

Inscribing the Vagabond: Excerpt from a Life

By Mary B. McGillivray

When I was a student of Malcolm Ross's at Dalhousie University in the 1970s, I was privileged to have him begin a conversation with me about poetry and religion that continued more or less uninterrupted until his death in 2002. One of the recurring elements of that conversation was Ross's abiding passion for the work of the poets of the Maritimes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chief among these, in Ross's opinion, was the poetry of Bliss Carman, to which Ross introduced me. I subsequently became fascinated not only with Carman's work, but with the poet himself. What follows is part of an extensive study of Bliss Carman's life in which I am currently engaged.¹

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Anyone who reads Bliss Carman's correspondence with his family, friends, editors, publishers—with anyone who was not a creditor or a potential employer—will be struck by the inventive variety of identities he claims.

Sometimes, when writing to his sister, he is B'sie. When writing to cousins or close friends of his early adulthood and even in the correspondence of his prime, he signed himself "Blisskin," or the truly awful—at least for current readers—"Blissikins." In an era before ours, he signed himself "Balder Queerman" without inviting an analysis of his place on the homosexual/heterosexual continuum. He styled himself "Darling Daddy" in letters to "Atom," a young woman with whom he had a close friendship and a long correspondence—an appellation that also sounds more nuanced now than it did when he used it. When feeling particularly whimsical, he signed himself "Slim Barcans," a reasonably clever anagram that had the advantage of making fun of his exceptionally tall and raw-boned frame. At his most playful he was "Willie." To friends in Vancouver, theosophist friends whom he came to regard as his west-coast family, he was "Monkey Willie." William Bliss Carman was born in 1861 in Fredericton, N.B., and, in keeping with the indeterminacy which I am about to sketch, was a pas-

sionate Canadian and Maritimer who nonetheless made the homes of his adulthood in his beloved New England.

Many critics and scholars, most notably H. Pearson Gundy, have commented on the playful and quicksilver aspect of Carman's epistolary personae (Gundy xv). D.G. Jones once mused on the significance of these self-styled labels while pondering the recurrent themes and metaphors of the ephemeral in Carman's poems (33). Carman, like his "Windflower," is always between places, inhabiting one space—barely—but longing for or thinking of another. "Between the roadside and the wood / Between the dawning and the dew / A tiny flower before the sun / Ephemeral in time, I grew," says the poem's speaker.

In the poems for which he was best known a century ago, the *Songs from Vagabondia* (1894), he celebrates a philosophy and a way of life that was at that time both an ideological passion and almost an obsession. He saw himself—and he was—a wanderer. He and Richard Hovey collaborated on the first *Songs* and on two more volumes, *More Songs from Vagabondia* (1896) and *Last Songs from Vagabondia* (1900). Theirs was a mutually inspirational, mutually supportive literary partnership. They would meet in Boston during Carman's Harvard days (1886-88), and found each other's liberal and spiritual approach to literature and life congenial. Hovey and Carman hiked long miles in the Adirondacks in several autumns in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Carman wrote Hovey frequently from 1889 onwards, seeking his opinion on manuscripts he was working on, arguing with him, lending and borrowing money, arranging holidays together when possible. On a couple of occasions they tented for a few weeks on the grounds of Kingscroft, Charles G.D. Roberts's home in Windsor, Nova Scotia, working with Roberts in a kind of poets' retreat. In the late summer of 1893, they organized a camp at which they were joined by Hovey's future wife, Henrietta Russell, a lecturer in the Delsartean school of artistic expression. Two tents were set up, and a cook engaged. Those in the group were to walk, write, and learn from each other. Mrs. Russell was to give lectures to any of the public who cared to subscribe. The weather was so bad that summer, however, they ended up more often than not inside the house at Kingscroft. Still, this "camp" lasted nearly two months (see Gundy in Carman, *Letters* 58-59) from late August until mid-October.

