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PREFACE
On the Confederation Poets' Companionship with Nature: Contexts

(This is the first in a series of prefaces on environment in the work of the Confederation poets.)

> *These stern coasts, now thundered against by Atlantic storms, now wrapped in noiseless fogs, these overwhelming tides, these vast channels emptied of their streams, these weird reaches of flat and marsh and dike, should create a habit of openness to nature, and by contrast put a reproach upon the commonplace and the gross. Our climate with its swift extremes is eager and waking, and we should expect a sort of dry sparkle in our page, with a transparent and tonic quality in our thought. If environment is anything, our work can hardly prove tame.*
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> —*Charles G.D. Roberts, "The Outlook for Literature" (1886)*

> *We know that climatic and scenic conditions have much to do with the moulding of national character. In the climate of this country we have the pitiless severity of the climate of Sweden with the sunshine and the sky of the north of Italy, a combination not found in the same degree anywhere else in the world. The northern winters of Europe are seasons of terror and gloom; our winters are seasons of glittering splendour and incomparable richness of colour. At the same time we have the utmost diversity of scenery, a country exhibiting every variety of beauty and grandeur. A Canadian race, we imagine, might combine the energy, the seriousness, the perseverance of the Scandinavians with something of the gayety, the elasticity, the quickness of spirit of the south. If these qualities could be united in a literature, the result would indeed be something novel and wonderful.*
>
> —*Archibald Lampman, "Two Canadian Poets" (1891)*

When Roberts and Lampman suggested that the scenery, climate, and atmospheric qualities of Canada might one day give rise to a Canadian national character and, hence, to a distinctive Canadian literature, they were not merely echoing statements made about New England by Washington Irving[1] but, like Irving himself, articulating a concept of environmental determinism whose roots lay in Locke's theory of mental development and Herder's theory of national identity. Since "our imagination nourishes itself" "[u]pon the impressions which our senses gather in during childhood," "[i]t takes the colour that it feeds on" runs Roberts's version of Locke in "The Savour of the Soil" (1892); thus, "individuality is much the product of the soil upon which it took shape" and, by Herderian extension, nationality is an inevitable component of any writer's work no matter what its "themes and scenes": "[w]hersoever the . . . imaginations [of writers] wander, they carry with them the savour of the soil" (252). As the enormously influential French literary historian Hipollyte Adolphus Taine put it in an essay on "Art in Greece" (1869; trans. 1875) that was very likely known to Roberts if not Lampman, "[a] people always receives an impression from the country it occupies," "[c]ountless circumstances of soil and climate combine" to form the "mental mould" of a people, and, from that mould, "all ideas" and artistic creations "issue in relief" (362, 387).

In one or more of many articulations, such theories and assumptions lie in the background of R.G. Haliburton's *The Men of the North and Their Place in Canadian History* (1869), William A. Foster's "Canada First: Our New Nationality" (1871), William M. Hingston's *The Climate of Canada and Its Relations to Life and Health* (1884), and numerous other iterations of the environment—mentality—art thesis, including, of course, the many claims of Canadian heirs of the Young Ireland movement that Canadian poetry will be or has become "racy of the soil."[2] "Those who expect to see 'A new Athens rising near the pole'" in Canada "will find themselves extremely disappointed," Arabella Fermor had asserted in *The History of Emily Montague* (1769); "genius will never mount high, where the faculties of the mind are benumbed half the year . . . [and] the cold . . . brings on a sort of stupefaction" (Brooke 130).[3] On the contrary, wrote Thomas D'Arcy McGee as the Confederation period was dawning, Canada's geographical position is "favourable" to the production of a "National Literature": "northern latitudes like ours have ever been famed for the strength, variety and beauty of their literature" and Canadian writing "must assume the gorgeous coloring and gloomy grandeur of the forest. . . . Its lyrics must possess the ringing cadence of the waterfall, and its epics be as solemn and beautiful as our great rivers" ([2]). If Iceland is anything to go on, suggested Hingston, Canada's literary future was assured, for had not the learned Lord Dufferin, the new Dominion's third governor general (1872-78), observed that "'devoting the long leisure of their winter nights to intellectual occupations'" had enabled "'the Icelandic settlers . . . [to become] the first of any European nation to create for themselves a native literature'" (qtd. 108n.)?

