Wither the White Man: Charles Mair's "Lament for the Bison"

Where are the buffalo? Gone the way of the Indian.
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Where is the Indian? Gone the way of the buffalo.
—Armand Garnet Ruffo

by Albert Braz

Charles Mair's literary reputation has fluctuated dramatically over the years. Mair first achieved renown with the publication of his *Dreamland and Other Poems* in 1868, considered by many critics at the time "the first significant collection of the new Confederation era" (Shrive, *Voice* 20). His standing was further solidified in 1886 when he published his "masterpiece" *Tecumseh*, a five-act verse drama about the Shawnee leader who helped to ensure that Canada would remain a separate polity in North America (Johnson 117).[1] Combined with his controversial political activities in the newly-acquired North-West, Mair's writings earned him the title of the nation's "warrior bard" (Dooley and Shrive 31; Shrive, *Voice* 106).Yet by the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century the same individual who had once been hailed as English-speaking Canada's "first important political poet" had come to be perceived as one of its "dear bad poets," those early writers who are significant not for the quality of their work but merely for mapping out an imaginative landscape (Brown 15; Reaney 211). Even more damning, some scholars ceased to deem him a creative writer at all. As Malcolm Ross wrote in justifying the decision to exclude him from one of the most influential anthologies of early Canadian poetry, "Charles Mair, perhaps, is our Confederation poet in the obvious political sense—the trouble being that he simply was not a poet" (ix). The recent dismissal of Mair is problematic, though, for at least two reasons. To begin with, a different view of his literary abilities was held in the past, when Pauline Johnson proclaims that the author of the "magnificent" *Tecumseh* has probably "enriched Cana-

dian Indian literature" more than any other writer (120) and Charles G.D. Roberts asserts that "Mair really is a poet" (qtd. in Whalen 71). More significantly, today's critics tend to ignore some of the more compelling aspects of Mair's work, notably his letters and prose about Western Canada and his writings on the bison. The latter, in particular, have surprisingly modern ecological overtones.

Mair has never vanished completely from the Canadian consciousness, but for reasons that are only incidentally related to the quality of his writing, especially his poetry. He was born in 1838 in the Ottawa Valley village of Lanark. He studied medicine at Queen's University but left before earning a degree. In 1868, the year *Dreamland* was published, Mair became instrumental in the creation of Canada First, a fiery nationalist political movement among whose main tenets was the promotion of westward expansion (Shrive, *Voice* 28-64). Soon afterwards, he was hired by the federal Minister of Public Works as accountant and paymaster for the crew that was building a road connecting Ontario to the Red River Settlement. This was a fateful development that would have major ramifications for both his life and afterlife. Mair's Canadian nationalism led to his being arrested for insubordination by Louis Riel's Métis provisional government, and then to a daring escape from the Fort Garry prison. His writings promoting the settlement of the North-West too were pregnant with consequences. In one of his letters to his brother Holmes, widely circulated in eastern newspapers, Mair was not content to sell the land as "boundless and rich beyond all description or comparison" but also commented on the "jealousies and heart-burnings" between the local white and mixed-race women. Specifically, he claimed that many prominent white men were married to "half-breed women, who having no coat of arms but a 'totem' to look back to, make up the deficiency by biting at the back of their 'white' sisters" (Letter 396). One of the mixed-race women in question, Annie Bannatyne, was so incensed by Mair's remarks that she cornered him in the post office and publicly "horsewhipped" him (Morton 20). Riel's response was equally unequivocal, although less visceral. The Métis leader simply advised the Ontarian to restrict himself to poetry, since that way his writings would at least have "le mérite de la rime puisquils n'ont pas toujours celui du bon sense" (14).

Mair's conduct at Red River, which even his most sympathetic critics acknowledge reveals someone who considers himself "supe-

rior, socially, culturally and politically, to the present inhabitants of the West" (Shrive, *Voice* 45-46; Cogswell 125), has transformed the poet into an object of ridicule and derision for contemporary Canadian writers. For instance, in his long narrative poem about Riel, Don Gutteridge diagnoses the "ass" and "stupid" Mair as "suffering / Loudly from acute constipation of the brain." Gutteridge also notes, without hiding his glee, that some "irate ladies had mauled / The buffalo-rimer and sometime epic bard" with a horse whip for his "importunate iambicizing" (7-9). Similarly, in his novel *The Scorched-Wood People*, Rudy Wiebe belittles Mair not just for his politics but also for his writing. As Wiebe has the Métis bard Pierre Falcon say of the "so-called poet" Mair, "anyone who tried to sing his verses while riding a horse would fall off in broken rhythm" (26). Finally, in a revisionist collection about that most sacred of Canadian political icons, the Mounted Police, David Day mockingly dismisses Mair as "the Canada-First laureate and martyr of the Red River Post Office Whippings" (47).