The Vagabond camp was a variation on a pattern Carman had begun in about 1886. As long as Roberts was at King's College, Carman made a point of spending part of each summer writing with him. From 1892 until 1894, Carman wintered mainly in Washington at Hovey's family home and

summered with or near Roberts in Windsor and Wolfville. He had no real home again in his life once he left Fredericton in September 1886. In September 1896, he writes plaintively to his sister Muriel Carman Ganong about his state (he had been in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, for the latter part of the summer after returning from a voyage to England and France with Bertram Goodhue, a gifted book and type designer): “I believe I can understand your wish to get back home. Though it is so long (how many years?—ten this month!) since I had a home, that I almost forget the feeling. I find one consolation, one is seldom homesick. . . . I don’t suppose I shall ever have a roof-tree of my own, so I think I shall erect chance into a theory and discover virtue in disattachment . . .” (*Letters* 110).

By the following summer (1897) Carman had met Mary Perry King, the woman who was to alter his life, or rather, with whom he altered his life. This encounter of soul-mates, if that is what they were, was to entrench rather than to end his vagabondage, inasmuch as he arranged his life thereafter according to the seasons Mary Perry spent in the Catskills in upstate New York or in or near New York City. In fact, after 1908, with the exception of occasional sojourns in Boston and New York, and infrequent but sometimes extended cross-continental trips, Carman spent virtually the rest of his life in tents, cabins, lodging-houses, or inns near the King residences.

For the literary biographer, Carman’s passion for vagabondia is more than chance erected into a theory; it is a motif that is uncannily evident in his playful nicknames, in the recurrent images of evanescence in his work, and even—and most frustratingly—in the very way in which he writes and publishes his poetry. Carman believed in the Muse, in inspiration; the effect of this belief was that he would write in bursts, which were succeeded by long silences. What is worse, from the point of view of the person trying to track the vagaries of his mind and heart by looking at this writing, he would alternately hoard or squander the results of the Muse’s visits. A vagabond, indeed. He would collect his manuscripts in desks and trunks, and leave them behind with friends or family, or trail them along, spilling a few things here and there in the form of private publications or limited runs or poems printed in ephemeral pamphlets or journals. In short, the task of unravelling the puzzle that is Carman’s writing life is nightmareish.

Carman’s bibliographic history is a rock on which better researchers than I have foundered. Frederic Fairchild Sherman compiled a checklist of Carman’s first editions in the second volume of *The Literary Miscellany* (1911) and revised and reprinted it as a booklet in 1915. This was reason-

ably, but not perfectly, complete, though it did not of course cover ephemeral or fugitive publications. Besides, Carman lived and wrote until 1929, so the last part of his career is not addressed.

In 1935 and again in 1985, Muriel Miller tried schematizing his publishing history in appendices to biographical studies. In the first attempt, *Bliss Carman: a Portrait*, she organized the materials in two units. Appendix A is “Books Published” (118-120), a challenge in itself for reasons I will mention later, and Appendix B (120-134) tries to meet the problem of Carman’s steamer-trunk approach by organizing titles under the headings “Output of the year 1885,” “Output of the year 1893,” and so forth. The lists are far from complete, and when Miller returned to her second study, *Bliss Carman: Quest and Revolt*, she stuck strictly to publication dates, but indicated the challenge by heading the first section: “The Native Canadian Period (1886-1889): Poems written and/or published before 1897 and reprinted in book-form (1893-1905)” (Miller, *Quest* 294).

William Inglis Morse, an important bibliophile and bibliographer, addressed the task in 1941 with his *Bliss Carman: Bibliography, Letters, Fugitive Verses, and Other Data*, but this, too, was incomplete. Much more recently, John Robert Sorfleet helped Carman scholarship enormously by publishing for the New Canadian Library in 1976 a selection of Carman’s poems arranged in their order of composition (where possible) or first printing—but even here, the problem of the hoarder-poet challenges the literary biographer’s attempt to delineate Carman’s development as a writer and as a thinker. Sorfleet once again made important strides in the field in 1990 when he published a chronological sequence of books and pamphlets in *Bliss Carman: a Reappraisal*, but this was not exhaustive either, and does not address composition dates. The poet and critic Douglas Lochhead has said the Carman bibliography will be a life’s work for someone, and he is right (191).

