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"You Woman-Hearted, Poet-Brained Wonder Worker!": The Poetic Dialogue of Love between Ethelwyn Wetherald and Helena Coleman

by Jennifer Chambers

"My own Dear, I don't know how to tell you how these last verses affect me. I turn from one to another and back again, all the time feeling little prickly thrills travelling back and limbs and even tingling in my fingers. You woman-hearted, poet-brained wonder-worker!" (Wetherald letter to Coleman, 12 July 1917). So wrote Ethelwyn Wetherald to fellow poet Helena Coleman, upon reading her manuscript for *Marching Men*, a collection of war poems, in 1917. Wetherald's response to Coleman is effusive, and shows both her admiration for Coleman's poetry, and her love for Coleman as well. Biographical, critical, and poetic evidence confirm that Wetherald and Coleman had a close, long-term friendship from 1906 to 1940, although they probably met some time earlier.[1] Extant letters and poems give us insight into their loving friendship and the conditions under which it thrived. Theirs was a covert queer desire, a kind often overlooked in Canadian love poetry of the early twentieth century.

Wetherald, the better-known of the two, is usually remembered as a nature poet rather than a love poet. This is perhaps surprising, given that many of Wetherald's poems are about love in various manifestations– young love, heterosexual love, lesbian love, love of God, loving at a distance. She shows a deftness of style and an originality of thought on the subject, though it is impossible to find contemporary critical opinion that credits her for it. This critical disregard of her love poetry probably has two sources. First, Wetherald cultivated a "poet in the trees" persona that was easy for critics, in their articles about her nature poetry, to focus on; and second, Canadian criticism on early poetry tends to elevate nature poetry above other poetry. The connection between landscape and national character or nationalism in general has, I would argue, made nature poetry the focus of much Canadian poetic criticism.[2] Indeed, "a major reason for the

concentration on the attractions and horrors of the country's landscape and seasons in early long poems on Canada," according to D.M.R. Bentley, "was the conviction that climate and scenery have a formative effect on individual and national character" (309).

Canadian nationalism, in the post-Confederation era, embraced the stereotype of female character as the moral standard, with women, therefore, as the standard-bearer. J. W. Bengough's popular "Miss Canada" caricatures, for example, promoted ideals of respectable womanhood inseparable from middle-class morality and upright national character. Women, often thought to be incorruptible and without sexual interest (outside of marriage), were portrayed as reflective of more noble natures; thus, the mirroring of a pastoral ideal with nature itself finds its expression in female character, the guardian of a nation's moral fibre. "The very strength of respectability and nationalism," George L. Mosse writes, "their appeal, and the needs they filled, meant that those who stood apart from the norms of society were totally condemned" (186). It is clear that Wetherald and Coleman abided by popular expectations, which paradoxically provided them with social respectability.

In their comments on Wetherald, contemporaneous critics tended to dwell on her reclusive life on the family farm, and particularly the tree house they called Camp Shelbi, built by her brothers as a writing retreat for Wetherald. She composed many of her poems in the treehouse, and occasionally slept there on hot summer nights. It quickly became linked to her literary image.[3] It appealed to critics' sensibilities that Wetherald was dwelling in the natural environment of trees writing poetry because it suggested a symbiotic relationship between her life and her work; it may well have also made her seem eccentric. The titles of Wetherald's collections of poetry–*The House of Trees and Other Poems* (1895), *The Last Robin and Other Poems* (1907), and *Tree-Top Mornings* (1921)–also link her with nature. The titles appear to play into the critics' tendency to romanticize her as living among the trees, and this representation may have been deliberate on Wetherald's part.

Rather than the nature poetry for which Wetherald is usually remembered, this article focuses on selections of Wetherald's love poetry and letters, and in particular the poetic dialogue on love and distance between Wetherald and Helena Coleman that solicits a queer reading. Attempting to discern sexual identity or evidence of queer desire in historical personages is difficult, since there is often the temptation to read these relationships in terms of more modern identity formations, and because aspects of private relationships are never fully recoverable. Given the prevailing het-

eronormative ideology of the early twentieth century, and the candid expressions of love and desire in Wetherald and Coleman's written exchanges, it is likely that their love poetry was in part overlooked to avoid nervous public discussion of what would have been considered too risqué to print, and perhaps best omitted to protect various reputations: critics were often loathe to deal with the possibility of homosexual themes lest they implicate themselves.[4] In any case, lesbian relationships were not often thought possible, a result both of women's subordinate social status and of the fact (at least in Canada, prior to 1929) that women were not legally "persons," capable of sexual expression apart from men. With this in mind, it is easier to begin to understand the public silence on female homosexuality in the early twentieth century not only in legal terms, but also in public terms that include, in this case, expressions of love through poetry. As critic Karen Dubinsky says, "In a culture that denied full political and economic citizenship to women, it is not surprising that women were denied cultural and legal control over their sexuality" (29). While an examination of selected letters and love poems by Wetherald and Coleman reveals their relationship, it also shows them to be poets of greater breadth than is usually granted. Such a consideration will lead us to "read" both them and their works differently than they have traditionally been read, and thus provide a more diverse picture of early Canada than is usually recalled.