Without minimizing Mair's cultural chauvinism, I would like to argue that the inordinate focus on his Red River experience has produced a rather unbalanced view of him. First, however dramatic, the events of 1869-70 comprise a minute segment of what was a long and active life—Mair would not die until 1927, at the age of 88, ending a career not just as a poet and political activist but also as a newspaper correspondent, merchant, land speculator, and civil servant. Second, when contemporary poets and novelists examine his activities in the North-West they tend to do so indirectly, as an addendum to the Riel story, thus disregarding his political and psychological motivation. Most important, they usually fail to address Mair's own writings. This is particularly true of his passionate advocacy of the vanishing prairie bison, best exemplified in the 1888 poem "The Last Bison" and the 1890 essay "The American Bison."[2]

Mair's essay, whose full title is "The American Bison: Its Habits, Methods of Capture and Economic Use in the North-West, with Reference to Its Threatened Extinction and Possible Preservation," is believed to be the "first Canadian taxonomical" study of the animal (MacLaren 102). It also clashes openly with the poet's popular image as an "apologist for the British Empire" and white culture in general (Leonard xv), as we can see from its very opening:

> There is perhaps no fact in the natural history of America which brings such reproach on civilized man as the reckless and almost total destruction of the bison. Twenty years ago it abounded in many parts of the North-Western plains and prairies. . . . In the beginning of the nineteenth century it roamed the country from Texas and New Mexico northward, and from the Alleghanies [sic] westward into and beyond the Rocky Mountains and north-westward to the affluents of the Mackenzie. (277)

As Mair stresses, a mere ninety years later, because of white activities, "there are in probability not five hundred animals alive on the continent" and the species has "practically passed away" (277, 297).

It may be true that Mair is an inveterate central Canadian bigot "dedicated to spreading 'superior' Anglo-Saxon values" across the top half of North America (Siggins 85), yet he is broadminded enough to admit that he owes much of his knowledge of the bison to the First Nations. He begins his essay with a recapitulation of the literary and scientific representations of the animal, citing a variety of early writers and explorers from Richard Hakluyt to Samuel Purchas, Thomas Morton, Louis Hennepin, and Jacques Marquette (277-79). However, he avers that he derives his authority more from his "long residence in the North-West" and from information provided to him by local First Nations and Métis people than from the learned Europeans. As he writes, it is by "consulting many Indians and half-breeds of experience and of great repute in their day as plain hunters" that he has been able to pursue "inquiries into questions of interest, with regard to the bison on the safe ground of their daily contact with and intimate knowledge of its habits" (281). Indeed, it is because of his experience on the Prairies, including the knowledge he gleans from "noted half-breed leaders of the plain hunt in times past," that Mair learns about the fabled burdash, the hermaphroditic bison who yielded the immense and much prized glossy "'beaver robe" (290).[3]

Moreover, as one can sense from the essay's first paragraph, Mair is not content to trace the seemingly inexorable disappearance of the bison from North America; he assigns specific blame for what a more recent poet, Al Purdy, has termed a "kinda genocide or buffalocide" (16). "The American Bison" is, in fact, nothing less than an indictment of Euro-American cupidity, an unequivocal condemnation of "that great enemy of wild nature, the white man" (281).[4] As Mair states, the First Nations "lived upon" the bison, "but, with

savage conservatism, severely punish[ing] anyone who wantonly butchered them."[5] The Métis are supposedly more thoughtless, slaughtering "Immense numbers" during their annual hunt (281, 291). But the great culprits in this ecological catastrophe are white people, who, at least since the advent of the railway, hunt indiscriminately. Mair is especially critical of "pot-and-hide hunters," groups of heavily armed men hired by "wealthy citizens" with a craving for bison "tongues and humps," and to whom he traces the genesis of "the work of extermination" (292). For the poet, white hunting practices are not just unecological but immoral. Consequently, he not only develops strategies for preserving the bison, notably through domestication and the creation of sanctuaries, but also underlines the ignominy of failing to do so. As Mair ends his essay, in what amounts to an act of atonement for both himself and his civilization, "[n]o reasonable effort should be spared to rescue an animal from destruction which has been of great service on our continent, which is intimately associated with its history, and whose extinction would be a disgrace to civilized man" (303).

