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## **Rummagings 15: Thomas Cary's Work for the "Peace and Good Order of a Well-Regulated Society"**

Thomas Cary is best known of course as the author of *Abram's Plains: A Poem* (1789), a celebration of English values and commercial progress that was published in Quebec on the thirtieth anniversary of the battle of the Plains of Abraham. Cary's long poem was not his only contribution to the literary and cultural life of Lower Canada, however: for some years he ran a subscription library in Quebec City, and on 5 January 1805 he began to publish a newspaper, the *Quebec Mercury*, that served for many years as an hospitable home for poems written in English by residents of the Canadas. Not only were poems a regular feature in the *Quebec Mercury*, but they were usually assigned a relatively prominent position in the top left-hand corner of its back page. Perhaps to indicate both his eagerness to publish poems in his newspaper and to exemplify the type of poetry that he wished to see published there, Cary included in his inaugural issue the "Occasional Prologue" that, according to its explanatory headnote, he had written a few months earlier for "the opening of the Patagonian theatre" in Quebec City.

The aim of the essay underway is to shed a little more light on Cary's role as a supporter and promoter of early Canadian literary culture, primarily through a discussion of his editorial principles and practices regarding poetry as they emerge from his editorial statements in the *Quebec Mercury* and by a contextualization of his "Occasional Prologue" within a genre—the theatrical prologue—that has yet to receive the attention it deserves from scholars of early Canadian literature. In the aggregate, Cary's publications and activities in the period surrounding the turn of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century provide a remarkable instance of the use of the technical resources of print capitalism in the formation of a proto-national community as famously theorized, of course, by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* and by Gerald Friesen in *Citizens and Nation: An Essay on History, Communication and Canada*.

Bankrolled by Cary himself in venture-capitalist mode, printed in Quebec by the Loyalist William Brown, and sold for two shillings a copy, *Abram's Plains* is very much a part and a product of the expansion of print capitalism in the post-Conquest period that enabled and encouraged the

English-reading inhabitants of Lower Canada to imagine themselves as a community. Forthrightly pro-British and anti-Catholic, Cary's long poem is also steeped in the "Good will" that in Edward William Thomson's *Peter Ottawa* is regarded as a "true Canadian growth" and advanced as an alternative to "Toleration," a word that Thomson, perhaps with an eye on Thomas Paine's scathing comments on it, "loathe[s]" and rejects as inimical to genuine acceptance and equality (18; and see Paine 107). As accepting of varying tastes as he is sharply critical of such practices as tithing that, in his view, contribute to the poverty of the poor in Lower Canada, Cary embeds in *Abram's Plains* a vision of society as a "happy middle scene... Beneath the blaze of ambition's fire, / Yet above want"—a *via media* that he likens to a "smooth stream" that "unruffled gently flows" without any "rude breeze to hurt its quiet" (572-79). In other words, the society that Cary envisaged for Canada is one in which tranquility prevails because the extremes of wealth and poverty are absent and, gone with them, are the attitudes and tensions—the *ressentiment*—that can lead, and in France soon would lead, to social unrest and violent revolution.

Given the views expressed in *Abram's Plains*, it is not at all surprising that in the editorials he published in the early issues of the *Quebec Mercury* in January 1805, Cary proclaims himself a lover of "pleasantries, in the stile of [E]nglish papers" (and in opposition to the "dryness for which most American papers are so distinguishable") and then positions himself as occupying "a central situation between high and low; establishment and non-establishment; profession and trade" (editorials. 5 and 19 January, 1805). Taken together, these two statements—the latter a personal reassertion of the *via media* and the former an endorsement of writing that is humourously entertaining because fundamentally good-natured—translate easily into an ideological and aesthetic preference for materials that avoid extremes, that seek neither to aggrandize nor to humiliate, and that contribute to balance and harmony among individuals and groups and, hence, society as a whole. As Cary himself puts it, the *Quebec Mercury* will eschew materials that might "hurt any man's feelings; or, in any way lessen the respect for men and things, which the peace and good order of a well-regulated society require." It is difficult not to sense a Leacockian Tory *avant le nom*, but, perhaps more to the point, it is impossible not to notice the closeness of Cary's words to the "peace, order, and good government" of the preamble to the British North America Act of 1867. Nor is this quite as fanciful as it might first seem, for the phrase "peace, order, and good government" appears verbatim in a sermon by Andrew Spark that was delivered in Quebec on 10 January 1800 and, like Cary's statement,

reflects a conception of Canadian society and its constituent members that was in circulation long before Confederation. Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to see in Cary's positioning of himself and his newspaper a secular version of Spark's conviction that religion—specifically, Presbyterianism—“converts the irregular propensities of the heart—gives strength and stability to virtuous purposes, and cherishes those dispositions, and the temper of mind, which are most friendly to peace, order, and good government” (8).