Because Wetherald and Coleman have been regarded as minor Canadian poets who are relatively unknown, brief biographical sketches will help to introduce them. Agnes Ethelwyn Wetherald was born in Rockwood, Ontario on April 26, 1857, the sixth of eleven children. For most of her life, she lived on the family farm in Chantler, near Fenwick, on the Niagara Peninsula, although she was educated outside the home first at the Friends Boarding School at Union Springs, New York, and later at Pickering College in Ontario. When she was seventeen, she sold her first poem to *St. Nicholas Magazine*, a periodical for young people published in New York (Wetherald "Reminiscences," xi; Hale 268). From 1880-82, Wetherald published a series of short stories in *Rose-Belford's Canadian Monthly.* In 1886, she began contributing essays and sketches to the Toronto newspaper, the *Globe*. She also edited a women's magazine, *Wives and Daughters* in London, Ontario. She co-authored her only novel, *An Algonquin Maiden: A Romance of the Early Days of Upper Canada* with Graeme Mercer Adam in 1887. Wetherald continued writing poetry, and in 1894 she published more poems than any other poet in the *Youth's Companion* (McMullen "Agnes," 342).

Wetherald filled a short-term editorial position at *The Ladies' Home Journal* in Philadelphia. At the same time, she was hired to assist Forrest Morgan, editor of a series of volumes entitled *The World's Best Literature*, for a year (Wetherald "Reminiscences," xvii). Morgan hoped Wetherald would stay in Philadelphia, something that is a credit to the quality and volume of her editorial work for him, but, as Wetherald wrote, "I longed for home–for the woods and fields, the countryside around an old farmhouse, the place called 'The Tall Evergreens'" (Wetherald qtd. in Hale 268). Wetherald had the opportunity to become a renowned North American journalist and editor, but she chose to write poetry in Canada instead.

Upon her return home, in quick succession, further volumes of Wetherald's poetry were published. In 1902, Wetherald published a second collection of poetry, *Tangled in Stars*. This was followed by the collection *The Radiant Road* that came out in 1904. In 1905, she wrote the introduction for John Garvin's edition of *The Collected Poems of Isabella Valancy Crawford*. In 1907, a longer compilation, *The Last Robin: Lyrics and Sonnets* was published. It included many of the poems from her shorter works as well as new poems.

When Wetherald was in her fifties, she began to care for a baby, Dorothy, who at six months old, was taken in by Wetherald; she was officially adopted by her in 1914, and Dorothy was raised at Fenwick by Wetherald (Rungeling 68). After Dorothy's adoption, Wetherald wrote more children's verse than other kinds of poetry, and she rarely published. In 1921, Wetherald published her last individual collection of poetry–all children's verse–entitled *Tree-Top Mornings*. A final collection of Wetherald's poetry*, Lyrics and Sonnets*, appeared in 1931, edited by John Garvin. She lived her later years reclusively, and "deafness rather increased the solitude in which she lived at her country home" (Bernhardt n.pag.). Ethelwyn Wetherald died at the age of 82 on March 9, 1940.

Helena Coleman is a little-known writer whose life and poetry intertwines with Wetherald's. She was born in Newcastle, Ontario on April 28, 1860, three years almost to the day after Wetherald. She had three brothers, and was the only daughter of Reverend Francis Coleman. At the age of eleven, Coleman was stricken with polio, and she walked with "the aid of crutches" for the rest of her life (Pomeroy "Salute," 262). Coleman attended the Ontario Ladies' College at Whitby, and graduated with the gold medal in music. After graduation, she spent a year in Germany studying music. When she returned, she took up the position of the Head of the Department of Music at the Ontario Ladies' College. In 1892, Coleman retired from her position, in order to devote herself more fully to her writ-

ing. She published many short stories and poems in the *Atlantic Monthly*, under pseudonyms such as Helen Saxon and Winifred Cotter. In the early 1900s, Coleman joined the Tennyson Club of Toronto, where her pen names became known to a small group of women writers. They helped her to get her first collection of poetry published in Canada, *Songs and Sonnets*, in 1906, and although publishers had difficulty persuading her to do so, she published under her own name. *Songs and Sonnets* was successful enough to earn a second printing in 1907 (Pomeroy "Salute," 262).

As an adult, Coleman shared a home with her brother, "the eminent geologist" Dr. A.P. Coleman (Pomeroy "Salute," 262). She also raised another brother's daughter, Helen, with whom she developed a strong emotional bond. Coleman's literary archives show that she was an extensive traveller. She sometimes accompanied her brother A.P. Coleman in his travels, and otherwise travelled with her niece to visit her brother Lucius on his ranch in Alberta, or her brother Albert in California. Helena Coleman had many friends and acquaintances, and she took a particular interest in literary women. The Coleman family cottage on Pinehurst Island, one of the Thousand Islands near Kingston, Ontario, became a gathering retreat for women writers. Later in life, by 1928, Coleman was confined to a wheelchair. In September 1949, Coleman's niece, Helen, pre-deceased her, which resulted in Coleman's long, final illness (Pomeroy "Salute," 262). On December 7, 1953, Helena Coleman died in her home in Toronto at the age of 93 (Pomeroy "Salute," 262-66).

In July 1911, Wetherald spent a fortnight at Helena Coleman's family cottage on Pinehurst Island. During this particular vacation, Wetherald was one of several women, including poet Marjorie Pickthall, New Zealand author Joan Lyttleton (who wrote under the pen name G. B. Lancaster), two nieces of Coleman's, and of course Coleman herself. This visit took on special significance for Wetherald. She wrote of it at length in a private letter to editor and friend John Garvin (29 July 1911), and again publicly in the introduction to her collected verse *Lyrics and Sonnets,* in 1931.