It is tempting but too easy to argue that the line of transmission thus briefly sketched means that the Confederation poets inhabited an intellectual as well as a physical environment sealed by the American border. The debts of Roberts and Lampman to Irving militate against such an exclusionary argument, as does a large body of evidence indicating that, in turning towards the natural environment for materials that were recognizably original because local or indigenous and, therefore, outside the existing repertoire of English Romantic and Victorian Poetry, the Confederation poets were largely guided by American nature writers. Nor is this surprising, for, as the easy adaptation of Irving's statements by Roberts and Lampman clearly indicates, the Northeastern states, the Maritime provinces, and the southeastern portions of central Canada have a great deal in common in terms of their scenery, climate, atmosphere, flora and fauna. Indeed, the chief guide for the Confederation poets among American nature writers of the later nineteenth century, John Burroughs (1837-1921), repeatedly sanctions such commonalities in "Nature and the Poets," the very essay in his *Pepacton* collection of 1881 that, as it happens, Roberts added to the English syllabus at King's College in 1886 ("The Work of the English Department"): for example, Burroughs pronounces "[o]ur common blue violet . . . the only species . . . found abundantly everywhere in the North" and, à *propos* Edmund Clarence Stedman's "Snow-bound," observes that "[i]t is characteristic of our Northern and New England fields that they are 'edged with green' in spring long before the emerald tint has entirely overspread them" because "[a]long the fences, especially along the stone walls . . . the land is fatter there . . . from the deep snows and other causes [and because] the fence absorbs the heat, . . . shelters the ground from the wind, and [hence] the sward quickly responds to the touch of the spring sun" (7:102). It is a coincidence born both of environmental similarities and of Burroughs' influence on the Confederation group that explains why a great many of the flora and fauna of New England that he describes in "Nature and the Poets" as "rich materials...that have yet hardly been touched" in American poetry (7:109) also appear in the work of the Confederation group (to give but a partial list: the mullein, the golden-rod, the hepatica, the white and yellow violet, the bluebird, the bobolink, the vireo, the cat-bird, the phoebe-bird, and the oven-bird [7: 84-110]). Little wonder that in his *At the Mermaid Inn* column for July 9, 1892 Lampman observes that "according to Burroughs" "the hermit [-thrush] . . . [is] the finest of our songsters" or that a week later in the same forum William Wilfred Campbell asserts that "[f]or those who love nature and nature's studies Burroughs is a never-dying friend" (110, 111). Among the Confederation poets, as in the United States, Burroughs' "prestige" was apparently as great in the eighteen eighties and nineties as that of Emerson and Whitman, two writers to whom his own "love [of] nature and nature's studies" was, of course, deeply indebted (Westbrook 50).

As obviously an heir to the environmental determinism of Herder, Taine, and especially, the Montesquieu of *De l'Ésprit des lois* (1748) as well as to the aggressively American Romanticism of Emerson and Whitman, Burroughs was convinced that the origins of national characteristics and variations lie in climate. "[N]o doubt many of the differences between the English stock at home and its offshoot in our country are traceable to this source," he argues in *Winter Sunshine* (1875): because the English climate is temperate, "the English are a sweet and mellow people" whose life and literature are characterized by such qualities as "reverence . . . [and] homeliness"; in contrast, Americans and their literary productions are given to "finincal, self-complacent smartness" and "forward[ness]" because the "American climate has a much keener edge" that "sharpens the wit . . . favours an irregular, nervous energy . . . [and] goads us day and night" (2:174-75, 148-49, 158). Especially formative of the (North) American character in Burroughs' analysis are seasonal extremes and the rapidity of seasonal changes, particularly, in the "initiative month" of April in the continent's more northerly regions (6:107, 93). "[I]s there anything like an April morning?" he asks in his essay on "April" in *Birds and Poets, with Other Papers* (1877), a first edition of which was owned by Lampman[4];

> One hardly knows what the sentiment of it is, but it is something very delicious. It is youth and hope. It is a new earth and a new sky. How the air transmits sounds, and what an awakening, prophetic character all sounds have! . . . The great sun appears to have been refurbished, and there is something in his first glance above the eastern hills, and the way his eye-beams dart right and left and smite the rugged moun-

> tains with gold, that quickens the pulse and inspires the heart. (6:97-98)

"Does not the return of the year, the sudden and golden dawn of our summers, come to us with an energy of exhileration quite unknown to the people of southern latitudes?" asks Lampman in his *At the Mermaid Inn* column of April 9, 1892; "[w]ith us the coming of spring is the signal for a physical and intellectual revolution and revival, a new birth of buoyant and unconquerable energy rendering us capable of undreamed of labours and immense undertakings" (51-52). In "April in the Hills" (1895), the first version of which was written a few days earlier, on April 6, 1892 (Early "Chronology" 86), Lampman sees the rejuvenation of the year as a source of personal, spiritual awakening ("I rise / With lifted brow and upward eyes. / I bathe my spirit in blue skies, / And taste the springs of life" [*Poems* 28], but in *At the Mermaid Inn* he uses it as a point of departure for a series of observations about the formative effects of climate on character that echo those in "Two Canadian Poets" and also intimate in their emphasis on seasonal extremes and changes the presence of Burroughs as well as Irving in Lampman's "meteorological determinism" (Westbrook 94):

