediocre conventionality; he had been an ardent proponent of the notion that clean, virile poetry had a decisive role to play in the growth of clean, virile "Canadianism." In fact, the same year that Scott penned "The Canadian Authors Meet," Stephen published "My Canada," an optimistic premonition of rising patriotism. "My Canada is still unborn," he acknowledged, but the first stirrings of national consciousness were already evident in "her bards' prophetic rhymes" (lines 1, 6).

A decade later, then, what compelled Stephen the literary patriot to pen stanzas so similar to Scott's? The answer is to be found in the dynamics of the national and British Columbia literary communities, in the circumstances of literary nationalism's reception on Canada's far western periphery, and in Stephen's own abortive attempt to refashion literary nationalism along regional lines. Although the literary institutions, ideologies, and factions of interwar Canada have attracted the attention of several cultural historians (Harrington; Irvine; New 137-212; Tippett 22-3; Vipond, "Canadian Authors' Association"), much of their work focuses on the central Canadian scene and little has been written on literary nationalism's appeal in other regions of the country. British Columbia's literary community is a case in point. Individual poets from the province, especially Earle Birney and Dorothy Livesay, who came of age during the interwar years and whose work is now considered part of the Canadian poetic canon, have warranted critical attention, but there was more to interwar British Columbia poetry than its best remembered luminaries. Though largely forgotten today, British Columbia's interwar poets formed a small but active and prolific community. As an historian rather than a literary critic, my main concern is not the aesthetic quality of their work; indeed, this article tends to support the characterization of much early British Columbia poetry as sedate and conventional (Lillard 322-3), and even suggests that its conventionality was a matter of ideological commitment. Instead, I concentrate on the assumptions of the authors themselves and their relationship with the broader cultural nationalist movement, as expressed principally in their correspondence, critical writings, and associational activities. In doing so, I shed light on the dynamics of a national network of authors, publishers, and critics, and suggest that many British Columbian poets saw themselves as active participants in a broad movement for a national Canadian literature. Their enthusiasm was born, at least in part, of the political economy of literary production: British Columbia's relatively small population and frontier economy did not support a substantial local publishing industry, and therefore access to eastern periodicals and publishing houses was crucial to any poet who was not content with the limited audience afforded by

newspapers or self-publication. Moreover, as Eli MacLaren has demonstrated in his study of copyright, Canadian literature developed within an institutional context in which national legislation was profoundly influential. Contending as they did with forces that observed national rather than regional boundaries, poets in central Canada and British Columbia shared a commitment to cultural nationalism that facilitated the formation of a national literary network; this network in turn reinforced the sense that "the nation" was more than an abstraction. By demonstrating that eastern and western poets made common cause in their dealings with a centralized publishing industry and that Canadian nationalism served as their common vocabulary, this article offers compelling support for Benedict Anderson's thesis, further extrapolated to the Canadian context by Gerald Friesen, that national identification is shaped by the economics of print capitalism (Anderson 47-65; Friesen 148-151). British Columbia poets of the early twentieth century have been ignored because their work does not fit the dominant narrative of modernist poetry's triumph over lingering Victorian romanticism, but an examination of their ideas and experiences still adds to our understanding of the broad cultural implications of modernity and nation-building.

The focus on the rise of modernism has led Canadian literary critics to marginalize British Columbia's interwar poets, but so too has the focus on regionalism in British Columbia literary criticism since the 1960s. British Columbia literary output during 1920s and 1930s offers few direct antecedents for the literary regionalism so pronounced in postwar west coast writing; for example, later regional writers were inspired by their contact with poets from the United States, particularly from San Francisco, while their predecessors had been reluctant to extend their networks south of the border. However, while many British Columbia poets of the interwar period thought about their work in nationalist terms, their conception of a Canadian national literature was not identical to that of their eastern counterparts. Most British Columbia writers incorporated regional content into their work, a strategy that won the praise of eastern critics such as Duncan Campbell Scott ("Authors Honor"). The results were generally in the tradition of the "Local Color" writers in the United States, works that featured detailed descriptions of local settings and picturesque characters, but melded these regional features to long-accepted literary conventions. Straddling the fence between romanticism and realism, these experiments in Local Color were not harbingers of a consciously regional voice. Indeed, some contemporary literary critics present Local Color and literary regionalism as diametrically opposed. To Fetterley and Pryse, Local Color

represents the insidious commodification of regional communities and landscapes and their subordination to external, especially national, interests; by contrast, literary regionalism seeks to subvert this process by asserting the authority of regional residents to define a regional experience in opposition to centralizing forces. However, it is overly simplistic to position literary nationalism and literary regionalism as necessarily oppositional. The complicated dialogue between nationalist and regionalist poetics in interwar British Columbia is illustrated by Stephen's attempt to establish a British Columbia literary "school" distinct from eastern models. The "Western Movement in Canadian Poetry" was inspired by Stephen's identification of British Columbia as an interface zone between the North American frontier and the Pacific Rim. Steeped in a conception of the significance of place that owed much to occult religion, the "Western Movement" merged setting and spirituality in a manner crudely suggestive of later currents in the literary depiction of the Pacific Northwest. However, Stephen had no interest in regional literary independence; he neither envisaged an autarkic regional literature nor identified a shared literary heritage between British Columbia and the American Pacific Slope, a project that has animated more recent critics; rather, his proposal for a distinctive west coast poetics was profoundly nationalistic, and placed the work of British Columbians at the centre of the quest for a Canadian national literature. In the failure of the Western Movement we find the seeds of Stephen's personal disillusionment with the project of nationalist poetics.

British Columbia had inspired poetry since significant European settlement began during the gold rushes of the mid-nineteenth century. However, most British Columbia poets before the First World War wrote in isolation and obscurity. Those who achieved even modest recognition, such as James Anderson, the so-called bard of the Cariboo, and Sir Clive Phillips-Woolley, a Victoria-based panegyrist of Empire, were the exceptions rather than the rule; their fame was either purely local, as in Anderson's case, or unrelated to their specific setting, as in Phillips-Woolley's. Certainly there is no evidence of a literary community, much less a regional style, in British Columbia before the First World War.

This changed in 1916, when Ernest Fewster, a Vancouver poet and homeopath, organized the Vancouver Poetry Society (VPS), which throughout its history claimed to be the oldest poetry society in Canada ("President's Report." 18 May 1932; Baker). The three "foundation pillars" of the society, as Fewster saw them, were critical study, encourage-

ment of "native poetic talent," and "the development of a distinctive Canadian culture capable of encouraging poetry" ("President's Report." 30 May 1942). Alongside Fewster, who published several collections of poetry, the VPS's more prominent and prolific members included Stephen, Annie Charlotte Dalton, Isabel Ecclestone Mackay, and Tom MacInnes. The VPS was the first, but not the only, institutional expression of an emerging literary community on Canada's West Coast. In 1921, writers in Vancouver and Victoria were quick to organize local branches of a new national literary organization, the Canadian Authors' Association (CAA). Founded in Toronto in 1920 to represent the interests of writers in the political efforts then afoot to reform Canadian copyright legislation, the CAA was initially conceived as a trade guild, an institutionalized response to political and economic forces that influenced the work of authors nationwide. By and by, however, it became a major proponent of an explicitly national voice in both poetry and prose (Vipond). The Vancouver branch, which drew its members not only from Vancouver and its environs but from throughout the British Columbia mainland, held its inaugural meeting at the Hotel Vancouver on 30 April 1921 (Ballantine). Citing the inconvenience of attending meetings on the mainland, Victoria writers met several weeks later to form the Victoria and the Islands Branch (Canadian Authors' Association. Victoria and the Islands Branch. Minutes, 20 Sept 1921). The CAA was, of course, broader in its appeal than the VPS, and in its ranks poets brushed shoulders with novelists, playwrights, and historians. Several of its members published in several genres, including Stephen, best known as a poet but also the author of two adventure novels, and Robert Hood, a prolific novelist and aspiring screenwriter who also published a volume of poetry.