Members of the literary community seemed to be well aware of the significance of Pinehurst Island and of Coleman to Wetherald, and it is in part due to their subtle but oft-repeated references to Coleman in articles on Wetherald that the connection between them became clear. Indeed, critics mention Coleman in almost every article on Wetherald, albeit briefly. Katherine Hale, John Garvin's wife, in her article about Wetherald's life, writes "of her close friendship with the distinguished poet, Helena Coleman, of Toronto," and she lists Coleman first among Wetherald's friends and correspondents (Hale 269). Because Wetherald had so many promi-

nent literary correspondents–among them poets William Wilfred Campbell, Duncan Campbell Scott, and editor E.W. Thomson–Hale's specific and primary mention of Coleman stands out in this context. In her article "Pinehurst Island" (1956), Elsie Pomeroy likewise describes Wetherald as "an intimate friend of Helena Coleman" (566). Pomeroy lists many of the guests to Pinehurst Island, including poet and writer Agnes Maule Machar, who appears in a photograph alongside Ethelwyn Wetherald, Marjorie Pickthall, and G.B. Lancaster. The photograph accompanying Pomeroy's article is evidence that Wetherald visited Pinehurst more than once, since in both of Wetherald's extant accounts of the two-week vacation in 1911, Machar is never mentioned as one of those present, as she certainly would have been.

In the letter to John Garvin, Wetherald says of her time at Pinehurst Island, "It was a glorious fortnight, packed with intense pleasures–literary, social, and picturesque" (Wetherald letter to Garvin, 29 July 1911). She makes it clear that she and Helena Coleman had not visited each other in some time, and this distance would be a continuing characteristic of their friendship: "I had not seen Helena Coleman since the fall my book came out [probably 1907].[5] She upbraided me (between kisses) for never coming to see her in Toronto. She is everything that is dear and noble and has a knack of saying original, unexpected things that makes me love her more than ever" (Wetherald letter to Garvin, 29 July 1911). The detail of being scolded "between kisses" shows both the love and the longing in absence between Wetherald and Coleman, and it further indicates Wetherald's willingness to share intimate personal details with John Garvin.

In both the letter to Garvin and the introductory "Reminiscences of the Poet" in *Lyrics and Sonnets*, Wetherald explains the sleeping arrangements at Pinehurst:

> I had the most charming little front bedroom, with a wide open door giving on a balcony overlooking the river. On one side of me was H.C.'s room and on the other Marjorie Pickthall's, and as the partitions were thin varnished boards reaching about halfway up, we three had most delightful talks in the early morning and while dressing. M.P. is lovely in soul and body–pure undiluted genius. She is very dear to me and I can never be grateful enough for this opportunity of knowing her. (Wetherald letter to Garvin, 29 July 1911)

Wetherald's description of Marjorie Pickthall suggests the respect and admiration she felt toward her. The link between Pickthall and Coleman is explained by Alex Kizuk: "At the University of Toronto, [Pickthall] attracted the friendship and encouragement of the older poet Helena Cole-

man" (15). In a separate article, Pickthall is described as an "intimate friend" of "Helen Coleman, niece of Helena Coleman" (Relke 31). The use of the term "intimate friend" by early Canadian critics appears to have been their coded way of intimating loving relationships between women.[6]

Besides Wetherald's lengthy letter to Garvin with regard to her time at Pinehurst Island, a few incomplete letters[7] from Wetherald to Coleman and a photograph of Dorothy Wetherald (Ethelwyn's daughter, age five, circa 1915), have been left in Helena Coleman's literary archives.[8] There are brief mentions of Coleman in Wetherald's other extant correspondence.[9] In a letter to an unnamed male British cousin (to whom she refers only as "Dear Cousin") Wetherald engages in self-examination, admitting, "One serious defect in my own character, which you have surely discovered by this time, is that I am almost uncontrollably honest: I'm a dreadful failure in the art of concealing my emotions and opinions" (Wetherald letter to Cousin, 26 January 1911). In the same letter, Wetherald explains the difference in her friendships with Laura Durand and Helena Coleman:

> Did you ever have the odd experience of showing one side of your nature to one friend, and another side to another? One of my friends, named Laura Durand, is a bundle of nerves, and [is] almost always in the throes of discouragement, apprehension, discontent–something poignant. She considers me in the light of a Bread Poultice. I can always soothe and comfort her. Another friend, Helena Coleman, is a singularly well-balanced woman. Fine intellect, great insight and sympathy, almost perfect self-mastery. Yet there is something inert about her. She lets her grand faculties lie dormant. She considers me her Thorn–says I pierce and prick her into doing things. Perhaps I have a special gift for finding what each individual needs and giving him that. (Wetherald letter to Cousin 26 January 1911)

After praising Coleman for her many good qualities, Wetherald makes a small criticism of her reserve. Wetherald expresses her belief that Coleman is an underachiever, and she sees her role as encouraging her friend to accomplish more. This encouragement and longing for her friend to live up to her potential suggests Wetherald's devotion to and emotional investment in Coleman. Her criticism reflects a desire for her to seek and to be more than she already is, and shows an intimate investment that contrasts with the terms of her friendship with Durand.