If anything, Mair is even more critical of Euro-American civilization in "The Last Bison," suggesting that the role of white people in the slaughter of the animal may have calamitous repercussions—for the bison as well as for themselves. Purportedly inspired by a "personal experience" Mair has along the North Saskatchewan River in the early 1880s (269), the poem is a first-person account of an epiphany, or reverie, the "poet" has in the middle of the prairie. As he journeys through "the wilderness" on his "runner of pure Indian blood," an agile and graceful pony he calls "my comrade," the poet comes to rest in a sheltered valley by the river. Around him, "The homeless and unfurrowed prairies spread / In solitude and idleness eterne" and all is "silence save the rustling leaf, / The gadding insect, or the grebes lone cry" (237). But while he expounds on how the land remains "undeflowered," "Inviolate still" (237-38), he senses that there is something profoundly tragic about it, for the Prairies have a long history of habitation that is now only barely perceptible:

> Yet Sorrow, too, had here its kindred place,
> As o'er my spirit swept the sense of change.
> Here sympathy could sigh o'er man's decay;
> For here, but yesterday, the warrior dwelt
> Whose faded nation had for ages held,

> In fealty to Nature, these domains.
> Around me were the relics of his race—
> The grassy circlets where his village stood,
> Well-ruled by customs immemorial law.
> (238)

Unfortunately, it is "All vanished" now, destroyed not by natural forces but by an "encroaching power" so ravenous that it "Will leave, at last, no wilding on the earth / To wonder at or love!" It is not just the first human inhabitants of the prairie who have disappeared, the poet stresses. With them have also "fled / The bison-breed which overflowed the plains / And, undiminished, fed uncounted tribes." As he concludes, once the bison herds were so vast that they "seemed / Exhaustless as the sea" but the only vestiges of their existence now are their "wallows, paths / And skulls and shining ribs and vertebræ" (238).

After the poet has lain for sometime "'twixt dreams and waking . . . , / Musing on change and mutability / And endless evanescence," he is suddenly awakened by the thunderous sound of a massive bison. Spellbound before the apparition, he is forced to ask himself if it is "a living form, / Or but an image by the fancy drawn?" He deduces that the bison is real, for it "breathed! and from a wound blood flowed, / And trickled with the frothing from his lips." Observing the bison without being observed, he is able to determine not only that it is "the last survivor of his clan" but also that it is a burdash, an impressive specimen that has grown to such an "enormous bulk" that its "presence filled / The very vale with awe" (239).

Unlike other androgynous bison, the burdash that appears to Mair's poet possesses not merely exceptional beauty and colossal strength but also a "voice," a voice with which he is able to produce its bygone kin's song. As the poet describes his discovery of the burdash's singular verbal capabilities:

> Now stood he there
> And stared, with head uplifted, at the skies,
> Slow-yielding to his deep and mortal wound.
> He seemed to pour his mighty spirit out
> As thus he gazed, till my own spirit burned,
> And teeming fancy, charmed and overwrought

> By all the wildering glamour of the scene,
> Gave to that glorious attitude a voice,
> And, rapt, endowed the noble beast with song.
> (239)

Comprising nine Spenserian stanzas, "The Song"[6] of the burdash is basically a history of the bison from its own perspective. The animal begins by addressing the "smokeless skies and [the] grass green earth" through which "fond Nature gave me birth, / And food and freedom—all she had to give." It particularly underscores the early times, "changeless and unchanged," when it and its kind were hunted only by "nations primitive," who depended on them and respected them. As the burdash remarks, echoing Mair's views in "The American Bison," the First Nations "loved us, and they wasted not. They slew, / With pious hand, but for their daily need; / Not wantonly" (240). But this ostensibly symbiotic relationship of "blameless strife" was altered radically when "the red man mixed his blood / With paler currents." The fruit of this biological and cultural interbreeding was a race of "reckless hunters of the plains—who vied / In wanton slaughter for the tongue and hide, / To satisfy vain ends and longings base."[7] The Métis, as the motives ascribed to them indicate, are not portrayed as being nearly as ecologically-minded as the First Nations. Yet they are not utterly foolhardy, either. While they expand the hunt more than ever before, under their regime, the bison still "flourished, and our name / Prospered" (240).

The bison only ceases to flourish not with the ascendancy of the Métis but with that of white people. Euro-Americans, the burdash charges, are the group most responsible for the near-extermination of the animal. They are the "pale" destroyers who "ravaged our domains / On every hand, and ringed us round with fire" (240). Tellingly, the reason whites have decimated the bison appears to have less to do with any specific animosity toward the species than with their own deficient collective makeup. As the burdash contends, Euro-Americans are an unscrupulous breed who slay with "equal mirth / The harmless or the hurtful things of earth" and who "yearn for havoc as the world's supreme delight." It is because of their seemingly insatiable appetites, their "mad desire," that the bison are on the brink of extinction. Even when scattered animals tried to escape to the "barren wastes" of the prairie after their num-

bers waned precipitously, they could not find relief, "For still the spoiler sought, and still he slew us there" (240-41).