With a significant cross-membership, relations between the Vancouver branch of the CAA and the VPS were generally cordial. The CAA invited members of the poetry society to its annual banquet in 1927 and when Vancouver hosted the CAA national convention in 1936, the VPS invited the poets among the convention delegates to an evening with Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, a hero to both organizations (Vancouver Poetry Society, Minutes, 2 Apr 1927; Executive Minutes, 29 Jun 1936). The CAA also sought the VPS's cooperation in its campaign for revisions to the *Copyright Act*, and reports of VPS activities appeared regularly in the CAA organ, the *Canadian Bookman*, throughout the late 1920s (Vancouver Poetry Society, Minutes, 18 Apr 1931; "Vancouver Poetry Society"). Yet in spite of the similar aims of the two organizations, the VPS vigilantly defended its turf against the CAA and other national bodies. A 1925 proposal to affiliate with the

Canadian Poetry Association was received with so little enthusiasm that it was not even put to a vote (Vancouver Poetry Society, "B" Section Minutes, 17 Oct 1925). In his 1943 annual report to the membership, President Fewster revealed that he had once received a proposal that the VPS affiliate formally with the CAA, but he had felt that such an affiliation carried no advantage for the society and never brought the proposal to the membership. In Fewster's view, close association with other groups threatened to dim the Vancouver poets' "spiritual vision." He even conflated his reluctance to affiliate with a national body with the global struggle against totalitarianism. "It is in the modern tendency to centralization," he argued, "that lies one of the greatest dangers to our freedom in Canada. Communism is similar to centralization, both are alike, tyrannical, oppressive and inimicable [sic] to all true growth. This year perhaps more that any other we must watch for this insidious disease" ("President's Report," 3 Jul 1943). It is tempting to read Fewster's hyperbole with derision, but it spoke to his sincere concern that membership in a centralized national organization might stifle local creativity.

The dynamics of a national literary association also concerned the British Columbia members of the CAA, though their concerns were generally more mundane than Fewster's anxiety over his creative autonomy. The relations between the west coast CAA branches and the national body might well be described as federalism in microcosm, in which British Columbia members occasionally felt overlooked by their eastern counterparts. In 1922, the Victoria and the Islands Branch expressed its concerns about the *Canadian Bookman* and its utility as a means of promoting Canadian literature (Executive Minutes, 17 Feb 1922). At the CAA's national convention the same year, the Vancouver poet Isabel Ecclestone Mackay emphasized that the "prompt and regular arrival" of the *Bookman* should be a priority for the association, as it allowed "widely separated branches" to keep abreast of national activities and policies ("Reports of Branches" 208). When Lawrence Burpee, the CAA's national president, visited the west coast branches in the summer of 1924, Vancouver members complained of a fiscal imbalance, as the branch had to remit most of its revenue to the association's Ottawa headquarters, while members in Victoria expressed frustration with the national office that rarely responded to correspondence (Hood, Letter to Lawrence Burpee, 27 Jun 1924; Canadian Authors Association. Victoria and the Islands Branch, Special Meeting Minutes).

Notwithstanding these misgivings, many British Columbia poets were enthusiastic about the opportunity to participate in a national literary com-

munity. They read and wrote for the *Canadian Bookman*, lobbied booksellers to participate in Canadian Book Week—the CAA's flagship public awareness campaign—and, when possible, attended CAA national conventions. Reviewing the 1936 gathering, held in Vancouver to coincide with the city's Golden Jubilee celebrations, poet Anne Marriot spoke of the strong sense of fellowship that the gathering fostered. "It was impossible to feel a stranger," Marriot wrote. "Calgary—Regina—Toronto—Halifax—it was a nation-wide event, this convention, and it did not matter where you came from or if you were only the most obscure new recruit to the ranks of writers, you were one of a big friendly family" (Letter to Martha Eugenie Perry). To writers on the far western edge of Canada, the contact facilitated by CAA membership, meetings, and publications was a means of expanding their networks in the east and thereby gaining access to eastern, and even British and American, publishing opportunities. At its second general meeting, the Victoria and the Islands Branch resolved to ask the national body to "secure a suitable Literary Agent in Toronto, London and New York, for the purpose of handling and disposing of matter submitted by Members of the Association" (Minutes, 14 Nov 1921). Although nothing ever came of this resolution or similar recommendations made in 1924, they demonstrate the writers' belief that membership in a national literary association ought to afford them access to national markets, presently out of reach because of their distance from the centres of the Canadian publishing industry.

Even if the CAA did not establish a formal literary agency, some members of the British Columbia branches certainly found that contacts made through the organization could be useful in arranging publication of their work in the east. A case in point was poet and novelist Robert Hood's friendship with Eric Gaskell, the CAA's national secretary and a self-professed "British Columbian in exile."[1] Although nostalgic for his native province, Gaskell found Vancouver to be too far removed from Canada's centres of literary and publishing activity, and his position "so near the hub of things in Ottawa" made him a particularly useful contact for Hood. In 1941, Hood had two manuscripts he hoped to publish, a collection of poetry on BC historical themes and a novel set in Scotland, and hoped that Gaskell might be able to sell both works to the Canadian subsidiary of Oxford University Press. Gaskell was enthusiastic about the work, particularly about the poetry collection, *Ballads of the Pacific Northwest*, which he believed exhibited educational as well as literary merit. When Oxford failed to come through, Gaskell sent *The Case of Kinnear* to Hugh Eayrs at Macmillan of Canada and personally delivered the *Ballads* to Lorne

Pierce at Toronto's Ryerson Press, both editors being staunch boosters of Canadian literature. Macmillan accepted the novel, and Gaskell continued to act as an intermediary between Hood and his publisher on contract and royalty issues. Meanwhile, in his communications with Pierce on the *Ballads*, Gaskell drove a hard bargain, and when Ryerson finally published *Ballads of the Pacific Northwest* in 1946, Hood gratefully acknowledged his friend's assistance and sent him a complimentary copy. Gaskell praised the finished product, and remarked that what "little assistance" he had been able to offer in securing the work's publication was amply repaid by the pleasure he had derived from working with the manuscript.

No money changed hands for Gaskell's informal representation of Hood; instead their relationship served Gaskell well in the internal political battles of the CAA. In 1941, at Gaskell's request, Hood was able to secure his friend's election *in absentia* as the representative of the Vancouver branch on the CAA's national council, a strategic position in an ongoing power struggle between the national executive in Ottawa and the Toronto branch. The Toronto writers wanted to suspend publication of the *Canadian Bookman*, ostensibly as a measure of wartime economy; Gaskell believed Toronto's real aim was to divert the funds that would normally support the *Bookman* to the project of securing a permanent club space for the branch. The distance and costs associated with sending a local member to national meetings no doubt made representation by an absentee councillor attractive to the west coast membership; conversely, the national executive was happy to manipulate distant regional branches to curtail the influence of the larger, wealthier chapters in central Canada, much to the latter's chagrin. Elsie Pomeroy, a Toronto delegate to the 1941 CAA convention, placed the blame for the association's increasing factionalization firmly on Gaskell, "the young, intriguing secretary" with "underhand ways." She also denounced Hood as Gaskell's pawn, who owed his own influence within the Vancouver branch to the national secretary's machinations. The Gaskell-Hood correspondence certainly supports Pomeroy's suspicions of a conspiracy to thwart the influence of the Toronto branch; the letters hint at the symbiotic relationship between the national CAA executive and the association's British Columbia members, in which political influence was exchanged for assistance in dealing with distant publishers.

Within and without the ready-made network of a national organization, British Columbia's poets communicated with fellow writers, publishers, and critics in the east, seeking support, constructive criticism, and publication. The economics of the book trade in Canada made these relationships

necessary. Before the 1960s, British Columbia's small population did not warrant a local trade publishing industry (Mitham 188). While self-publication was a respectable avenue for some (Twigg 12), most writers sought the larger audiences that only eastern publishers could offer. Several eastern literati professed a strong interest in western literary developments, and some eastern periodicals eagerly sought the work of British Columbia writers so as to make their pages "representative of all Canada" (Smith). Lorne Pierce's close ties with the Vancouver and Victoria literary communities were not limited to his dealings with Hood and Gaskell. In 1944 he accepted the honorary presidency of the VPS, a post previously held by Sir Charles G.D. Roberts. "I only succeed to the office [and not to Roberts]," he wrote to the Victoria poet Eugenie Perry, "but I was very happy because of my long and intimate association with the writers on the Coast, whom I have held in affectionate regard for a quarter of a century" (Letter to Perry, 20 Jun 1944). Audrey Brown of Nanaimo also found numerous influential eastern patrons. Baroness Tweedsmuir, then chatelaine of Rideau Hall, and former Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden both took a keen interest in Brown's work and welfare, as did Pierce (Brown, Letter to Pelham Edgar, 28 Sept 1936; Letter to Pelham Edgar, 10 Oct 1937; Pierce, Letter to Audrey Alexandra Brown, 5 Dec 1945; Blank 117). Duncan Campbell Scott, a powerful federal bureaucrat as well as a poet, interceded with the provincial government to secure a pension for the sickly and struggling Brown, and also sent her violets from the grave of John Keats, an allusion to her sobriquet as "Canada's Keats" (Brown, Letter to Pelham Edgar, 23 May 1932; Letter to Pelham Edgar, 3 Jan 1938; Blank 116). Pelham Edgar, professor of literature at Victoria College, Toronto, represented Brown in her dealings with Macmillan of Canada, and also corresponded regularly with Eugenie Perry, whose friendship he greatly valued (Brown, Letter to Annie Charlotte Dalton, 26 Nov 1928; Edgar, Letter to Eugenie Perry, 20 Oct 1939). Annie Charlotte Dalton of Vancouver found her patron in the well-known critic William Arthur "Bill" Deacon, literary editor of the Toronto *Mail and Empire* and later of *Saturday Night*. Deacon offered encouragement, proposed venues for publication, and suggested that Dalton mention his name when submitting her work to eastern periodicals and publishers (Deacon, Letter to Annie Charlotte Dalton, 21 Dec 1925; Letter to Annie Charlotte Dalton, 14 Oct 1926). Such connections served British Columbia writers well, as Dalton acknowledged when she told Deacon that "a Western poet has no chance in the world if he [or she] is without friends in the East—I know" (Dalton, Letter to William Arthur Deacon, 24 Jan 1931).

