

“The whole of the gallant rescue:” The Letters of E. J. Pratt

By Alex Kizuk

Elizabeth Popham and David G. Pitt, eds., *E. J. Pratt Letters*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. xi + 751pp.

There is no question that the University of Toronto Press has granted Canadian literature and literary history a great boon in 2017 with the publication of *E. J. Pratt Letters*, edited by Elizabeth Popham and the redoubtable David G. Pitt. The *Letters* is the final volume of their Collected Works series, which comprises critical annotated texts of Pratt’s poetry, a handy volume of selected poems, selected prose, and the letters. The Series’ editorial board is itself a veritable Who’s Who of Canadian literary doyens: Sandra Djwa, W.J. Keith, Zailig Pollock, Susan Gingell, Lila Laakso, D.M.R Bentley, Claude Bissell, Robert Brandeis, Peter Buitenhuis, Michael Darling, Douglas Lochhead, Jay Macpherson, Malcolm Ross, David Staines, Brian Trehearne, and Popham and Pitt. The series is also associated with the Hypertext Pratt, an online digital supplement at Trent University, under the auspices of Popham (<http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt>). This publishing enterprise is on the face of it a significant achievement for Canadian culture both in terms of its high production quality and the refreshingly non-ideological choice of the subject.

Before the various modernisms and postmodernisms we have been engaged with spread—like some sort of dry rot through the societies of the Western world, their epistemologies and the general sense of who they are ontically and historically—Jean-Paul Sartre had declared, in 1946, in a famous essay entitled “Existentialism Is a Humanism,”

Our point of departure is, indeed, the subjectivity of the individual, and that for strictly philosophic reasons. It is not because we are bourgeois, but because we seek to base our teaching upon the truth, and not upon a collection of fine theories ... (345)

The loyal and gregarious yet often businesslike mind that stands behind this edition of Pratt's collected letters could very well have made a point such as this after World War II. Pratt's readers should never forget, however, that his *epoché* in the war's aftermath would never have been unbounded by his Methodist faith. Pratt remained true to himself and true to his backwoods Newfoundland individualism, understood as freely empowered *in Christ*. Unlike Sartre, who threw himself rather desperately into Marxist activism in later years, Pratt simply remained true to his origins in terms of faith and an emergent colonial country (Newfoundland was confederated in 1949). Reading Pratt's letters for these humanist and national elements alone can be steady and delightful.

Like the accompanying volumes of the print series, the *Letters* is a real pleasure to leaf through and browse. It is a handsome, well-made volume, replete with over 1000 letters and instructive annotations, bulwarked by a masterly textual apparatus and helpful appendices. The letters are for the most part methodically routine, though one can perceive the backroom workings of a high-level Canadian literary authority that functioned in the hands of Pratt and his correspondents for the second half of the twentieth century. Still, in the time of such narcissistic events as Justin Trudeau's selfy-fuelled election, Trump's appalling victory over the Clinton machine, and thousands of youthful social justice warriors across the continent screaming impotently at the sky, E. J. Pratt may not seem to be the most 'politically correct' figure to be thus elevated by the gatekeepers of Canadian culture.

Of course, one will recall F. R. Scott's politely socialist objection, in his poem "All the Spikes But the Last" (1957):

Where are the coolies in your poem, Ned?
Where are the thousands from China who swung
their picks with bare hands at forty below?

Scott believed that Pratt somehow forgot to mention the coolies who actually built the railroad celebrated in the Governor General's Award-winning *Towards the Last Spike* (1952), Pratt's signature effort to define an epic or heroic tradition in Canadian verse. How many acres of the railroad's land did immigrants receive through the Canadian Immigration Act of 1923? As Erica Kelly has said recently, though Pratt's poem does contain a sympathetic gesture towards the suffering of laborers (ll. 1132-

47), “He does not write the history of the exploited workers, so often victims of racism in its deadliest form“(47).

Similarly, one can imagine that Pratt’s letter to A.J.M. Smith of 16 February 1943, might draw fire from certain other quarters of the #MeToo calibre. Here, Pratt laments the sort of talent he and Smith had to sort through as influential gatekeeper editors and anthologists of Canadian poetry in those years:

I don’t know how long I shall continue editing the C.P.M. [*Canadian Poetry Magazine*, 1936-43]. I am getting about sick of it. Who would think that some of the females who in real life are so cold that they could piss icicles would get Vesuvian with the rejection of their poems ... what poems, ye gods! They’re talking about their cunts all the time... (250)

The male gaze in Pratt’s view of art would not be much appreciated in today’s postfeminist climate, and one might expect that even a more generalized gender-coding in his thought might not pass muster. In a 1962 letter to Vincent Sharman, then a student writing a critical study of Pratt’s poems (which was later published), Pratt invoked for him a crucial theme in his work as “man’s unremitting struggle with nature, and his indomitable courage in pitting his strength against hers, no matter how great the odds.” Here he speaks of his artistic purpose as indeed a “gallant rescue” (659).

In another unsuccessful attempt to monumentalize Pratt’s achievement, Robert G. Collins dithered over the point that Pratt’s art was perhaps an existentialist or a social existentialist project (193). Collins’ confusion in understanding Pratt in the 1980s lay in his attempt to bracket off Pratt’s ideas and unique poetic from the poet’s Methodist faith, which never wavered—outside of a single moment brought on by the death of his mother and recorded in *The Iron Door: An Ode* (1927). Pratt’s dynamic, faith-based conception of personal action (or agency to use the fashionable word) has for the most part continued to baffle his commentators.

Angela T. McAuliffe, however, has argued forcefully that we can no longer remain closed-minded toward Pratt’s Christian faith, as so many commentators, from Pacey to Davey, have tried and failed to do. I have made similar errors in an essay published in *Queens Quarterly* some years ago, where I attempted to subsume Prattian values to a structuralist *mise en abyme* between ‘miracle’ and ‘law’. As the editors of *Letters* point out

in their Introduction, Pratt was ever ambivalent toward politics generally and including all forms of modernism in literary terms (xiii). He never doubted the divinity of Christ and the surety of human salvation in Christ. For Pratt, these strands combine in a poetically heroic tenor defined by Christian action and a code of conduct that had a characteristically confident Methodist swagger about it (McAuliffe 34). Indeed, one of the most interesting elements of the *Letters* is the connection that one can follow throughout the volume between this confidence on the one hand and the concept or role of art held by an important Canadian literary celebrity-cum-authority on the other.

Another faith-based celebrity who eschewed the captivations of modernism was Pratt's near contemporary C. S. Lewis, whose conservative British Anglicanism was historically aligned with Canadian Maritime Methodism. In a delightfully tight-lipped example of British humour, the famous essay "Men Without Chests," Lewis disparaged a hegemonic exhortation of uplifting educational values in mid 20th-Century literary books for the schools:

In a sort of ghastly simplicity, we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful. (37)

Pratt undoubtedly would have recognized Lewis's attempt to curtail modernist "heartlessness"—God's death, man's death, the author's death, etc.—in literature and culture as a "gallant rescue" not unlike his own.¹ But now with the demise of such heartlessness and the completion of the University of Toronto Press's Pratt archive (and the accompanying digital supplement at Trent), surely the way is clear for new readers and up-and-coming Canadian literary scholars to find better ways to locate if not engender more salient or less contingent interpretations of the poet's work and its importance in Canadian literary history and culture.

Note

- 1 For a theoretical model (Critical Realism) that goes beyond postmodernism in a manner that writers like Pratt and Lewis would have been grateful for in their time, see Margaret S. Archer's *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*.

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