The white people's callous treatment of the bison is not without consequences, though, as is evident in the "prophesy" with which the burdash closes his song, before sinking to its knees and dying:

> I see our spoilers build their cities great
> Upon our plains—I see their rich estate:
> The centuries in dim procession fly!
> Long ages roll, and then at length is bared
> The time when they who spared not are no longer spared.
>
> Once more my vision sweeps the prairies wide,
> But now no peopled cities greet the sight;
> All perished, now, their pomp and pride:
> In solitude the wild wind takes delight.
> Naught but the vacant wilderness is seen,
> And grassy mounds, where cities once had been.
> The earth smile [sic] as of yore, the skies are bright,
> Wild cattle graze and bellow on the plain,
> And savage nations roam o'er native wilds again!
>
> (241)

In other words, nature itself will ensure that white people will suffer retribution for their indefensible conduct by reclaiming the lands they conquered and returning them to the joint custody of their deserving caretakers, the First Nations and the bison. Or, to phrase it differently, the bison will yet have its revenge.

Mair's "The Last Bison" is clearly an unusual poem, never more so than in its depiction of the burdash. Desmond Pacey, for example, dismisses the work as "inept and fantastic." Pacey seems disturbed by the fact that "Mair gushes about the oppressed Indians and the disappearing buffaloes," but he also accuses the poet of writing in a "language appropriate to an itinerant evangelist!" (39). Norman Shrive, the author of two books[8] and several essays on Mair, is more temperate in his criticism. Yet even Shrive concedes that the poem is "the strangest expression . . . of the theme of the greedy white man" in Mair's work (*Voice* 112). One of the few laudatory voices in this chorus of disapproval is Fred Cogswell, who agrees that Mair can be sentimental. However, examining Mair's work historically, Cogswell does not see this trait as a flaw but rather as a result of the poet living in his time. The main charge

against Mair, Cogswell maintains, is that he does not "write as critics of today, gifted with hindsight, would have him write." As Cogswell states, after noting that the initial reception of "The Last Bison" was quite positive, "[i]t is Mair's misfortune that the present age is in revolt against both the kind of feelings our ancestors displayed and any open, direct expression of feeling at all in matters not concerned directly with sex and violence" (133-34; Shrive, *Charles Mair* 203).

Another striking aspect of Mair's poem, as of his essay, is its categorical denunciation of Euro-American civilization and its unabashed celebration of the bison. This becomes especially significant if one accepts the apparent association of the bison with the First Nations. The fortunes of the bison and the First Nations of course have long been connected in both Native and non-Native discourse in North America. As the Anishinabe poet Armand Garnet Ruffo writes, in the lines used as the epigraph to this essay, the "way[s]" of one are usually linked with those of the other (*Grey Owl* 194). This parallel is conspicuously evident in the work of William Cullen Bryant and Carl Sandburg, two American poets to whom Ruffo may be responding. For Bryant, "In these plains / The bison feeds no more" and "The red man too— / Has left the blooming wilds he ranged so long" (52). Sandburg, similarly, writes that "The buffaloes are gone. / And those who saw the buffaloes are gone" (235).

Terry Goldie claims that Mair's identification of the bison with the First Nations is neither accidental nor innocent, since it suggests that the "extinction" of the animal is "analogous to the near-genocide of the Indians" (26). Leslie Monkman, too, has convincingly argued that "The Last Bison" was probably inspired by "the tradition of the Indian death song" represented by Mair's own "The Iroquois at the Stake" (Monkman 52; Mair 247-51). There is much insight in these two analyses, especially regarding the poet's propensity to portray both human and non-human life in North America as synchronic, "natural and so timeless" (Goldie 160). Mair is clearly unaware of the multitude of natural and cultural factors that may have been responsible for the destruction of the bison, not least of which, the historian Andrew Isenberg contends, was the adoption of the horse by the First Nations (Isenberg 6, 9-10). Nevertheless, one must acknowledge that there is a crucial difference between Mair's attitudes toward the bison and toward the First

Nations. As he writes in "The American Bison," even before the arrival of the Europeans, "the buffaloes were never so dangerous to man as their pursuers ever have been to each other" (296). That is, while Mair may consider the First Nations great conservationists in comparison to white people, he still views them as destructive to the bison. He definitely does not perceive them as noble savages, always at one with nature and its flora and fauna.