Certainly the relationships that British Columbia authors developed with their eastern counterparts were rooted in genuine professional admiration and personal affection. However, the networks they established were also predicated upon shared assumptions about the nature of literary activity, assumptions the networks themselves served to reinforce. A conservative cultural nationalism was the common object that made this national literary community possible. Both the west coast CAA branches and the VPS took the rituals of patriotism very seriously, and their discussions of national symbols reflected the tension between British imperial and Canadian national sentiment that typified both CAA discussions nationally and public debate more generally. Victoria branch meetings opened with the singing of "God Save the King," and on one occasion a prospective member was censured for failing to show due respect for the ritual (Canadian Authors Association. Victoria and the Islands Branch. Executive Minutes, 9 Jun 1922; Executive Minutes, 20 Jun 1922). Alongside their concern with defending the sanctity of imperial sentiment against insult, the members of the Victoria branch and others in the British Columbia literary community also tried their hand at patriotic verses in the tradition of Charles G.D. Roberts' "Canada" or "Collect for Dominion Day." In 1926, at Annie Dalton's suggestion, the VPS held a "Canadian night," at which "selections from the work of the members of the Society in which the voice of their patriotism could be heard should be chosen and read." Dalton's own contribution was a three-verse hymn, "God Save Thee Canada" (Vancouver Poetry Society, "B" Section Minutes, 9 Jan 1926; "B" Section Minutes, 6 March 1926). Set to the melody of "God Save the King", the song invoked well-worn themes of imperial loyalty, muscular Christianity, national unity, and Nordic virility (Dalton, "God Save Thee Canada"), and was an instant favourite with the poetry society. For several years thereafter, a spirited rendition of "God Save Thee Canada" was part of the opening ritual for VPS meetings. The song was also sung at the 1927 CAA convention, and was even adopted for use in some Saskatchewan public schools (Ross 12). She also sent a copy to Deacon, who, though unable to convince his fellow editors to include it in *Saturday Night*, nevertheless endorsed Dalton's efforts to develop a uniquely Canadian symbol (Letter to Annie Charlotte Dalton, 19 Apr 1926).

These rituals were suggestive of the British Columbia poets' conception of the patriotic purpose of their work. Although modernist and internationalist voices were occasionally accommodated—Dorothy Livesay participated in several meetings of the VPS during the late 1930s (Vancouver Poetry Society, Minutes, 13 Nov 1937)—generally the west coast poets

conformed to the conservative literary tastes that prevailed throughout English Canada. In Robert Hood's estimation, the writers of Vancouver, British Columbia, and Canada had a higher calling, "a patriotic duty" to counteract the forces of materialism in a "raw young country" whose frontier economy encouraged moral and cultural degeneracy (Chairman's Report, 15 Apr 1925). Ernest Fewster shared this conservative conception of the moral power and importance of a national literature and emphasized the necessity of vigilance in combating what he saw as baser impulses; Canada's poets had an obligation to re-establish literature's "spiritual purpose" in the face of rampant modernism (President's Report, 31 May 1941). To Eugenie Perry, the emergence in the 1940s of a left-wing school of poets in Montreal, with fundamentally "un-Canadian" aims, was cause for regret because it threatened to split the Canadian poetry community (Letter to E.K. Brown, 2 Nov 1944). In a letter to Lorne Pierce, Perry remarked that "even if we deplore Canadian prudery in literature, we still, I believe, are proud to think that Canada is the cleanest, and we hope, healthiest, mentally, of any country in the world" (Letter to Lorne Pierce, 1 Apr 1945). Another writer believed "good" Canadian literature was a bulwark against the pernicious influence of jazz and other malignant American cultural imports ("Good Literature"). Even A.M. Stephen, an avowed Marxist in his politics (Campbell 68-9), was thoroughly conservative in his conception of the purpose of poetry. Though he believed poetry must address social issues and that poets ought to be at the vanguard of the fight for social justice (Vancouver Poetry Society. Minutes, 27 Nov 1937), Stephen worried that modernism constituted a treacherous "fifth column in poetry" (Stephen, "Fifth Column"). True working-class folk culture ought to be encouraged, but not so modernist poetry, which was "prone to attack our shortcomings while neglecting to emphasize the hard-won right and liberties that we have maintained as our most precious heritage" (Vancouver Poetry Society, Minutes, 7 Dec 1940). Given his political inclinations, it is possible that Stephen's comments were calculated to allay concerns about his loyalty; they were made, after all, in 1940, before the Soviet Union entered the war on the side of the Allies. Nevertheless, they conformed generally to his oft-articulated belief in the "spiritual" rather than material value of poetry.

When British Columbia poets looked for examples of verse that epitomized the spiritual value of their craft, their choices never strayed far from conventional wisdom. Like their eastern counterparts, they expressed a near-idolatrous devotion to the Confederation Group and particularly to Bliss Carman and Charles G.D. Roberts. Papers on the Confederation poets

and solemn recitations of their verse were regular rituals at meetings of the VPS and the west coast CAA branches, and visits from these literary heroes were the cause of much excitement. The VPS minutes for a visit by the sixty-six-year-old Roberts in 1926 have a panegyric quality. "It is evident that [Roberts'] artistry, and convincing power have not been diminished by his long silence," the society's secretary recorded. "The FATHER OF CANADIAN POETRY is still one of Canada's youngest and most virile sons"(Minutes, 27 Nov 1926, emphasis in original). At times their devotion verged on the whimsical—Audrey Brown considered christening a pet goat Bliss because he shared a birthday with Carman (Brown, Letter to Pelham Edgar, Oct 1935)—and criticism of the Confederation Group was tantamount to heresy. When Colonel Hick, a member of the CAA's Victoria branch, criticized Carman in a local newspaper in 1921, he was reprimanded by the branch for undermining its efforts to popularize Carman's works (Canadian Authors Association. Victoria and the Islands Branch, Minutes, 5 Dec 1921). Similarly, when popular Vancouver *Daily Province* columnist Jimmy Butterfield criticized a lecture that Roberts delivered at the University of British Columbia, A.M. Stephen urged all members of the VPS to protest "Mr. Butterfield's assumption of the role of literary critic" (Vancouver Poetry Society, Minutes, 27 Nov 1926). It is interesting in both of these cases that the responses from the CAA and the VPS did not address the substance of the criticisms, but rather the position or authority of the critic: Hick's criticism of Carman was unacceptable because of his membership in the CAA, while Butterfield's criticism of Roberts offended because a columnist in the mainstream press was deemed unqualified to assume the critic's role. Even other members of the Canadian literary community recognized that the British Columbians' devotion to Carman and Roberts was peculiar in its ferocity. Bill Deacon facetiously anticipated that an article he published in *Saturday Night* would upset his Vancouver friends, for he opposed the canonization of Carman at the expense of the rest of the Confederation Group (Deacon, "Is Carman" 9; Letter to Annie Charlotte Dalton, 12 May 1925). Through their participation in ongoing efforts to promote the works of the Confederation Group, British Columbia poets asserted a central role in the development of a Canadian national culture.