In a letter to Coleman in 1935, after some thirty years of friendship, Wetherald again employs the "Thorn" image:

> My Dearest, don't hesitate to bring your book of sonnets out. Everyone who knows you knows that egoism is regrettably–almost criminally–absent from your make-up. […] The more I study these sonnets of yours the more the beauty of their meaning seeps through. The veriest dolt could not accuse you of conceit. I'll be your Thorn in earnest if you don't. (Wetherald letter to Coleman, 5 February 1935)

She signs this letter "All my heart to you, Thorn." Although there are gaps of time where no extant correspondence exists, such continuity in nicknaming, as well as the space of years between letters suggests a continuing and long-standing devotion and intimacy. Of the extant letters from Wetherald to Coleman in the various archives, she never addresses "Helena" or signs "Ethelwyn," but rather she uses nicknames or terms of endearment. In this way, their correspondence is perhaps coded, certainly personalized, although the address and handwriting disclose the writer's identity.

In the first of two existing letters from Wetherald to Coleman about Coleman's manuscript for *Marching Men*, Wetherald addresses "Dear and Ever Dear," explaining her excitement at having received the first batch of poems:

> The precious package came safely, but I dared not open it that night for fear that some of the things that *you* call "weak and ineffective" would scratch sleep from my eyes and keep my head as Emerson says, boiling on the pillow. Then next morning I would not mix your inspirations with a lot of groveling cares so kept the treasure-box unopened with such a delicious feeling of riches in reserve and of getting my hands at last on what almost threatened to escape me altogether. (Wetherald letter to Coleman, 22 June 1917)

Wetherald's exhilaration at receiving Coleman's "precious package" of poetry, her histrionic suggestion that she might not be able to sleep should she read them before bed, and even the description of the package as a "treasure-box […] with such a delicious feeling of riches in reserve" certainly dramatize Wetherald's welled-up anticipation and deep emotion. This vocabulary of desire is concomitant with an expression of distant love, of shared feeling evoked in poems. The material reality of the relationship between Wetherald and Coleman became their poems themselves. The exchange of words and metaphors about love in letters and poetry became the dialogue and foundation of their love for one another, as I will further examine in discussing their poetry.

The letter continues, and Wetherald explains more practically that she is in a position to criticize Coleman's poetry because she has not seen a line

of any of the poems before, and also because Coleman has been sending her "the best of recent war poetry," making her well-versed in contemporary poetry on the same themes as Coleman's. After preparing Coleman for criticism, Wetherald continues:

> And now after writing these callously judicial words I feel like plunging at you and telling you that I have read these things with quickened heart and increasing mist in the eyes. You dear blind Bat! Every one of these *takes hold*. They are imperfect, of course. I'll hunt up flaws here and there; but the truth remains that everyone who reads any one of them is enriched, ennobled, and saddened with the sadness that is nearest to our divinity. You have felt these things deeply, sincerely. They are *you*. (Wetherald letter to Coleman, 22 June 1917)

Although it is not preserved in the archives, Coleman must have responded to Wetherald's tactic of preparing her for harsh criticism only to give her nothing but praise, as a letter from Wetherald to Coleman, dated a couple of weeks later, intimates:

> I turn with a sense of renewed pleasure to thee. […]
>
> Dear, I did not consciously get you all prepared for the worst in order that the best might have more telling effect. As I look back it seems to me that I was in kind of a grudging fault finding mood and that if I had to do it over again I should practise less restraint in the matter of praise.
>
> You are perfectly right in saying that it is not the want of feeling that is wrong with your work but of freedom and facility. That is almost the lightest praise I have given you.
>
> Your feeling is Deep, deep as lovers' eyes
>
> Filled with naphtha fiery-sweet and it flows between "narrow adamantine walls." [10]
>
> When you consider that 999 verse writers out of 1000 are fairly mushy–gruely–with freedom and facility you should rejoice that you have escaped those pitfalls. It doesn't matter how much you fuss over them as long as the reader can't detect the fussiness. And besides what you call "fuss" is plain hard work. […]
>
> But I am beginning to question whether self-consciousness is not your blessing rather than a drawback. You are an intensive poet, putting so much of yourself in your writing that your best work is nearly all H.C. It could not possibly be mistaken for the inspiration of anyone else. That is the chief reason why I know you are the Genuine Thing. […] Your spirit, in spite of its handicaps, perhaps because of them, is thrillingly alive. […] I did not expect much from this last budget. I thought of course you would send the best first. (Wetherald letter to Coleman, 12 July 1917)

Wetherald's support of, and confidence in, Coleman and her poetry is clear. The style of the letter, with the poetic interjection, "Your feeling is Deep, deep as lovers' eyes," is unlike Wetherald's correspondence to others, which tends to be business-like and brief or full of the details of everyday life. The sexual imagery of the volatile feeling, "[f]illed with naphtha fiery-sweet" that may be seen as female, as it flows between "narrow adamantine walls'' may be subconscious–or not.

The thrill described by Wetherald on reading Coleman's war poetry, and Wetherald's gushing praise for Coleman herself show a depth of feeling and an emotional investment that are well beyond a colleague offering advice to a fellow poet; surely, love is expressed. Wetherald's address "Dear Admirer of Pen Pricks" mocks Coleman about the missing criticism in the previous letter, and it also plays on the role of the "Thorn" that Wetherald assumed in relation to Coleman, who is the recipient of the "pricks" of the thorn.