The problem is this: just as he does in the pervasive imagery of the evanescence of life itself in his poetry (the best of which is not in the *Vagabond* series proper, by the way), Carman demonstrates his gypsy heart and soul in the poems’ arrivals and departures, in their printing, publication, and republication.

Let us take “Ma Belle Canadienne” as an example. This is one of Carman’s earliest—but I do not say, please note, *the* earliest—publications. He seems to have had it printed privately in Fredericton in broadsheet form in about 1881. The poem is interesting in part because it is evidence of Carman’s attachment to his first fiancée, Julie Plante. (The date of their engagement, and the date of its breaking off, for that matter, are specula-

tive.) Since Carman tended to print single poems upon occasion after about 1880 and since as far as I can tell the “occasions” were usually religious holidays such as Christmas or Easter or important personal events, knowing when he first had it printed would be helpful. It appeared twice in literary magazines, first in *The Week* on December 27, 1883, and again in the New York *Tribune* in 1884. But unlike many of Carman’s other work early or late, it does not appear in his two-volume *Poems* (1905) or in his 1921 *Later Poems*.

Tracing the development of Carman’s work is almost as daunting as following the tracks—and backtracks—of his published, privately published, and fugitive manuscript verse. Even when the biographer thinks she knows something, it vanishes, the trail of the vagabond appearing and departing like the waves in “Low Tide on Grand Pré.”

In this most well-known of Carman’s works, the speaker struggles to grasp the eternal through the fleeting temporal, evoking that haunting longing which is characteristic of the best in Carman:

The sun goes down, and over all
These barren reaches by the tide
Such unelusive glories fall,
I almost dream they yet will bide
Until the coming of the tide

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Was it a year or lives ago
We took the grasses in our hands,
And caught the summer flying low
Over the waving meadow lands,
And held it there between our hands?

(*Poems* 19)

This poem was written in June 1886 and was apparently first published by the *Atlantic Monthly* in Boston in March 1887. Carman himself felt it was his first really important piece and he used it as the core of his first volume of verse, which appeared six years later in 1893. Many critics have anchored some notion of Carman’s sense of subject, or of Carman’s strong attachment to his mother, by juxtaposing the poem’s sense of loss and longing with the event of her death in February of 1886. In 1991, Thomas B. Vincent discovered that an earlier version of “Low Tide” had appeared in the *King’s College Record* of October 1886. This one was called “Low Tide on Avon,” and it was this that Carman wrote in June 1886 (Vincent 130). Vincent argues convincingly that the poem has a keen sense of place

and of its Acadian history that is vestigially present in the later version, but that the later version is the stronger for subordinating everything to the maturing lyric impulse. So far, so good. Two versions of "Low Tide." A biographical development. But even this is not certain, at least not from an editorial point of view, because it is not wholly clear when all the changes were made.² We know only that an early draft appeared in the *King's College Record*, and that an edited version with an altered title appeared five months later. The strong connection some have made between the pathos of the poem and Carman's grief over the loss of his mother may have been diffused, at least in the poet's mind if not in our reading of the text, by the Evangeline connection of Acadie.

Early in his career, Carman, as I said, wrote in bursts of creative energy more often than not, and collected and saved the results. The recovery of manuscripts and fugitive private printings does not solve much for the biographer, for many of the manuscript copies of poems are marked with place names but no dates. So are many of the fugitive publications and private printings. Carman's work appeared in literary periodicals, in privately printed pamphlets, broadsheets, in individual runs of single poems, and in newspapers long before he published his first volume.