As enthusiastically as British Columbia's authors believed that the works of the Confederation Group constituted the foundation of a Canadian national literature, they also acknowledged that building a Canadian literature involved more than simply promoting and emulating the works of the previous generation. Inevitably, the thorny question of appropriate

subject matter arose: were a Canadian setting and stereotypically Canadian characters indispensable to Canadian literature? Nationally the CAA faced criticism that it promoted literature on the basis of its Canadian-ness, with little regard for quality (Vipond 74-5), but for better or for worse, publishers expected explicitly Canadian content. "If a vote were taken," Eugenie Perry lamented in the *Canadian Bookman*, "I wonder if it would not be found that there are thousands and thousands of Canadians as tired of the eternal pioneer story as I am. But the edict seems to have gone forth that a story can only be a Canadian story if it is a pioneer story" (Perry, "If Fiction" 164). She longed for the day when complex and introspective protagonists would join "the two fisted hero of the forest" and the "illiterate European peasant struggling sordidly to wrest a living from the unkind soil" in the pages of popular Canadian literature (165). Similarly, at a 1938 VPS panel discussion on the question of "Old vs. New" Canadian poetry, one speaker proposed that where Carman and Roberts had concentrated on the hinterland and the heroism of its pioneers, Canada was now becoming conscious of "a background that will be more collective" (Vancouver Poetry Society, Minutes, 26 Nov 1938). A.M. Stephen took a different approach; he sought to introduce the British Columbia poetry community to the new standards of literary criticism and used the theories of the Italian cultural critic Benedetto Croce as a "measuring rod" to determine the objective quality of the works of the Confederation Group. Predictably, the exercise confirmed the transcendent genius of Carman and Roberts, but it demonstrates that at least one British Columbia writer during the interwar period was concerned with international trends in criticism, if only to legitimate the value of Canadian poetry (Stephen, "Major Note").

The question of external models was a thorny one, and part and parcel of anxieties over British and American influence that extended far beyond the literary community. In "My Canada" Stephen dismissed the British cultural inheritance as "the chains / Of these old legends of a sainted past" (lines 13-14), which enslaved Canadian children and distracted them from their national destiny, but this was far from a unanimous view. The relative importance of imperial and national loyalties was a particularly vexed discussion on the west coast, where a large constituency of British-born immigrants vowed to defend the imperial connection, and the imperialist faction had its partisans within the local literary community. As much as they agreed on the necessity of an autonomous Canadian literature, Bill Deacon and the English-born Annie Dalton strongly disagreed on the issue of Imperial Unity. Their long-distance debate on the subject lasted for six years, with Deacon ultimately conceding that he would be unable to con-

vince Dalton of the necessity of Canadian political, as distinct from cultural, independence (Deacon, Letters to Annie Charlotte Dalton, 2 Nov 1925, 21 Nov 1925, 10 Jul 1931, 4 Aug 1931). Audrey Brown was even more dismissive than Dalton of Canadian autonomy. Brown boasted of the "un-Canadian flavor [sic]" of her own poetry, and questioned the very utility of overtly patriotic literature (Letter to Annie Charlotte Dalton, 26 Mar 1929). "Do you think anybody's made a more Canadian Canadian by chanting machine-made paeans about the land of the beaver and the maple and the prairie and the mountain," she once demanded of Pelham Edgar (Letter to Pelham Edgar, 3 Jan 1938—emphasis in original). Brown's imperialism went beyond literary taste; just about everything about life in "the colonies" irritated her, from the teaching of Canadian history to the Canadian accent and even the texture of Canadian Easter chocolate (Letters to Annie Charlotte Dalton, 11 Jul 1929, 20 Sept 1929, 4 May 1930).

Brown's case aptly illustrates the persistence of imperialist opposition to Canadian cultural nationalism in British Columbia, for she was not a recent immigrant, but a second-generation Nanaimoan. "Perhaps in time I shall learn to set my countries in their proper places—England dearly loved always, but Canada first," she mused to Stephen when he encouraged her to engage distinctly Canadian themes in her poetry. "Still, the Ethiopian though born in China, finds it hard to change the color of his skin. It's harder yet to change the color of one's soul" (Letter to A.M. Stephen, 16 Dec 1928). She avoided the question of national identity in her writing, focussing instead on traditional subject matter such as nature and Old World mythology, both favourite themes of the neo-romantics. The title poem of her 1931 collection, *A Dryad in Nanaimo*, is a case in point, for it transposed characters from Greek lore to a British Columbia setting; her only poem with any significant reference to Canada, it is a fitting allegory for her literary objective, the preservation of European cultural standards on the Canadian west coast. In spite of the absence of distinctive Canadian content in her work, Brown's peers did accept her as a valuable contributor to the Canadian national literature (Hannan). Stephen assured her that her soul was Canadian, and in time her literary imagination would also assimilate (Letter to Audrey Alexandra Brown, 29 Dec 1928). Still, Brown's imperialism and her residence in Nanaimo distanced her from the Vancouver and Victoria literary communities. As Perry wrote to Edgar, Brown was a talented poet but she had inherited "a certain unpleasant type of English characteristic, the snobbishness of the cockney" (Letter to Pelham Edgar, 18 Oct 1936).

If the poetry community was divided over relations with the British Empire, the ambivalence was even more pronounced when its members considered the work of their American contemporaries. On the one hand, BC poets made some tentative efforts to establish relationships with American colleagues. Ernest Fewster attended a literary convention in Seattle in 1927 as the self-proclaimed delegate of western Canadian writers, and thereafter the VPS maintained a "fraternal relationship" with the Seattle Poetry Club (Vancouver Poetry Society, Minutes, 8 Oct 1927). The League of Western Writers, an American organization with objects similar to those of the CAA, established chapters in Vancouver and Victoria during the 1920s, and the Canadian chapters co-hosted the League's annual convention in 1931. The British Columbia branches of the League were closely affiliated with the local branches of the CAA, sharing a number of executive members. However, this close affiliation underlined the League's redundancy in Vancouver and Victoria: neither city had a literary community large enough to warrant branches of two national or continental literary organizations. Consequently, the League kept a low profile in British Columbia and its Canadian chapters were dormant by 1939; their records have not survived and only the occasional reference in CAA documents and in the private papers of individual authors attest to their existence and activity. Institutional ties with writers across the Rockies were more powerful than those across the forty-ninth parallel, and from an aesthetic standpoint, most British Columbia poets were adamant that contemporary American poetry offered no inspiration in the formation of a new Canadian poetic voice. Fewster once entertained the VPS membership with a sarcastic recitation of modern American free-verse poetry, and all in attendance concurred that it "showed the intelligence of the writer to be little removed from that of a jibbering idiot" (Vancouver Poetry Society, Minutes, 27 May 1921). Stephen showed more interest than Fewster in the poetry of the American West and his own work was well received in American literary circles (Vancouver Poetry Society, Minutes, 7 Mar 1931; McMahan; Maring). However, even he argued that free verse and a fascination with sex debased American poetry, and he praised his fellow Canadian poets for avoiding the "extravagant vagaries" that characterized *avant-garde* American works such as Edgar Lee Masters's 1915 *Spoon River Anthology* (Stephen, "Western Movement", 213, 216).

Simultaneously rejecting deference to Great Britain and emulation of American modernism, British Columbia's poets found inspiration and encouragement in two other cultural movements of the interwar years. First, they recognized that the movement for a virile, decolonized Cana-

dian national literature was part and parcel of a broad project of cultural nation building, and they closely followed developments in the visual arts and especially the careers of the Group of Seven painters and their local associate, Emily Carr (Canadian Authors Association. Victoria and the Islands Branch, Minutes, 12 Apr 1928; Vancouver Poetry Society, Minutes, 12 Apr 1943). If these artists had succeeded in creating a distinctively Canadian style of painting, did that not bode well for efforts to find a national literary voice? British Columbian authors certainly thought so, and Lorne Pierce paid the VPS a high compliment when he ranked the society and the Group of Seven together as "the two most active and fruitful [artistic] centres in Canada to-day" (Vancouver Poetry Society, 'A' Section Minutes, 28 Feb 1925). Annie Dalton took the analogy further, and in a speech before the national convention of the CAA in Toronto in 1931 she called for the formation of a Group of Seven in Canadian poetry. Just as the members of the Group of Seven had sought a distinctive Canadian spirit in the wilds of northern Ontario, Dalton hoped for the day when poets would spend their summers in the wilderness, capturing the "sonorous music" of the raw Canadian landscape ("Group of Seven"). Perhaps not surprisingly for a British Columbian, Dalton was drawn to Lawren Harris's western mountain paintings, in particular his 1928 "Mountain Forms", rather than to the Group's iconic images of Georgian Bay or Algonquin Park. Dalton described the first time she saw Harris's painting as a near-religious experience, for in its unearthly peaks she saw "a sacred symbol," "the very soul of a new and tremendous poetry" (Dalton, *Future*, n.p.). "Mountain Forms" epitomized the features she hoped to see in Canadian verse, namely freedom, originality, and spiritual enlightenment. Far from being parochial, Canadian literature would become a model for the world.