Both Wetherald and Coleman suffered from feeling inferior as poets, and yet these two writers persevered in their writing, adding to the cultural landscape of early twentieth-century Canada, not only in terms of love poetry, but in terms of war poetry in Coleman's case, and nature poetry as well. Wetherald's letters, her "Reminiscences of the Poet," and articles about Pinehurst Island are the tangible evidence of the relationship between the two women. The letters cloak Wetherald's private expressions of love in terms of playfulness and literary encouragement, and the poems show a heightened dialogue on love, and a reluctant but resigned acceptance of love at a distance.

Formally, both Wetherald and Coleman wrote traditional lyrics and sonnets. As Karen Dubinsky explains, the cultural climate of turn-of-the-century Canada in terms of a woman's place, family, and love required an unambiguous morality:

> Historians have tended to interpret the turn-of-the-century social purity movement as an Anglo-Saxon, middle-class response to increasing fears about immigration, the growth of the working class, and changes in social and family life brought on by industrialization and urbanization. Yet as other commentators have recently argued, moral regulation also involved the creation of a particular kind of citizen. The emerging state in nineteenth-century Canada was concerned not just with the formation of political and economic 'subjectivities,' but also with "the formation of a moral subjectivity that would not only be congruent with but also would provide the psychological basis for what was known as nation-building" (Valverde and Weir, "Strug-

> gles" 33). Nations required factories, workers, and transportation systems, but they also required citizens, subjects with 'character.' (30)

This idea of Canada as a country with citizens of "character" meant a presumed heterosexual norm, and women were expected to abide by their wifely and maternal roles. In their lives, to all appearances, Wetherald and Coleman conformed to the idea of the morality of the Canadian woman. They kept their relationship with one another at arm's length, and they both took on the maternal duty, Wetherald by adopting and raising Dorothy, and Coleman by raising her niece Helen. In their poetry, however, they managed to express both their compliance arising out of a love of God and also the strains of that conformity.

Certain love poems by the two express a dialogic sequence that has so far been overlooked. As I have suggested, Wetherald's and Coleman's letters and some of their poems can be read as an intimate dialogue on or an affirmation of their love for one another. I begin with Coleman's sonnet "When Thou Art Distant" because it was published first, in her collection *Songs and Sonnets* in 1906. In it, she describes how distance intensifies reflection on the absent love:

> When thou art distant, then art thou most near,
> For though in thy dear presence I am fain
> With my great joy forever to remain,
> Yet when thou art no longer with me here,
> The sum of thee, like music fine and clear,
> Steals in upon my being till I gain
> So close a sense of thee that I attain
> A new relationship divinely dear.
>
> 'Tis in the silent hour we most discern
> The face of our beloved, and realize
> The deeps of our own heart; 'tis when we yearn
> With unspent passion that the spirit-eyes
> Unclose to Heavenly vision, and we learn
> Those narrow ways that lead to Paradise.
> (Coleman 133)

Coleman explores the idea that withdrawal, absence, or separation in love stimulate a yearning that forces a realization about "the deeps of our own heart" and its "unspent passion." It is in longing for her loved one that the "narrow ways that lead to Paradise" are disclosed. It may be that Coleman is suggesting the need for her and Wetherald to maintain their love at a dis-

tance because of the social constraints of the time; or, she may be adopting a celebratory attitude, that the dutiful distance of lovers (and its necessary chastity) will reap rewards for them in the afterlife.[11] This latter reading is the most likely, though another possible interpretation is to consider the ending not as celebratory but rather as critical of the "narrow ways that lead to Paradise," as an imposition on the lovers in order to secure their place in heaven. In this reading of the poem, Coleman is being not only paradoxical, but also defiant in affirming that distance only makes her lover feel closer to her, because no matter what the social conditions demand, her passion increases.

Coleman's celebration of the purity and vastness of loving at a distance was echoed by Wetherald. Both Coleman's *Songs and Sonnets* and Wetherald's *The Last Robin* were published by William Briggs one year apart. Wetherald's poem "Good-Bye," first published in *The Last Robin* in 1907, is in some ways a more emotional variation on Coleman's theme of passion between separated lovers:

> Good-bye, my love! Though multitudes of years
> And miles and faces come between us twain,
> Though I should never hear your voice again,
> Still are you mine, still mine! Not by my tears–
> You never made them flow–nor by my fears,
> For I was fearless born; but by the rain
> Of joys that turned to seas of sunny grain
> This heart that showed aforetime slender spears.
>
> Now on my clouded day of life shall come
> No loss. The streams of gold that poured from suns
> Unseen have turned to gold this harvest heart;
> I am all sunlight-coloured, and the sum
> Of by-gone happiness that through me runs
> Will make you mine forever, though apart.
> (Wetherald, *LR* 183)

The themes of love and separation from the beloved are highlighted in the opening line, "Good-bye, my love"; and, with the strong mid-line caesura, the break in the line imitates the separation of lovers. The speaker then imagines what may happen over time and distance, bereft of the connection of touch, sight, and sound of the beloved, yet still the speaker affirms their togetherness. The certainty of the continuing connection with the departed lover shows conviction, and the repetition shows defiance: "still are you mine, still mine!" Love is nourished, in the absence of the lover's physical

presence, by the recollection of an encounter in the past; an image of cultivation or growth through a "rain of joys" brings the heart's formerly "slender spear" to a fecund maturity. The imagery may allude to a sexual encounter of some kind, an aspect of the relationship that was surprisingly and discreetly "unseen"; or, perhaps a sexual climax, powerful enough and sustaining enough that the "by-gone happiness" binds the lovers to one another forever, regardless of distance.