Such was the path of the poems and of the man whom his cousin Charles G.D. Roberts more than once called "one of Earth's roamers" that Carman managed to garner a review by George Stewart in the October 11, 1888, issue of *The Week* merely on the basis of a privately-printed broadsheet made sometime that year or the year before. If this is the same broadsheet I have seen—and I infer it may be only because it includes "Low Tide on Grand Pré" in the same version in which it appeared in *The Atlantic*—it has a scant dozen poems, some of which were not to reappear for a decade or more. The broadsheet, nonetheless, earned Carman the reviewer's praise and his earnest hope that a volume would appear "soon." When that first volume finally appeared more than five years later, it was a selection "in the minor key," as Carman put it (*Low Tide on Grand Pré* np), plucked from the accumulation of dozens of poems over a period of more than a decade.

In the wanderings between 1886 and 1892, Carman had worked for two years in New York as a literary editor for the weekly *Independent* and briefly for *Current Literature*. In the autumn of 1892, he hiked with Hovey from New York to Washington, D.C, where he stayed for six months at the Hovey family home, polishing old work and writing new. It is Lorne Pierce, a monumental figure in Canadian letters and another literary biog-

rapher of Carman, who has provided the best example I can offer of what I have called Carman's vagabond manuscripts.

In his Foreword to *The Music of Earth* (1931) a posthumous selection of Carman's works, itself initially privately printed, Pierce says that it was at the Hovey household in Washington in February 1893 that Carman "typed out 8 pages of titles and suggestions toward his first collection. From 161 poems he selected several groups" (Pierce np). Pierce goes on to name twelve lists. What is remarkable about them is that they rough out at least five of his subsequent volumes: *Low Tide on Grand Pré* (1893) (which was first conceived of as a less sombre volume called *Nomina Mimae*, then took on its eventual tone under the manuscript title *Northland Lyrics*), *Songs from Vagabondia* (1894), *Behind the Arras* (1895), *Ballads of Lost Haven* (1897), and even *Ballads and Lyrics* (1902). In other words, at least some of what Carman was publishing even nine years later was drawn from the collection he had gathered around him in Washington, and which trailed around with him from Adirondacks to Catskills, from Washington to Northampton, Massachusetts (where his sister Muriel lived), to New York.

This publication pattern of sorting his poems according to theme or mood makes the chronology of composition and edition, and therefore the developing narrative line of his moods or thoughts, difficult to determine. Further illustration lies in *The Music of Earth* selection itself, where Pierce draws on the five-volume compendium *Pipes of Pan* (1902-1905) that consists of *From the Book of Myths* (1902), *From the Green Book of the Bards* (1903), *Songs of the Sea Children* (1903), *Songs from a Northern Garden* (1904), and *The Book of Valentines* (1905). As Pierce's annotations reveal, some of the more notable poems in the 1902-1905 *Pipes of Pan* volumes date back to 1892, others to 1896 and 1899, and so on. In this case, the pattern may reveal more than thematic habit. The *Pipes of Pan* volumes appeared at a time when Carman was enjoying the last phases of a creative lyrical impulse that was beginning to wane. In fact, part of the impulse for the *Pipes of Pan* series, both in some of its parts as they appeared in 1902-1905, and in its whole as a compendium in 1906, was purely financial. Earning his living "by the pen alone," as he called it, was a struggle; the letters to his sister Muriel Carman Ganong and to his friends reveal that Carman was nearly always drowning in debt. (The situation was especially bad by 1904 when he was constantly pursued by creditors. In a letter of December 27 to Peter McArthur, a fellow writer and close friend, Carman thanks McArthur for his support when Carman was recently "hailed into court," apparently over debts. In 1906 he was in court again, where his

worldly possessions were proven to be all of \$20, with another possible \$30 owed him by a room-mate [*Letters* 153].)