Dalton's emphasis on universality and spiritual illumination flowed from her interest in theosophy, an occult belief system and the second source of inspiration for British Columbia poets as they contemplated the character of a Canadian national literature. Founded by the Russian-American eccentric Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in New York in 1875, the Theosophical Society sought to popularize eastern mystical teachings, especially the mysteries of an esoteric Tibetan Buddhist sect called the White Brotherhood, in which Blavatsky claimed to have been initiated. By the turn of the century, the movement was well established in Canada, and attracted many of the country's artists and intellectuals (Lacombe). Several British Columbia poets, including Dalton, Fewster, and Stephen, were active in the Theosophical Society, and or a short while Vancouver's cultural community even boasted its own theosophical lodge, with Stephen at

its helm ("Official Notes" 184; "Death of A.M. Stephen"). And like conservative cultural nationalism, a common interest in theosophy facilitated interactions among eastern and western artists and intellectuals. As Thomas Hodd has recently noted, theosophical themes may be found in the published works of several VPS members ("Where East") and may account for the interest in British Columbia poetry expressed by Bliss Carman and Charles G.D. Roberts, whose occult influences Hodd has also documented ("Celtic Twilight"). Dalton's correspondence with Deacon is rife with theosophical references and allusions. Deacon's pet project, in which he hoped Dalton would join him, was to transform Canada into a global cultural influence (Letter to Annie Charlotte Dalton, 20 Mar 1925). To Deacon, the theosophical notion of the various branches of the Aryan race justified Canada's survival as a nation independent from both Britain and the United States (Letter to Annie Charlotte Dalton, 2 Nov 1925). The Canadian intelligentsia had a duty to establish a hybrid civilization, a "New Temple of the Human Spirit," that would merge the best traits of the Old and New Worlds (Letter to Annie Charlotte Dalton, 21 Nov 1925). Dalton's CAA address indicates that she shared Deacon's notion that Canadian national literature was a stepping-stone between narrow provincialism and universal consciousness. The poets of the future, she speculated, might eschew nationalist themes for international or universal subjects, and Canada could lead the way. After all, Harris, a fellow theosophist, had demonstrated and Canadian poets would confirm that "of all civilized countries, Canada is the finest jumping-off place for the Spirit" (Dalton, *Future*, n.p.).

Like the literary community in which it found so many converts, the Canadian theosophical movement struggled with the challenges posed by distance and regional jealousies. When the constitution of the Canadian section of the society was drafted in 1920, the western lodges demanded, and received, even more decentralization than the Toronto-based leadership offered ("Organizing the T.S."). Many prominent theosophists, including Blavatsky herself, extolled the decentralized federal structure for the Theosophical Society ("An Autonomous Society" 91; Mitchell 33-4), and its tolerance of local autonomy no doubt appealed to west coast poets such as Fewster who worried about the pernicious spiritual consequences of centralization. However, when tensions within the national organization led to the secession of some fifty members of the Vancouver lodge in 1924 and the formation of a rival organization, it was the literary members who remained loyal to the national society ("Freedom of Thought" 25-6; "Among the Lodges" 3). The loyalty of Vancouver's literary theosophists

to the national society, like their participation in national literary organizations, reflected their interest in creating and maintaining national networks; as much as poets and theosophists yearned for universal truth, the idea of Canada mattered. In this they concurred with the Theosophical Society's national president, A.E.S. Smythe, when he warned the Vancouver schismatics that "we cannot escape the implications nor the obligations of the National Karma…which limits and at the same time emphasizes our activities" (A.E.S.S. 162).

So impressed was he with Fewster's loyalty that Smythe himself paid a visit to Vancouver in the midst of the 1924 schism and, on 30 January at 8:29pm in the reception room of the Standard Bank Building at the corner of Richards and Hastings, he summoned the late King Edward VII to convey a congratulatory message to the loyal Fewster from beyond the grave (A.E.). Quite apart from its significance in the internal politics of the Theosophical Society, the spectral king's message to Fewster hinted at the peculiar contribution of British Columbia to the creation of a new Canadian culture. The ethereal royal visitor praised Fewster's efforts to further the cultural life of Vancouver, "this cosmopolitan centre, where Nationality is more often than not ignored, due to the constant flow of folk to, and from the Orient." Theosophy exposed writers to the "wisdom of the east", which led eastern and western Canadian intelligentsia alike to ascribe cultural as well as commercial importance to British Columbia's relative proximity to the Far East. According to Bill Deacon, Canada's Pacific seaboard was well positioned not only as a port of entry for Asian commodities but also as an entrepÙt in the global market of ideas, a base for the penetration of eastern enlightenment into North American arts and letters. As the ports of Vancouver and Prince Rupert were flooded with the riches of the Orient, Deacon foresaw a greater sympathy between the peoples of Canada and China, whose shared a peaceful spirit in contrast with Europe's culture of war (Deacon 163-78, 296). The study of Asian philosophy and the expansion of Pacific commerce were thus symbiotic pursuits. Another easterner who re-imagined British Columbia as the centre of a new Pacific culture was the painter Frederick Varley of the Group of Seven, who on accepting an appointment to the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts in 1926 set out to refashion the culturally backward Terminal City into a dynamic meeting place of eastern and western artistic ideas (Davis 128). John Vanderpant, a close associate of Varley and a member of the VPS, called on Canadian poets to reject the culture of Europe and "establish their own native culture" while simultaneously expressing his admiration of Chinese poetry; he thus melded the society's cultural nationalism with Var-

ley's programme for a syncretic Pacific culture (Salloum; Vancouver Poetry Society, Minutes, 14 May 1938, VPS, 526-D-4, File 1).

Well before Deacon, Varley, and Vanderpant, however, some British Columbia writers had already begun to explore and engage eastern philosophies in their work. L. Adams Beck of Victoria published extensively on eastern philosophy and the occult and firmly believed that Canadian authors need not be limited to Canadian subjects. Duncan Campbell Scott agreed, and praised her 1922 book *The Ninth Vibration*, a collection of short stories on Asian and mystical themes, as a valuable contribution to Canadian literature (Scott). Tom MacInnes, the son of lieutenant governor and senator Thomas Robert McInnes, became fascinated with the Orient during his boyhood in polyglot New Westminster (MacInnes, *Chinook Days* 22-3), and spent many years in China working on a project to "modernize" the ancient city of Canton (Deacon, "Canadian Poet"). His experiences in China heavily influenced his writing, which, as one critic remarked, melded the "asceticism and negation, so prominent in eastern mysticism," with "the optimistic atmosphere of Canada, a country in the wholesome, youthful glow of its ascendancy" ("Poetry of Tom MacInnes"). Though his poetry treated non-Canadian themes, MacInnes was nevertheless embraced enthusiastically by the nationalist VPS, where he found considerable support and attention for his work (Prouty 47).

Theosophical Orientalism was particularly inspiring to Stephen, whose poetry explored the tantalizing possibility that British Columbia would serve as the cradle of an exciting new Canadian cultural movement. In the prologue to "The Ships of Spain," a poem principally concerned with the exploitation of British Columbia's forests, he traced the westward progress of humanity from its birthplace in the lost cities of Tibet to "the last edge of land / Where silver seas reach in and fir-clad hills reach down / Where East meets West and cherry buds of old Japan/Scent the warm waves" (lines 19-22). On Canada's Pacific coast, western civilization might dream of its metaphorical return to the Orient:

> Here, for a space again, the ancient gods will dwell
> With mortal men. Here, on these shores, the
> questing soul
> Gazing like Cortez, over the murmuring swell,
> May catch some rose-lit gleam of that far-distant
> goal –
> The Mystic City, Beauty's shrine, beyond the range
> Of Himavat – a Land of Dreams, dim, sweet and strange.
> (lines 25-30)

Stephen's conception of Tibet as humanity's Garden of Eden and his evocation of Himavat clearly reflected the poet's theosophical orthodoxy; the Hindu personification of the Himalayas, Himavat has a particular significance in theosophical doctrine, both as the guardian of sacred Tibet and as an esoteric metaphor for theosophy's universal relevance ("Studies"). Nor was this Stephen's only poetic allusion to theosophical lore; his poem "Sunrise in the Himalayas", which first appeared in the *Canadian Theosophist*, referred explicitly to Blavatsky's White Brotherhood (Stephen, "Sunrise"). Some in the Canadian literary community were puzzled by his esoteric references, considering them strangely discordant in a campaign for a distinctively Canadian literature (Moore), but for Stephen, as for Deacon, Dalton, and Smythe, there was no contradiction between theosophical universalism and Canadian patriotism. Nationalism and spirituality were one and the same, and he described his own "discovery" of Canada as akin to a religious conversion (Stephen, Letter to Audrey Alexandra Brown, 29 Dec 1928).