The sestet develops the rain imagery, the "clouded day of life" that suggests an ending, or the passage of time, or what must remain masked in the relationship. Still, the speaker affirms that there is "no loss." Instead, she focuses on the "streams of gold" that they have developed in the past. The separation between lover and beloved is inevitable at the poem's end, and the lovers rely on "by-gone happiness" to sustain them.

As "Good-bye" was published the year after Coleman's *Songs and Sonnets*, it is not unreasonable to suppose that it was Wetherald's public poetic response to "When thou art distant then art thou most near." In both poems, the word "sum" resonates with much the same significance at the moment in the poem when the speakers seek an optimistic outlook on the situation of loving at a distance. Coleman writes, "The sum of thee, like music fine and clear / Steals in upon my being…"; and Wetherald writes, "…the sum / Of by-gone happiness that through me runs / Will make you mine forever, though apart." The imagery of rain in "Good-bye," both as nurturing and sorrowful, shows the tension in striving for equanimity in terms of separation and love. In other words, the speaker of "Good-bye" regrets the idea that she must love at a distance even while she affirms the depth of connection.

Wetherald's and Coleman's variations on themes of loving at a distance are compelling. For one thing, they agree that long-term separation is integral to the relationship between the lover and beloved. There is both a temporal and a physical distance in the imagery of "Good-bye," as it takes time for the "rain of joy" to reap its harvest, and it is from "suns / Unseen" that the harvest occurred. While a love poem like John Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" laments the imminent separation of lovers and their inability to physically be together, in "Good-bye," the ideas of temporal and physical separation are set up as enhancements for the perpetuation of love, and so they are celebrated. The title indicates the poem is about parting, and yet the speaker is always confident about her connection with the beloved because she has 'blossomed' through knowing her. There is an optimistic tone in the poem, even though separation is required rather than chosen.

Wetherald's poem "To H.C." was published in *Lyrics and Sonnets* in 1931.[12] It offers compelling evidence that Wetherald loved Coleman, and it also offers an explanation for their affirmed separation from each other:

> Dear, I would be your friend, but not as those
> Whose eager breaths and hands are hot out-thrown;
> When you are far then are you most my own.
> I am as one who in the dawnlight goes
> Down dewy paths and finds the perfect rose
> And leaves it in the stillness all alone,
> God being with it. From its heart half blown
> His deepest and divinest thoughts unclose.
>
> Something from air and sky, from rain and sod
> You send across the hedge of reverence
> To me who see you only but to bless.
> Ah, when I leave you all alone with God
> It is as if my heart and soul and sense
> The more enclosed your spirit's loveliness!
> (Wetherald, *LS* 215)

"To H.C." suggests that the relationship between Wetherald and Coleman, or their feelings for one another, may have been complicated by their religious beliefs. Wetherald was raised as a Quaker, and Coleman was the daughter of a minister. Both women are mindful of religion and of what they present as the pure and higher love of God in their love poems to one another. The "H.C." of the title is unidentified, and readers might assume that Wetherald is addressing a man in her poem. Yet, there is little doubt that "To H.C." refers to Helena Coleman. In Wetherald's letter of July 29, 1911, she refers to Marjorie Pickthall as "M.P." and to Helena Coleman as "H.C." as the letter progresses. And a few years later, she writes, "You are an intensive poet, putting so much of yourself in your writing that your best work is nearly all H.C. It could not possibly be mistaken for the inspiration of anybody else" (Wetherald letter to Coleman, 12 July 1917). Furthermore, Coleman often signed letters "Yours, H.C." The "Dear," in the opening line is also gender-neutral and there is an eroticism in its opening lines, in which "hands are hot out-thrown." In qualifying that her friendship with H.C. cannot be physical, like other people's, the speaker implies that her feelings for H.C. are superior, on a higher plane than the banal, physical level; their love is purer because they maintain a platonic or intellectual commitment that supercedes the physical.

The third line of the poem, "When you are far then are you most my own," both expresses how separation emphasizes the depth of their love, and paraphrases the opening line of Coleman's poem, "When thou art distant, then art thou most near." The speaker in "To H.C." seeks isolated moments in which to discover love and friendship: "dewy paths" at "dawnlight" suggest a private or personal moment, perhaps even an inspirational moment where she finds "the perfect rose / And leaves it in the stillness all alone, / God being with it." It is in leaving H.C., symbolically the rose in the poem, that the speaker then receives "deepest and divinest" of spiritual thoughts.[13] This image echoes the description of an intimate moment shared with Coleman that Wetherald includes in her "Reminiscences of the Poet," published in the introduction to *Lyrics and Sonnets*. Wetherald concludes her "Reminiscences" with a memory of Coleman from Pinehurst Island:

> I remember in particular the Sunday morning when the cook wished to go to church. Miss Coleman and I rowed her across to Gananoque and while she went to her place of worship, we waited outside in the boat and talked of churches and creeds, of Christianity and the meaning of existence, of things that remind us we are infinite. The best of herself is what Helena Coleman gives in her talk as in her written prose and poetry. (Wetherald, "Reminiscences" xviii)

By ending her "Reminiscences" with this memory of Coleman, Wetherald both reinforces the importance of this relationship to her, and underscores the intellectual connection and religious understanding between them.