So, when the need was urgent to complete a volume, Carman would sift through what he had, or turn to the contents of a trunk he had with him, or one he had left at his sister's place in Massachusetts, or even, later on, at the Kings' home in New York or Connecticut. He would develop the image or theme that sparked his imagination, selecting current poems and older ones, pursuing the thread in new ones. By this time, about 1903-1904, he was doing something similar in prose, collecting essays and articles on art and nature he had written seven or eight years earlier and organizing them for publication in two volumes, *The Kinship of Nature* and *The Friendship of Art*.

Carman continued this publication pattern more or less for the remainder of his life. In 1910, he seemed to have turned to his collection for direct financial rescue. Having reached the limits, at least temporarily, of his poetic and prosaic inspiration, he was forced to try to realize the benefit both of his popularity as a poet and of the beauty of his well-crafted books. He began to sell off some of his pamphlets, first editions, and even broadsheets and manuscripts—such as he had hung on to, anyway. A baffled Carman learned that Carmanophiles or just plain bibliophiles were paying up to \$32 for certain pamphlets from the nineties (*Letters* 182). When James Carlton Young, a book collector and philanthropist, contacts him in October 1910, Carman replies:

Manuscripts? You shall have them indeed, and welcome. I would rather you have them as a small mark of friendship, than to see them bartered about. It is immensely flattering, of course, to achieve the distinction of a place in the book-auction lists; but I am always . . . a little inclined to cry 'What *is* the use of buying that old rubbish? Here is a brand new poem, so *much* better!'—Ah, if I could only open up an auction room for the sale of my own productions! (*Letters* 181)

During this period, Carman was consciously pursuing the expression of his Unitarian philosophy in his work. Partly as a result of this, demand for his current poetry and prose was dwindling. He engaged in various projects with Mary Perry King—the lyrical pageants “Daughters of Dawn” and “Earth Deities,” for example, which finally appeared in 1913 and 1914 only after Carman had offered the manuscripts repeatedly to publishers. In the end, his friend Mitchell Kennerly took them on as a personal favour to Carman. Few copies were printed, and fewer sold.

Carman gave away many of his manuscripts and limited-run books as gifts, and, as we have seen, sold others when he was desperate. Occasionally he lost track of their whereabouts. Sometimes errant manuscripts would just turn up, and Carman himself was hard-pressed to recapture them. Mary Hathaway, who lived as a child for a time in the former Carman home in Fredericton, reveals in a memoir that Carman's early verse was in a locked cupboard in the house, and that these manuscripts came into her possession (Carman Papers, National Archives of Canada). She treasured them, reading and re-reading them. She did not tell Carman, who visited occasionally, that she had them until some ten years later. Carman immediately asked for them, and although she surrendered them, she kept one or two to give to her children. I do not yet know how or if Carman used these poems, or what became of them, although they may be the same manuscripts given by Carman, on one of his myriad travels, to his cousin Isabel St. John Bliss to hold for him (Pacey Papers, National Archives of Canada). Even Carman's books in other people's hands wandered: Teddy Roosevelt told Roberts that he had taken two books with him for solace on the Vice-Presidential campaign trail: Horace's *Odes* and Carman's *By the Aurelian Wall* (Carman Papers, Queens).

A final challenging dimension of Carman's arriving and departing poems is one I have already hinted at: his visiting and re-visiting of titles as well as themes. There was, for example, a pamphlet "Green Book of the Bards" (1898) five years before a book of the same name. The Sappho poems appeared in three different guises between 1902 and 1903 (*Sappho: Lyrics*, 1902; *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics*, 1903; *A Vision of Sappho*, 1903). In 1912, during those barren years, Carman published still another volume of *Vagabondia* poems (a fourth). The title *Echoes from Vagabondia* is poignantly apt: the poet's voice is thin and far away; he is hard to hear and to see.