> Our summer heats are keen and wholesome, and neither depress nor enervate. Autumn with its refreshment of splendid colours and its tonic days comes before we have lost anything of the vital impulse, and carries us on with renewed energy into the depth of that trying season which is our severest test. Yet even through the winter months, bitter but bracing, labour is a moral necessity, and we continue to prosecute it with strenuous energy, if not with actual joy. In Canada with the snows and frozen months of Stockholm and St. Petersburg we combine the long days, the blue sky, and the splendid sunshine of the north of Italy. There has never been any other nation on earth so situated, and we cannot but suppose that our people will in the future develop an unusual buoyancy and novel energy of character. (52)

There may also be Canadian sources for Lampman's "meteorological determinism" but its very evident origins in the work of Irving and Burroughs (whose 1875 collection, it will be recalled, is entitled *Winter Sunshine*) render it a curiously American—specifically New England—expression of the effect of climate on Canada's national character.

Both in *Birds and Poets, and Other Papers* and in *Pepacton* Burroughs repeatedly draws attention to a creature whose "prophetic . . . sounds" he regards as a uniquely (North) American sign of the arrival of spring:

> Among April sounds there is none more welcome or suggestive to me than the voice of the little frogs piping in the marshes. No bird-note can surpass it as a spring token; and as it is not mentioned, to my knowledge, by the poets and writers of other lands, I am ready to believe it is characteristic of our season. . . . Generally the note is very feeble at first . . . , and only one voice will be heard, some prophet bolder than all the rest. . . . Soon, however, . . . say toward the last of the month, there is a shrill musical uproar, as the sun is setting, in every marsh and bog in the land. . . . There is a Southern species, heard when you have reached the Potomac, whose note is . . . harsh and crackling. . . . The call of the Northern species is far more musical.[5]
> (6:96-97)

> What a chorus goes up from our ponds and marshes in spring! The like of it cannot be heard anywhere else under the sun. In Europe it would certainly have made an impression upon the literature. An attentive ear will detect first one variety, then another, each occupying the stage from three or four days to a week. The latter part of April, when the little peeping frogs—*hylodes*—are in full chorus, one comes upon places, in . . . drives or walks late in the day, where the air fairly palpitates with sound; from every little marshy hollow and spring run there rises an impenetrable maze or cloud of shrill musical voices. After the peepers, the next frog to appear is the clucking frog. . . . (7:144)

In the first of these passages (from *Birds and Poets, and Other Papers*) may be the textual origins not only of the "trill and trill" of the "Tremulous sweet voices" that "flute-like, answer . . . / One to another" "From the pale-weeded shallows" in Lampman's "April" (1888), but also of the "piping" that emanates from "whispering river meads / And watery marshes" "when spring [is] in her glee" in "The Frogs" (1888) and, like the singing of Keats's nightingale, enables the speaker of the sonnet sequence briefly to escape the temporal world to "lands where beauty hath no rest . . . and the sun" is "But ever half-way sunken toward the west" (*Poems* 7-8). In the second (from *Pepacton*), perhaps in conjunction with Lampman's poems,[6] may lie the textual origins of "When Milking-time is Done" and "Frogs," two sonnets in the spring portion of Roberts's

Songs of the Common Day (1893) in which frogs figure as "cool-fluting ministers of dream" whose "myriad . . . mellow pipes" when heard at "sunset" "Make shrill the slow brook's borders," render "all the air . . . tremulous," and bring therapeutic "release" to "tired ears" (*Collected Poems* 117, 121). If so, then credit must go once again to an American writer for alerting Lampman and Roberts to the presence in their natural environment of a creature whose sound, through not unique to Canada, is nevertheless characteristic of the central and eastern Canadian spring.[7]

A further aspect of Burroughs' writings that may well have helped to awaken Roberts and Lampman to the characteristics and effects of the natural environment is his notion that in the seasonal cycle in northerly regions both Spring and Fall are sites of fierce conflict between Winter and Summer and, thus, April has an inverse counterpart in November, as, less starkly, does May in October. "In the fall, the battles of the spring are fought over again," he suggests in the essay entitled "Autumn Tides" in *Winter Sunshine*:

> There is the same advance and retreat . . . between the contending forces, that was witnessed in April and May. . . . Both seasons have their equinoxes, both their filmy, hazy air, their ruddy forest tints, their cold rains, their drenching fogs, their mystic moons; both have the same solar light and warmth, the same rays of sun; yet, after all, how different the feelings which they inspire! One is the morning, the other the evening; one is youth, the other is age. . . . It is rarely that an artist succeeds in painting unmistakably the difference between sunrise and sunset; and it is equally a trial of . . . skill to put upon canvas the difference between early spring and late fall, . . . between April and November. . . . The spring is the morning sunlight, clear and determined; the autumn, the afternoon rays, pensive, lessening, golden.
> (2:98-99, 102-03)

While this passage raises some echoes in the Spring and Fall sonnets of *Songs of the Common Day*, particularly in "The Flight of Geese" (1893), where the sounds of the lightless night are "filled" with April remembered and "forecast" (*Collected Poems*, 129), its resonances in Lampman's work are both numerous and rich, probably because, in conjunction with similar passages in Burroughs' work, it lent seasonal substance to the Spring/morning/youth and Fall/evening/old age quadrants of the cyclical system that, as argued elsewhere,[8] lends structure to the poetic *oeuvre*.

Notes

1 See the Editorial Notes in Lampman, *Essays and Reviews*, 280 for the passage in Irving's "The Catskill Mountains" in *The Home Book of the Picturesque; or American Scenery, Art, and Literature* (1852) that appears to lie centrally in the background of the remarks of both Lampman and Roberts. The passage is quoted by William Henry Forman in an article the American painter Jasper Francis Cropsey in the April 1884 number of *The Manhattan*, the New York periodical in which Roberts published "The Sower" in July 1884 and, from there, quoted in the March 19, 1884 issue of the Toronto *Evening News* as "appl[ying] as forcibly to Canada as to the Northern United States" ("Our Glorious Climate").

2 This term, meaning "characteristic of a certain country or people" (*OED*), was a slogan of Young Ireland and was widely used in discussions of Canadian literature after Confederation.

3 See also Hingston 102-10 for a discussion of the actual and supposed effects of cold on the physical and mental faculties.

4 Lampman's copy of *Birds and Poets, with Other Papers* is now in the collection of Michael Gnarowski in Kemptville, Ontario.

5 In *Fresh Fields* (1874), Burroughs, who visited England in 1871 and 1882, notes the absence of "the voice of frog or toad" in that country (4:194).

6 To judge by Roberts's "I grieve for my poor frog" in a letter of June 22, 1887 to Richard Watson Gilder, and his notation "Frog ret 6/16/87" on the letter (*Collected Letters* 66) he had composed a poem entitled "Frog" (perhaps an early version of "Frogs" [1893], which was first published in *The Dominion Illustrated Magazine* in November 1888) before reading *Among the Millet, and Other Poems,* which he received sometime between November 16 and December 18, 1888 (see 93, 97). "When Milking-time is Done" (1893) was first published in the July 1889 number of *The Youth's Companion* (Boston). It is in a letter to Gilder on August 14, 1887 that Roberts first mentions that he is planning a "series of sonnets of 'The Common Day'" (67).

7 Hingston refers to several "members of the animal and vegetable kingdoms" in his discussion of spring but refers only in passing to the "harsh gutteral sounds" of the frog (46-47). He does, however, refer to April as the month that "divides the extremes [of cold and heat] equally" and "the only month which may in truth be called a spring month" in Canada (44).

8 See Bentley, "Watchful Dreams." In his father's copy of C. Crispi Sallussii *De Catellinae Conjuratione Bellogue Jugurthmo Historiae*, which is now among the Lampman papers in the National Archives (MG 29 D59 vol.8) either Lampman or his father draws attention to a note describing the four, fifteen-year "stages" into which "'the most correct Roman writers'" divide human life: "*pueritia* was within fifteen; *adolescentia* within thirty; *juvenius* within forty-five; and *senectus* comprised the remaining period of life" (11-12n, endpaper). Lampman's conception of the relationship between the seasons and human activities may have been partly or even greatly affected by Keats's "Four seasons . . ." sonnet, where "the mind of man" has its "Spring, when fancy clear / Takes in all beauty with an easy span," its "Summer, when luxuriously / Spring's honey'd cud of youthful thought he loves / To ruminate, and by such dreaming high / Is nearest unto heaven," its "Autumn, when his wings / He furleth close; contented to look / On mists in idleness—to let fair things / Pass try unbreeded," and its "Winter . . . of pale misfeature" (423).

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