The octave of "To H.C." concludes with the invocation of God and the divine in a verse about distance and love, and this invocation proposes that the beloved, the rose, while "all alone," still has God with her. It is reminiscent of the conversation "of things that remind us we are infinite." Her love of H.C., maintained despite the paradoxically necessary distance, echoes her love of God; in the absence of physical presence, her love of H.C. becomes purer and more profound. The sestet develops this line of thought further, beginning with the ineffable sense of "Something […] / You send across the hedge of reverence" that the speaker receives from H.C. across the distance that separates them.

Through keeping their love at a distance, Wetherald and Coleman literarily sustain their connection through letters and poems. The poem ends with the speaker leaving H.C., thereby developing a greater understanding of her. The withdrawing speaker internalizes the "spirit" of H.C.–emotionally, religiously, and physically. Retreating in order to better "see" H.C.'s

spirit, and to make expansive what has been closed off to the speaker, promotes the necessity of distance for the full appreciation of a loved one. Without the freedom to love openly and publicly, Wetherald celebrates the virtues and possibilities of loving at a safe, socially acceptable distance. Given the identity of H.C. and the relationship between Coleman and Wetherald, the poem becomes an affirmation that the two women chose to live by a specific moral code. The poem "To H.C." is less effusive than "Good-bye," perhaps because by the time Wetherald wrote "To H.C." she and Coleman had long been living and loving at a distance.

In Coleman's *Songs and Sonnets,* further connections with Wetherald's poetry are evident. In both Coleman's and Wetherald's love poems, distance in love makes loving safe, even possible. Coleman's poem "Love's Higher Way" examines the humbling effects of exercising restraint in the expression of loving someone, and the parallel love of God that accompanies it. The poem begins robustly–"Constrain me not!"–and asks that the beloved understand that the speaker hides her face to "hide the overflow/ Of love" (Coleman 59). Immediately, the speaker requires "space" and "solitude" to thank God for allowing her such overwhelming feeling, and is always mindful of her devotion to God as well. Love "rolls the stone / From buried selves, and makes us part / Of all that was and is to be" (Coleman 60). In loving freely, and without constraint, mindful of God's presence and blessing, the speaker hopes to be led "past self into the wide, / Still reaches of eternal day" (Coleman 60). Threatened by her strong feelings of love, the speaker finds consolation in her love of God. Like Wetherald, Coleman expresses a mindfulness about God, divinity, and eternal life as she considers the overwhelming feeling of love.

In *Songs and Sonnets*, Coleman's love poems are usually gender-neutral; that is, the speaker addresses "thee" or "thou." The poem "Exiled" is probably about Pinehurst Island. It is possible–even quite likely–that Pinehurst Island, as a literary women's retreat, was a kind of sanctuary where women's love for one another was accepted and acceptable, an "exile" from heteronormative society and the limitations of social purity. In three stanzas, the speaker expresses longing to return to "the old home place" in summer. Places of exile are not usually places where one longs to be, unless of course they are somehow freer than normal society. In the final stanza, the poet uses suggestive vocabulary–"How my wanton pulse thrills"–to describe how she feels when she nostalgically reflects on the place (Coleman 19). The language communicates the anticipation and the tingling of the senses the speaker feels in remembering and in looking forward to revisiting the "exile."

The themes of distance in love recur throughout Wetherald's love poetry as well. Three sonnets from her collection *The Last Robin* show how she continued to muse on the theme. In "At Parting," she writes, "My soul goes after thee / […] My life with thine grows strong or fails or dies" (Wetherald, *LR* 185). The poem "In A Dark Hour" asserts, "The memory of days too sweet to last / Shall make my heart run o'er with joy again" (Wetherald, *LR* 186). And "Absence" uses floral imagery to suggest its transformative power: "Beneath thy touch the brown and yellow leaf / Turns to pink blossom, and the spring-bright boughs / Frame lovers running to each other's arms" (Wetherald, *LR* 170). Although the speaker is wilting and wasting away from absence, she is seasonally renewed and reborn through connection with the beloved. The metaphor of the leaf turning from brown to pink at the lover's touch is an example of inversion, made wonderfully sensuous because it turns the colour of living flesh rather than the green of leaves. Wetherald's nature metaphors are always warmly sensual, and sometimes subtly sexual, perhaps showing Wetherald's way of naturalizing what she could not or would not state explicitly in her poetry. Nature imagery is both conventional and familiar to readers, but it also provides metaphoric camouflage for all kinds of topics, including unconventional love.

In *Songs and Sonnets*, Coleman's sonnets entitled "At Parting" and "Absence" also speak of distance, love, and hope in memory; again, because Coleman's collection was published one year ahead of Wetherald's, Wetherald's poems echo Coleman's in title and theme. "At Parting" begins "Keep thou amidst the fulness of thy days / Some little space apart for thoughts of me" (Coleman 137). "Absence" is about how the speaker takes solace when her lover is distant and her day is "grieving" (Coleman 156). Both poets extol distance to achieve the purest, most profound type of love.

In their thematically similar love sonnets, Wetherald and Coleman created a dialogue that they alone, with perhaps a few other intimate friends, were fully aware of. In it, they affirmed the necessity for distance in their love, and quietly asserted their feelings for each other–perhaps as reassurance or affirmation, always under the guise of acceptable "female friendship"–but certainly there for attentive readers.