The allusion to the "stout Cortez" of John Keats' sonnet, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," is also instructive. Like Keats' conquistador on a peak in Darien, from an apartment in downtown Vancouver, Stephen gazed out over the western ocean with a wild surmise. Here Canadian poetry would come into its own, enriched by the global influences washed its way by the Japan Current. The poets of the west coast, Stephen suggested, mingled Oriental mysticism with the "spiritual perception" of the Indian poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and the American transcendentalist Walt Whitman ("Spirit of the West"). From this observation, he envisioned a cohesive "Western Movement in Canadian Poetry," and outlined its formation and features in a paper he delivered before the VPS in 1923 and published two years later in the *Dalhousie Review*. British Columbia's regular contact with the Orient had introduced an element of mysticism, even "neo-paganism" into the work of its poets. This mystical inheritance was, however, tempered by a frontier ethic, "the creed of the frontiersman," so as much as they might adapt traditional forms, west coast poets were in no danger of falling for the modernist excesses elsewhere pervading western literature. Thus, while British Columbia poets were part of a global spiritual awakening, their work was "distinctly national in spirit" (Stephen, "Western Movement" 210-17).

While the Western Movement's debt to theosophy was clear enough, Stephen was less candid in defining the vigorous "frontier culture" with which the mystical wisdom of the Orient was to intermingle. His conception of the western frontier was probably grounded in a romantic fashion-

ing of his own youthful experiences in the far west; shortly after arriving in Kamloops in 1896 to article at his uncle's law firm, he had quickly abandoned his legal studies to roam the Pacific Northwest, working in mines, lumber camps, ranches, and one-room schoolhouses throughout British Columbia, Alberta, and Washington State (Stephen, "A.M. Stephen"). However, there was more to the west than Stephen's ideal of freedom and breadth of spirit: in the early twentieth century, the pursuit of quick wealth defined British Columbia's frontier experience more accurately than the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Stephen discovered this the hard way when, optimistically predicting Vancouver's rise to cultural prominence, he collaborated with St. John Brock Smith to transform a struggling weekly newspaper, the *New Western Tribune*, into an organ for the city's literary and artistic community (Stephen, Letter to Martha Eugenie Perry, 12 Jul 1929). Modelled after Toronto's *Saturday Night* and staunchly nationalist in its editorial stance, Stephen and Smith's *Tribune* lasted only a few issues, and Stephen blamed its failure on the vulgarity of Vancouver society. "Vancouver BC decided that culture was not desirable," he complained to Audrey Brown. "Sensation, murders, divorces, stock-gambling, society news, politics—ah, yes, these it must have. But books, art, literature—never!" Stephen thus came face to face with the grim realization that in the real twentieth-century west the financial success denied to poets was enjoyed instead by "bootleggers and grafting politicians" (Stephen, Letter to Audrey Alexandra Brown, 20 Dec 1929). Was this the upstanding society that would inspire a new poetics?

If the reality of settler society fell short of Stephen's ideal, the traditions of British Columbia's First Nations offered better fuel for his imagination, and he urged local writers and artists to look to Aboriginal folklore for distinctly Canadian material (Stephen, "B.C."). His own poem "The Saghalie Tyee" revelled in the mellifluousness of First Nations place names:

> Some master singer's lips let fall
> Such shapely gems as Walhachin,
> Sechelt, Nechaco, Lilloet [sic],
> The fluent strain of Tulameen.
>
> Totem more lasting than the weird,
> Carved wooden god who leans above
> The broken roof-tree of the clan,
> Each word recalls the vanished love –
>
> And whispers to the dreamer's ear

> Of Him, the Saghalie Tyee,
> Who now rejected, crowned with night,
> Broods dimly o'er his ancient sea.
> (lines 25-36)

Stephen was not the only British Columbia writer fascinated by the literary potential of the province's First Nations heritage. The west coast literary community eagerly heeded Lorne Pierce's advice that "a yet untouched field lay awaiting the pens of Canada's artists in our wealth of Indian lore and legend," (Vancouver Poetry Society,"A" Section Minutes, 28 Feb 1925) and presentations on authentic Indian folklore and its possible use in literature were regular features at CAA meetings and conventions (Canadian Authors Association. Victoria and the Islands Branch, Minutes, 8 Nov 1928; Canadian Authors' Association, n.p.; Hood, Letter to Eric Gaskell, 3 May 1941; Letter to Eric Gaskell, 19 May 1941). For Stephen, however, the First Nations people of the Northwest Coast offered more than romantic local colour. Alongside his poetry, Stephen published two novels with west coast settings, and one of these, *The Kingdom of the Sun* (1927), went beyond retelling Aboriginal folklore to cast Aboriginal characters as allegorical representations of the author's occult worldview and of the Canadian nation-to-be. Inspired by fanciful tales of fair-haired Haida, the novel tells the story of Richard Anson, a sailor aboard Sir Francis Drake's Golden Hinde, who is marooned after he falls in love with Princess Auria, a beautiful prisoner captured from a Spanish galleon. The mixed-blood priestess of a Mesoamerican sun cult, Auria wields a spiritual power that is irresistible to Mayans, Salish, and shipwrecked English sailors alike; she represents the universal applicability of theosophical teachings and the oneness of world religions, a theme Stephen addresses explicitly in his preface to the work. She is the quintessential Creole, personifying the possibility of a syncretic North American culture: European in appearance, she is spiritually a child of the New World and rejects the heritage of her English father. She is at home among Aboriginal peoples, whose peaceful, animistic religion she finds more compelling than the materialism of the Christian invaders (75-6). This is a theme Stephen also explored in his poetry, for in "The Saghalie Tyee" he proclaimed the superiority of indigenous religion to materialistic Christianity: "For dead are they who seek for gods / Among the pale-faced clan / Who worship self in gilded shrines. / No brave is he who, praying, whines / To God to change His plan" (lines 43-47). Not only is Stephen's classification of love and enlightenment above material gain in accord with theosophical principles, it is also an assertion of the superiority of Creole over metropolitan values. However

romanticized or misconstrued, Aboriginal culture was a distinctive feature of the Western Movement, for it was more in accord with Stephen's conception of the spiritual mission of western Canada than was the spiritually bankrupt materialism of the poet's fellow white British Columbians.

Although it is important not to overstate the regionalist content of Stephen's work, his critical and poetic writings did foreshadow subsequent developments in regional poetics. Numerous contemporary critics have taken up the theme of British Columbia as a distinctive spiritual homeland: Nicholas O'Connell suggests that the regional literature of the Pacific Northwest is distinguished by its concern with the spiritual relationship between people and place, while Ludwig Deringer defines a truly regional literature is one characterized by "mythic imagination," a tendency not merely to describe or idealize the region but to establish a mystic relationship with it (358). Although constrained by well-worn romantic cliché, Stephen sought to do just this when he constructed "towers of a hidden Aidenn" on the "Emerald slopes" of the North Shore Mountains (Stephen, "Vancouver", lines 25-32), or discerned "Broad terraced temple stairs" leading to "a portal to the land of dreams" in the arid slopes of the Okanagan Valley (Stephen, "Okanagan", lines 2, 6). Stephen's occasional choice of Aboriginal language and lore over European associations as a means of evoking the British Columbia experience presaged a now well-established trope in regional literature and criticism (Ricou "Dumb Talk"). His embrace of Aboriginality might well be considered a precursor to this focus, though Stephen would almost certainly cringe at, for example, Gary Geddes' use of Chinook Jargon to evoke the very commercialism that the earlier poet sought to counteract (Geddes xiii). Finally, alongside the theosophical undertones of its prologue, his poem "The Ships of Spain" suggests a primitive environmentalism, a precursor to the ecological consciousness that Laurie Ricou has identified in contemporary Pacific Northwest literature on both sides of the border (Ricou *Arbutus*). In Stephen's poem, the heroine Tess, the daughter of a logger in the northern Gulf Islands, is connected to the landscape by her own mythic imagination, in which the creeks sing the stories of the region's history, and the trees are "her gods and guardians, living things, / Whose sheltering arms could mother her" (lines 194-5). The lumbermen, by contrast, are "monsters to her—enemies" for their unfeeling assault on the landscape (line 212); these monsters represent the ever encroaching culture of acquisitiveness that Stephen so despised.

Yet in its conception of the relationship between regional and national literature, Stephen's poetics differed significantly from the regionalist

movements and criticism that would arise later in the twentieth century. Frank Davey argues that regionalism in Canada is a discourse of dissent normalized by geography, offering a response and a challenge to the unrelentingly expansionist discourse of nationalism (Davey, "Toward" 3-7). Several scholars of American literature agree. Deringer proclaims "the literary independence of the region" as the goal of literary regionalism (358), while Fetterley and Pryse characterize literary regionalism as a discourse of resistance against "commodified 'local coloring'" (7). Since the 1960s, British Columbia writing has been characterized by a thread of aggressive regional self-definition. The Vancouver poets of *Tish*, for example, saw their movement as a counterbalance to the literary imperialism of Toronto (Davey, "Introduction" 20-22), much to the chagrin of some central Canadian critics, who saw creeping Americanism in *Tish*'s close ties with California poets (Richardson 13-15). Davey suggests that contemporary British Columbia writers have been successful in fostering a coherent regional literary voice, even if the most self-consciously regional of their number are little-known outside the region (Davey, "Toward" 6). Stephen, by contrast, expressed no interest in resistance or literary independence. Rather, he envisaged a national poetics, western in its inception but nationalist in its objectives.