Carman did not seem to know which veins of his works were most worth re-visiting—or his publisher could not be persuaded to concur in some of his assessments. Although the enormous popularity and many re-printings of the first three *Vagabondia* volumes would seem to argue with me, it is the *Sappho* poems, written in 1902, that are of such lyrical power that they are well worth re-printing.³ In one of these *Sappho* poems, the persona cries out:

How soon will all my lovely days be over,
And I no more be found beneath the sun,—
Neither beside the many-murmuring sea,
Nor where the plain-winds whisper to the reeds . . .

. . .
For I am eager, and the flame of life
Burns quickly in this fragile lamp of clay.
Passion and love and longing and hot tears
Consume this mortal Sappho, and too soon
A great wind from the dark will blow upon me,
And I be no more found in the fair world,
For all the reach of the revolving moon
And patient shine of ever lasting stars.

(67)

In this poem (which, coincidentally and perhaps ironically, is easy to pinpoint as to composition and publication—Carman dated it December 12, 1902) the literary biographer can find all Carman’s power in a lyric voice that announces its passion as it mourns its transience. The image of vagrancy is there in the eye that wanders seeking the soon-to-be dead Sappho, and in the image of the revolving moon. The counterpoint to these—the implied eternal destiny that the vagabond seeks—is in the closing image of the everlasting stars.

Carman’s vagabond manuscripts, his repeated motifs and echoes in theme and title, the elusive tracery they sketch, are really a metonymy for his life. Even his final publication, *Sanctuary: Sunshine House Sonnets*, evades the imaginary “definitive” grasp of the biographer. Published in New Canaan in 1929, about six months after his death, these sonnets are welcome testament to a renewed lyric voice in Carman near the end of his life. The haunting beauty of the *Low Tide* poem of his youth is there; so is the ineffable passion of the *Sappho* lyrics, and the longing wanderlust urge as well, though more subtle than before.

Here is a fragment from “Sorcery,”⁴ one of Carman’s late sonnets:

A breath of wind comes ruffling the smooth lake
And strews the white plum-blossoms on the grass,
Stirring old transports, and is still again.

(*Sanctuary* 7)

Yet even here, echoes, reflections and chimeras. Four of the sonnets in *Sanctuary* were published in 1916 thirteen years earlier by Small Maynard as a Christmas card from Carman and Mary Perry King to their friends (438 copies). Even more tantalizing—if not maddening—is that I recently uncovered evidence that Mary Perry made silent alterations to these last manuscripts of Carman’s before she and their friend Padraic Colum pub-

lished them in New Canaan. But this is matter for another facet of Carman's life story which I am in the process of reconstructing.

One could wish that Carman had been less of a vagabond, at least with his manuscripts—but that very indeterminacy and elusiveness is part of what makes his good poems what they are, uniquely evocative and haunting, and what makes the attempt at writing his life so fascinating.

Notes

- 1 This essay was developed from a paper that I delivered before the Bibliographical Society of Canada, to which I am grateful for support and encouragement. To the staff at the Archives and Special Collections at Queen's University, the University of New Brunswick and the National Library and Archives of Canada, I am grateful for their ongoing assistance in the larger project of the critical biography.
- 2 In her rather unnoticed and somewhat problematic *Bliss Carman: Quest and Revolt* (1985), Muriel Miller reveals that Carman excised several stanzas on the advice of the editor of the *Atlantic*. This obviously alters the critical and biographical perspective. I shall offer elsewhere my analysis with respect to these changes; this work is currently in process of completion.
- 3 D.M.R. Bentley and others have done valuable work in keeping these poems in readers' minds, and in giving them insightful interpretation. See, for example, Bentley, "Threefold in Wonder: Bliss Carman's *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics*."
- 4 I have briefly made this case elsewhere by citing among others a fragment of this same sonnet. See McGillivray, "The Popular and Critical Reputation and Reception of Bliss Carman" in *Bliss Carman: a Reappraisal*.

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