Early Canadian love poetry has often suffered critically because of its reputation for being sentimental and old-fashioned, and also because of its focus on individuals and lyrical verse rather than being linked with national character and landscape. In Canada, "[t]he ruling attitude of the time," writes W.H. New, "espoused a particular moral cause, rigid in its

interpretation of the factuality of historical models, absorbed in an idea of the universe as a clockwork unity, suspicious of art, and bombastic in judgment" (111-12). That attitude virtually prohibited the cultural production of non-heterosexual, non-family-oriented literary texts; in the cases of Wetherald's and Coleman's love poetry, I suggest that it deflected attention from their love poems. Coleman hid behind pseudonyms and used gender-neutral language when she published love poems under her own name. The perception of Wetherald as the "poet in the trees" gave her a safe pastoral literary image, and undoubtedly provided protective coloration for her non-traditional love poems.

Terry Castle argues, "The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night" (2). Such a shadowy history apparently suited the quiet sensibilities of Wetherald and Coleman, among other writers of the early twentieth century, who could write about their own experiences through traditional poetic genres and still maintain their reputations and status as writers. Through poetry, women could publicly express mutual love, though doing so meant they wrote themselves into the shadows. By using conventional genres and styles, they could maintain respectability. The love poems and letters between Wetherald and Coleman show the limited and careful conditions allowed for the expression of love and desire between women at the turn of the century in Canada, and they remind us of the need for a broader scope when reading early poetry and considering its diverse landscape.

Notes

1 The timeline here is based on letters, Wetherald's "Reminiscences of the Poet" in *Lyrics and Sonnets* (1931), and photographs. Wetherald's letter to John Garvin in 1911 says that she and Coleman had not seen one another since her book came out, in 1907, which is the earliest extant reference to their friendship. When and how they met remain elusive biographical details.

2 The link between early nature writing in Canadian travel literature and early tourist promotion suggests that nature was one way of distinguishing Canada, and of making it exotic or at least forging a kind of Canadian identity and potentially a sense of nationalism. Through critical writing on the Confederation Poets, who have received so much critical attention compared to other poets of the period, this connection between nature and national identity might better be seen. "Confederation poetry," W.H. New writes, "struggled with many Canadian dilemmas, especially those created by imperial conservatism, by the contrast between urban life and the values attached to rural poetic imagery, and the disparities between literary landscape conventions and empirical

landscapes" (120). As "the first distinctly Canadian school of writers," Francis Zichy writes, the Confederation poets "drew much of their inspiration from Canadian nature, but they were also trained in the classics and were cosmopolitan in their literary interests" (228).

3 Critics have made much of Wetherald, the nature poet, writing in the trees; see, for example, Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald's article on Wetherald, "Trees and a Poet." Roberts MacDonald, a sister of Charles G.D. Roberts, writes, "One is not surprised to find that Miss Wetherald has a material 'House of the Trees,' built in a huge willow near a stream, where she sleeps on sultry summer nights" (54).

4 It was not until 1969 that the Canadian federal government decriminalized sexual practices associated with homosexuality. Such reforms were included in the federal government's 1969 omnibus criminal reform bill, C-150, which was passed on May 14, 1969.

5 Wetherald is probably referring to 1907, when *The Last Robin* appeared. Her next collection of poetry, *Tree-Top Mornings* did not appear until 1921.

6 See Rictor Norton's "The Suppression of Lesbian and Gay History," *Gay History and Literature*, 5 April 2005 <http://www.infopt.demon.co.uk/suppress.htm>, for more on this subject. Norton examines the history of writers such as A.E. Housman, Anne Lister, George Eliot, and Countee Cullen, among others, who used some form of codification in letters, or whose letters have subsequently been suppressed because they suggest more than platonic same-sex friendship which has been deemed, often by literary executors or family members, as a threat to their literary reputations. The term "friend," as a cover for loving homosexual relationships, was at times used to avoid legal problems as well as judgment and discrimination.

7 It is interesting to note that the letters from Ethelwyn Wetherald to Helena Coleman in Helena Coleman's literary archives are incomplete. They can be identified as Ethelwyn Wetherald's by the address "Fenwick, ON" and by the penmanship. These letters are never addressed "Dear Helena" but, rather, they use terms of endearment such as "Dear and Ever Dear" or "Dear Admirer of Pen Pricks." The one complete letter is signed by "Thorn" in reference to Wetherald's poking and prodding Coleman to publish her poetry.

8 Helena Coleman's literary archives are held at Victoria University Library, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.

9 For example, in an early letter to a Mrs. Edgar (probably Helen Edgar, Pelham Edgar's wife) writing with respect to Marjorie Pickthall's poetry, Wetherald responds by discussing two poems sent to her by Pickthall, and a further poem "'The Lam of Poor Souls' [which] was copied for me by Miss Helena Coleman, who knows how much I appreciate Miss Pickthall's work" (Wetherald letter to Mrs. Edgar, 2 July 1910).

10 Wetherald alludes to two poems here. The first is a misquote of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "The Daemonic and the Celestial Love": "Deep, deep are loving eyes / Flowed with naphtha fiery sweet." The second is a reference to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Two Rivers" Part IV, which begins, "And thou, O River of To-morrow flowing / Between thy narrow adamantine walls."

11 This line is a Biblical allusion to Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

12 In the collection *Lyrics and Sonnets* (1931), John Garvin arranged the sonnets so that the similarly-themed "Good-Bye" directly precedes "To H.C.," the sonnet to Helena Coleman.

13 It is interesting to note the pattern developed by Wetherald of symbolizing herself as the thorn while Coleman is the rose in both correspondence and here in the poetry.

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