Stephen's goal was to introduce the "Western Movement" to eastern Canadian readers and critics as quickly as possible, and initially his project was met with enthusiasm both within the literary community and beyond. On hearing his 1923 lecture on the movement, the VPS promptly instructed their secretary to assist in the arrangements for his proposed tour of eastern cities (Minutes, 24 Nov 1923). The Manitoba poet Wilson Macdonald, visiting the coast that autumn as part of a reading tour of the western provinces, concurred with Stephen that cosmopolitan British Columbia had a unique contribution to make to Canadian literature. The same week as the VPS meeting, Macdonald told an audience of several hundred at a Vancouver Methodist church that "the adventuring hearts of the western world centre here, bringing with them, in differing degree, their cultural traditions, together with the intellectual stimulus born of the desire for new revelations of beauty and truth, and these have already resulted, in a limited degree, in the production of a new and virile literature of our own" ("Spirit of the West"). Eastern literary production and tastes were more staid, as Macdonald implied when he joked that Ontario audiences believed his poem "The Unburied Dead" was about them ("Canadian Poet Gives"). Stephen also found an influential ally in Mary Ellen Smith, Liberal MLA for Vancouver and the first female cabinet minister in the British

Empire. A staunch nationalist, Smith held that promoting cultural relations between east and west was as important to Canadian unity as correcting inter-provincial trade imbalances, and she pledged assistance for Stephen's proposed tour (Letter to A.M. Stephen, 10 Dec 1923). The Vancouver *Daily World* eagerly endorsed the Western Movement in similar terms. For a local cultural community disappointed at the exclusion of British Columbia artists from the Canadian selections for the 1924 British Empire Exhibition, the Western Movement promised greater dialogue among Canadian writers in various regions. "In a literary, as well as an economic sense, the people of East and West should know more of each other," proposed the editor of the *World*. "Then they will understand and appreciate" ("Spirit of the West").

In spite of the support he received, Stephen's tour of the east was postponed for almost five years. In the meantime, the VPS undertook to advance, on a much smaller scale, his project of a distinctively western Canadian poetry. In 1924, the society amended its constitution, splitting the membership into two sections. The first, styled "A" section, was to serve as the nucleus of a "Western School" of Canadian poetry, and membership therein was open only to those of demonstrated poetic achievement. "B" section would be open to those of lesser attainments interested in furthering the movement (Minutes, 4 Dec 1924). The proposed amendment was approved unanimously, though the bifurcated structure seems to have survived only until 1926, probably because the small membership did not warrant such a division. Stephen did finally visited his native Ontario in 1928, but his lecture and reading in Toronto does not appear to have dealt with the Western Movement, focussing instead on his oft-articulated desire to encourage the "soul and spirit of Canada" through its literature ("Poet from the West"). He emphasized the same project during another speaking tour through Saskatchewan and Alberta in April of 1930, under the aegis of the Native Sons of Canada (NSC) (Stephen, Collection of Press Clippings on Prairie Tour).

It is telling that the NSC took an interest in Stephen's efforts, for his dream of writing regional poetry with national relevance echoed the history of that patriotic organization, which had originated on the west coast but had expanded far beyond its borders (Vipond, "Nationalism and Nativism"; Pass 220-22). Stephen had been a member of the Native Sons almost since the society's inception, and like the NSC's program, Stephen's writings on western poetics were not sectionalist in intent. He believed that the role of the western Canadian poet was not to articulate a separate identity for his region but rather to expand the horizons of national literature. Just

as the Pacific coast was poised to become the centre of national economic life, so it would become the centre of cultural innovation. Some decades earlier, Charles G.D. Roberts had made much the same claim for Nova Scotia (Bentley 78), and it is noteworthy that Stephen found a receptive audience for his ideas on the country's far eastern periphery, where the editors of the *Dalhousie Review* published the manifesto of the Western Movement after it had been rejected by Ontario journals. The reluctance of Central Canadian intellectuals and artists to listen to the lessons their western counterparts might teach deeply discouraged Stephen. As he complained to Lorne Pierce, who had failed to place the manifesto in a Toronto periodical, it was Ontario and not the peripheral regions that exhibited a "provincial" spirit and thus impeded the development of a truly national literature (Letter to Lorne Pierce, 14 Jan 1925).

Stephen was not alone in his growing realization that even a mild expression of regionalism was a non-starter in interwar literary circles. Although, as we have seen, the associational life of the literary community mirrored the tensions of Canadian federalism, and although British Columbia writers' correspondence with eastern friends and associates was peppered with playful exchanges on the relative merits of east and west, assertions of regional grievance and regional distinction rarely made it to the printed page. Overtly regional works simply did not appeal to central Canadian publishers and critics; certain prominent figures on the national literary scene, such as CAA national secretary and *Saturday Night* editor B.K. Sandwell, were openly hostile to the political and economic demands of the country's outlying regions (Sandwell 26-31, esp. 28). Duncan Campbell Scott might have encouraged British Columbia writers to include more "local color" in their work, but works that exhibited even this mild form of proto-regionalism were not sufficiently "Canadian" for other critics. Eugenie Perry endured just such criticism from Alan Crawley, the West Vancouver-based but Manitoba-raised editor of *Contemporary Verse*. Crawley believed that the stories of the harsh Prairie West more accurately epitomized the Canadian experience than did the writing of the temperate Pacific coast, and consequently he advised Perry, a fellow displaced Manitoban, to forget arbutus trees and the blue waters of the Strait of Georgia, and instead concentrate on her memories of pioneering struggle on the Plains (Letter to Martha Eugenie Perry, c. 1936). Crawley's criticism of Perry was regional—under his editorship *Contemporary Verse* published very little British Columbia poetry (Lillard 323)—but it was also gendered. Pauline Butling has observed that under Crawley's direction *Contemporary Verse* published the work of many female poets (Butling 61-

62), yet Crawley's correspondence with Perry suggests that he espoused the gendered assumptions common throughout the male-dominated Canadian literary community, both among traditionalists who extolled the "virility" of Roberts and Carman and among modernists who belittled the feminized character of the CAA (Bentley 73; Irvine 78). Perry defended herself against Crawley's criticism by challenging those assumptions. She complained to Pelham Edgar that "[Crawley] forgets, perhaps, that to a woman, love and beauty are realities," (Letter to Pelham Edgar, 18 Oct 1936—emphasis in original) and to E.K. Brown that in male-dominated Canadian poetry there was too little "tenderness" (Letter to E.K. Brown, 11 Sept 1944). Perry's dispute with Crawley, in which feminine and regional voices alike were deemed "un-Canadian", seems to suggest the utility of a feminist perspective in understanding the failure of British Columbia to explore regional poetics. Certainly American critics have drawn parallels between regionalism and feminism, both of which challenge dominant national and masculine literary discourses (Fetterley and Pryse). Be that as it may, Perry accepted Crawley's criticism, for she believed his sole motivation was a desire to elevate the quality Canadian literature (Letter to Alan Crawley, 4 Nov 1943; Letter to E.K. Brown, 2 Nov 1944). Her self-expression and regional experience were secondary considerations, to be subordinated to the demands of a masculine cultural nationalism.

Interest in fashioning British Columbia as part of a more cosmopolitan Pacific Rim culture also proved a passing fad to all but a few members of the Canadian intelligentsia. In fact, literary Orientalism had been riddled with contradictions from the outset, driven as much by a popular appetite for exoticism as by a sustained interest in Asian spirituality (Stephen, "The Poetry Society," 1; Bayne). Moreover, even their sincerely-held theosophical principles did not immunize writers against the virulent anti-Asian racism so prevalent in interwar British Columbia. Tom MacInnes apparently saw no contradiction in employing Asian forms and themes in his poetry while simultaneously lending his literary talents to anti-immigration causes, as evidenced by his 1927 pamphlet, *Oriental Occupation of British Columbia*. Annie Dalton was uncomfortable with Bill Deacon's characterization of the Chinese as a peaceful people, citing a series of paintings in a Vancouver museum that "represented some of the milder tortures favoured in China." In the same letter she also expressed her fear that Canada's western seaboard was poorly defended against an invasion from across the Pacific (Letter to William Arthur Deacon, 16 Oct 1933). Mounting political instability in Asia diminished the appetite for romantic Orientalism

among British Columbia writers. Stephen maintained his intellectual engagement with the Orient, but his focus shifted. As the Far East became a war zone, the poet became an activist, serving as director of the China Aid Council; in this capacity he also turned his literary talents to pamphleteering and rallying his fellow writers to the cause of opposing Japanese aggression (Stephen, *War in China*; Letter to Francis Joseph Dickie, 18 May 1939).