That Cary did assess and either accept or reject materials for publication in the *Quebec Mercury* in accordance with his stated principles is borne out by the comments that he made about the poems that were submitted to him for consideration. The “ideas” and the “versification” of a piece entitled “Fire Side” are judged acceptable, but it is “tediously long, and wants the liveliness with which we wish to fill our poet's corner” (2 March 1805). Submissions likely “to provoke...personal altercation” and submissions of a sectarian nature are rejected (2 March and 23 December 1805). Although a “virulent libel on...[the] sacred torch” of “*Hymen*,” the “‘Old Maid’ from Montreal shall appear,” but “in the confident hope that some votary of the offended God, will come bravely forward, and draw the teeth and nails of the ancient *Virgo*, alias *Virago*” (9 March 2005). “*Alcanor*'s verses shall appear, tho' he makes the lady he represents look up to that perfection...which, we are afraid, she will scarcely find among mortals” (23 March 1805). Even Cary's castigation of certain poems and poets for such faults as “prosaic[ness],” “trivial[ity],” “flatness,” “incongruity,” and “offen[ces] in the measure” of rhythm (9 and 23 March 1805) can be read as aesthetic reflections of his endorsement of harmony and regulation in the social sphere. The very fact that most of Cary's comments are jocular in tone is in itself consistent with his preference for “pleasantries” and the sort of “good humour” that, as Alexander Pope has *Clarissa* emphasize at the end of *The Rape of the Lock*, defuses tensions, cools tempers, and prevents them from escalating into seriously damaging animosities and hostilities.

To inaugurate the “Poetry” section of the *Quebec Mercury*, Cary published in its first issue the “Occasional Prologue” that, as already observed, he had written for “the opening of the Patagonian theatre,” which appears to have taken place on 9 October 1804. According to his explanatory headnote to the poem, its purpose was “to exalt the theatre, [and] with a view to its being put on as respectable a footing as possible.” Modelled on Samuel Johnson's prologues, particularly his “Prologue, Spoken by Mr. Garrick, at the Opening of the Theatre, in Drury-Lane 1747,” Cary's

“Occasional Prologue” echoes Samuel Johnson’s praise of “immortal SHAKESPEAR” as the avatar of “many-colour’d Life,” his censure of Restoration dramatists (the “Wits of *Charles*”) as the panders to a licentious public, and his conviction that the theatre should be a vehicle for promoting “Virtue” and “Truth” (2-3, 17, 61-62). More than Johnson, however, Cary stresses the social usefulness of the theatre both as a source of personal amusement and revitalization and, more important, as a force for communal stability:

Full well the ancients knew the stage’s pow’r  
To still the tempest of the troubled hour...

. . .

And moderns nothing of the lesson lose,  
That pow’r’s great magic art is to amuse.  
Hence discord oft was lull’d to gentle peace,  
And civic ire its clamours learn’d to cease:  
Of labour’s tasks the toil was render’d light,  
And listless torpor rous’d to active might.  
(23-24, 27-32)

Very much in accord with Cary’s conservative view of the social value of theatre is the proposal, first mooted in an editorial dated 21 March 1805 in the *Quebec Gazette*, that a subscription be established for the purposes of erecting a theatre to house performances by the Society of Canadian Gentlemen (Les Messieurs Canadiens) and by “such Gentlemen among the English, as may be inclined to perform in plays written in their own language.” “In every country, whose inhabitants have attained to any degree of refinement,” argues the editorial,

The Theatre has ever been countenanced and encouraged. The productions of genius and learning, nice discrimination of Character, the eloquence, art, and feeling of the actors are emitted on the stage, and fail not to have a powerful influence on the taste and morals of society. The deformity of vice is presented in the most lively colouring, and its career [sic] is generally terminated by a merited degree of punishment.

The follies and absurdities peculiar to some characters in real life, which may be either hurtful to the individual, or to the Society of which he is a member, are exposed to derision, and other persons are thereby cautioned to avoid them. (“Canadian Theatre”)

It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Cary had a part in shaping this proposal; certainly, its author(s) were likely to have been familiar with his assertion in his “Occasional Prologue” that “a well-order’d stage” can serve to “soften, mend, and refine” a society (1-2). Perhaps what is most telling about the resonances and overlaps between Cary’s “Occasional Prologue” and the editorial in the *Quebec Gazette* is that they both reflect concerns and misgivings about the potential damage, not just to individuals, but also to society as a whole that may result from the sorts of behaviours that they credit the theatre with the ability to correct or quell. Nor were such concerns and misgivings without cause in Lower Canada in October 1804 and March 1805 when the outcome of the Napoleonic War was by no means certain—indeed, several months before the 21 October 1805, when the Battle of Trafalgar confirmed the British naval superiority upon which Canada’s connection to Britain depended. (Nelson’s victory so greatly endeared him to the British inhabitants of Lower Canada that a column in his honour—the first of its kind anywhere—was immediately commissioned and, in due course, installed in Montreal.)

In his on-line anthology of “Prologues and Epilogues as Performed on English Canadian Stages,” Patrick O’Neill has done the extremely valuable service of assembling over ninety Canadian examples of the genre(s), and further research has uncovered several others, including one hiding in plain view in Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Rising Village with Other Poems* (1834). O’Neill’s statement that these poems were “a bit of extra nonsense” (“Introduction”) is certainly true of parts of most of them, including Cary’s. But, as O’Neill goes on to observe and as Cary’s lines attest, prologues were also used to address such serious issues as the morality of the theatre and its place in Canadian society. Perhaps this brief essay will help to earn theatrical prologues the modest place that they deserve in early Canadian literary culture, and also attest further to Cary’s role as a promoter and supporter of that culture.

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson argues that colonial newspapers played a major role in differentiating colonies alike from the imperial centre and other colonies (see 61-65) and in *Citizens and Nation* Friesen argues more specifically that Canadian newspapers played such a role in the formation of Canadian community (148) or, perhaps better, communities. It is thus arguable that Cary’s publications not only helped to foster a sense among Lower Canadians of an emerging community, but also articulated a vision of what that community might and should be like and, moreover, indicated by precept and example artistic practices that would help to shape the personal attitudes conducive to the “peace and good

order” that are definitive of a “well-regulated society.” In his “Occasional Prologue,” his editorials and interjections in the *Quebec Mercury*, and, some fifteen years earlier, in *Abram’s Plains*, Cary worked to disseminate and make communal among his Lower Canadian readers an ensemble of values, standards, interests, and attitudes that have stood the test of time and, in the process, become central to our understanding of it means, involves, and requires to be a member of Canadian society.

### Coda

In closing, a small suggestion: it is surely long past the time when the term “imagined community” should have been put into semiretirement in the sort of congenial setting where such words and phrases as “aporia,” “panopticon,” and “*mise en abîme*” also enjoy a well-earned rest. “Semiretirement” is the operative word here, for Anderson’s term, although very far from being obsolete or useless, has for some time been in danger of becoming overworked, tired, and ineffective, one reason being that it has often been employed indiscriminately to refer to communities that are less “imagined” than actual or, in indeed, “face-to-face.” Such was the case in Cary’s Quebec City, and no more obviously so than in the group to which his “Occasional Prologue” was originally and literally addressed: a theatre audience. Here and in similar instances, the chapter entitled “Some Observations on the Drama among Democratic Nations” in Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) might prove practically and theoretically useful. Starting from the premise that drama rather than the novel is “the most democratic part of...literature,” de Tocqueville observes that “[t]he theatres of aristocratic nations have always been filled with spectators not belonging to the aristocracy” (84) and proceeds to argue from this that it is in the nature of theatre audiences that they not only seek to be emotionally affected and engaged, but also that each member of an audience “pronounces his own separate opinion” of the play that has been presented, either at the theatre or at “their own firesides” (87). To attend a play is thus to share an emotional response (even bond) with other members of society in a particular location and then to share one’s response with other people in a way that is likely to generate agreement or disagreement and, in any case, discussion and exchange. In short, the theatre helps to generate the kind of interaction upon which community is based, which was also part of the goal, surely, of Thomas Cary’s work as a writer and as an editor.

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