Because of indifference in the east and acquiescence in British Columbia, the far west failed to fulfill its destiny as the cradle of a new Canadian national literature, at least during the interwar years. Stephen's 1930 reading tour of Saskatchewan and Alberta affirmed his faith in the west, broadly conceived, as the source of much innovation in Canadian poetry, but it also forced him to concur with Crawley that the Prairies were more advanced in national consciousness than was British Columbia (Untitled Clipping). By the time he published his third collection of poems, *Brown Earth and Bunch Grass*, in 1932, Stephen believed that the impassioned patriotism of western Canadian nationalists rang hollow when he looked at the treatment of the frontier heroes he believed embodied the true spirit of western Canada. He expressed this criticism in a poetic tribute to Daniel "Peach" Davis, a famous veteran of the Northwest Mounted Police who spent his old age employed as a janitor in Calgary, a "city of beef barons and oil magnates", forgotten by an ungrateful nation:

> When you hear politicians
> waving the flag,
> when you hear Native Sons
> raving about national spirit,
> when Daughters of the Empire
> perspire patriotism
> that drips into their tea-cups,
> come down to Calgary.
> I'll show you how Canada delights to honor her great men.
> I'll show you
> Constable Daniel Davis
> standing guard
> over ash cans in a basement.
>
> ("Peach Davis" lines 72-85)

Although the references to the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, the flag, and even the ironic allusion to "O Canada" all suggest Stephen's disillusionment with the translation of nationalist discourse into action, it is

his disappointment with the Native Sons of Canada that best illustrates his pessimism concerning the prospects for national spirit in the west. In a letter to Deacon in 1935, Stephen complained about the timidity of the Native Sons, which, like the failure of the *Western Tribune*, he attributed to the superior strength of material interests over true patriotism (Letter to William Arthur Deacon, 17 Aug 1935). Equally diminished was his faith in eastern spirituality as a corrective force. In a foretaste of the gendered condescension of "How to Write a Canadian Poem", his poem "After Hearing a Lecture on Oriental Mysticism," poked fun at "penitential spinsters, / who worship Truth / only when it wears the turban / and flowing robes of an Eastern yogi" (lines 5-8). His personal theosophical convictions may have remained strong, but he despaired of its power to counteract the forces of materialism. Indeed, he feared the philosophy itself was prone to capitalist co-option. In a posthumously published verse entitled "The Osophist," Stephen lampoons a Tibetan lama who makes a tidy living by convincing a "common geezer" that he is the reincarnation of a Roman emperor. Like British Columbia's romantic past, Oriental wisdom could expect only dilettantish curiosity and cynical commodification from the western Canadian public.

Stephen did not give up on cultural nationalism, but he certainly changed his conception of the nation. The 1935 publication of his final book, *Vérendrye: A Poem of the New World*, marked a recentring of the poet's conception of the Canadian nation. The process of writing *Vérendrye* was an ecstatically patriotic devotional exercise for Stephen (Stephen, Letter to Audrey Alexandra Brown, 29 Dec 1928); his publisher, J.M. Dent and Sons of Toronto, billed it as "The First Canadian Epic," and one reviewer compared the poem to the prototypical national legend, the *Niebelungenlied* (Murray). However, where Stephen had once hoped that the distinctive experience of the Pacific Coast might provide the impetus for a new kind of Canadian nationalism, his presentation of the eighteenth-century French explorer Pierre Gaultier de Varennes et de la Vérendrye as a nation-builder conformed to the Laurentian interpretation of Canadian history. Most often associated with the works of the University of Toronto historian Donald Creighton, whose *Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence* was published just two years after Stephen's *Vérendrye*, the Laurentian Thesis emphasized the east-west transportation axis formed by the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes as the most significant geographical determinant in the development of Canada. Vérendrye was a Laurentian hero because, as reviewers of Stephen's work hastened to mention, he was the first to envision a transcontinental empire centred in the Canadian

heartland of the St. Lawrence Valley (Murray). The national focus explains the glowing reception of the poem in the east, particularly among French-Canadian intelligentsia.[2] With *Vérendrye*, Stephen quietly abandoned the proto-regionalism of the Western Movement in favour of a more conventional conception of Canadian nationalism.

In history as in literary criticism, regionalism and nationalism are slippery concepts. Often conceived as necessarily oppositional, they are perhaps better considered as two facets of a "divided duty", at times contradictory, at others mutually reinforcing, the one loyalty constantly modifying the other. Examining early Canadian literary nationalism through a regional lens reveals this complicated relationship. Between the wars, poets based in British Columbia coalesced into a recognizable community, and despite its distance from the cultural centres of the East, this community was firmly integrated into the movement for a Canadian national literature. Like their eastern counterparts, they swooned over the writings of the Confederation Group, debated the value of the British cultural inheritance, and spiritedly denounced the menace of modernism. In some respects the commitment to the cause of literary nationalism was even stronger in British Columbia than in the traditional centres of cultural influence, and their contributions to the cause did not go unnoticed. As one internal historian of the early VPS breathlessly recalled, "reviewers expressed their enthusiasm as they recognized, perhaps at first with some hesitation, that from the far-off shores of the Pacific was coming the fruits of a new but genuine poetic impulse endowed with qualities which rivalled anything yet to appear from Canadian pens" (Stephen, "The Poetry Society" 2). Surely there is a healthy dose of self-congratulatory bravado in this account, but it is true that high-profile eastern critics and publishers were eager to support the efforts of west coast writers, and regarded them as allies in the struggle for Canadian cultural independence. In their professional discussions as in their works, west coast authors articulated a vision of their home province as unabashedly, even uniquely, Canadian in spirit; far from being peripheral or provincial, they believed that the Pacific West was the wellspring of a new, and possibly syncretic, Canadian culture. Stephen did call for a distinctive western Canadian literature, and in some respects his "Western Movement" might justifiably be considered a forerunner of the regional trends in British Columbia poetry that have intensified since the 1960s. However, Stephen legitimated his literary vision through the rhetoric of cultural nationalism rather than appealing to any intrinsic notion of regional difference. A vibrant western poetic voice would reinvigorate the

cause of Canadian national consciousness, not detract from it. "In the land of singing mountain streams, by the shores of the blue Pacific," he wrote, "[British Columbian poets] have formed the nucleus of a new Canadian literature virile with promise for the future" (Stephen, "Western Movement" 217). Yet his project failed to interest central Canadian publishers and critics, and British Columbia proved a market too small with a culture too venally materialist to support the vibrant poetic experiment Stephen proposed. Therefore, the first poet and critic to seek a reconciliation of west-coast regionalism with the conventional cultural nationalism of the east abandoned his efforts, retreating publicly to Laurentian nationalism and privately to sarcastic mockery of the very literary nationalism he had once so enthusiastically advanced. A distinctively British Columbian school of poetry would have to wait for a new champion.

Notes

1 Hood and Gaskell's substantial correspondence between 1941 and 1947 is preserved in RAH, Box 1, File 18, and Box 4, File 15.

2 Letters of praise for Vérendrye from the Superintendant of Public Instruction of Quebec and the Rector of Laval University, as well as from Baron Tweedsmuir and Duncan Campbell Scott, are preserved in AMSB, Box 1, File 7.

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Abbreviations:

AAB: Audrey Alexandra Brown fonds, Special Collections Library, University of Victoria.

ACD: Annie Charlotte Dalton fonds, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

AMSB: Alexander Maitland Stephen fonds, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

AMSC: Alexander Maitland Stephen collection, Add. MSS 56, City of Vancouver Archives.

EF: Ernest Fewster fonds, Add. MSS 663, City of Vancouver Archives.

KE: Kate Eastman fonds, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

MEP: Martha Eugenie Perry fonds, MS 697, British Columbia Archives, Victoria.

PE: Pelham Edgar fonds, F 9, E.J. Pratt Library, Victoria University in the University of Toronto [PE].

RAH: Robert Alexander Hood fonds, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

VIB: Canadian Authors' Association. Victoria and the Islands Branch fonds, MS 2366, British Columbia Archives, Victoria.

VPS: Vancouver Poetry Society fonds, Add. MSS 294, City of Vancouver Archives.

WAD: William Arthur Deacon fonds, MS Coll. 160, Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library, University of Toronto.

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