Mair, as stated earlier, is a more complex figure than his critics are willing to admit. It is true that he advocates an Ontario-centred Canadian nationalism[9] in which the acquisition of the North-West becomes not just a logical but a natural development. It is also true that he harbours deep anxieties about the new waves of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Like many of his contemporaries, on both sides of the Canada-United States border, he fears that the continual arrival of "semi-barbarous hordes" (qtd. in Shrive, *Charles Mair* 132) will lead to what another well-known naturalist, Theodore Roosevelt, terms "race suicide" (qtd. in Kassanoff 69). As a New England minister warns during that period, if such trends in immigration continue in North America, the people of "old stock" who succeeded to "cross the seas" and "subdue the wilderness" are bound to suffer the same fate as "the American Indian and the bison" (Denison 17).[10] Yet at the same time that Mair avidly promotes the settlement of the North-West by Euro-Canadians, particularly those of Anglo-Celtic ancestry, he calls into question the wisdom, and long-term success, of any such enterprise. Throughout his poetry and prose, he often shows white people as a malignant force incapable of entering a territory without defiling it. As he writes in the symbolically titled poem "Kanata," the European masses seek "shelter in the peaceful West" but, because of their insatiable thirst for material wealth, they are destined to "enact the tyrants part" (253). This is an argument that becomes even more explicit in "The Last Bison," where Mair proposes that the decimation of a species is a crime so ignominious that it demands, or ought to demand, the eventual disappearance of white people from the heart of North America (241).

Needless to say, there is a measure of histrionics in the curse against white people that Mair has the burdash utter in "The Last Bison." After all, in "The American Bison," which is essentially a prose version of the poem, there is little indication that the bison and the First Nations are fated to displace whites from the Prairies.

The curse becomes even more problematic in light of Mair's 1875 essay "The New Canada." The poet ends that tract with a vision of the new Dominion soon being transformed into "the hope of the despairing of the world," something that is made possible because "[t]he haunt of the Indian, the bison, and the antelope, [is] waiting with majestic patience for the flocks and the fields, the schools, the churches, the Christian faith and love of the coming men" ("New Canada" 109). In other words, rather than being about to re-inherit the Prairies, the bison, like the First Nations, appear about to vanish. That being said, Mair's raising of the idea of retribution likely is not just a rhetorical exercise. He truly seems convinced that Euro-American civilization's ignoble treatment of the bison will have catastrophic ramifications for white people, unless they succeed in reversing the decline of the animal.[11] This is precisely what Mair advocates at the end of "The American Bison." He considers a series of ways in which the animal can be saved from "extinction," and concludes that the best way is to create a national sanctuary for it on the "foot-hills of the Rocky Mountains," a plea that is believed to have provoked "a renewed interest in the buffalo" and influenced the Canadian government's decision to create a reserve in Wainwright, Alberta (303; Shrive, *Voice* 115).

It has not been the main objective of this essay to prove that Mair is a great poet, or even a great nature poet. Robertson Davies once opined that the Ontario writer J.R. Ramsay "suffered the disability of many poets—he had to choose between rhyme and reason, and he chose rhyme" (376). Mair, at least in the first part of "The Last Bison," does not even have the excuse that he is hampered by the need to ensure that his lines end in similar sounds. Still, there is no question that his poetry is often undermined by the quaintness of its language. Whatever else they may accomplish, lines like "the fulgent light / Of snowy cloud-land and cerulean skies" and "the suns fierce beams / Reverberate in wreathed ethereal flame" (237) fail to convey the reality of the landscape they describe. The inadequacy of Mair's poetic language becomes particularly glaring when one contrasts his poetry to his prose, notably his letters, such as when he informs his brother that the future of the North-West "is as inevitable as to-morrows sunrise. The climate is delightful. . . . In deep winter, there are short spells of severe weather, but they are short; so they all tell me, and certainly my experience so far justifies the assertion. I never felt such fine weather in November in Canada

as we have just now: and there is an exhilaration in it quite new to me" (Letter 398). Indeed, as one reads his Red River correspondence, one cannot help but wish that, in his poetry, Mair had heeded the advice of his Canada First confederate Robert Haliburton and realized that "[y]ou're living in a new world and you must write the language of the living to [the] living" (qtd. in Shrive, *Voice* 26).[12]

Nonetheless, despite Mair's propensity for archaisms, there is power in his poetry. This is a vitality that probably derives from the poet's contradictions, his profound ambivalence not only about the First Nations but also about whites. Mair is widely viewed as an apostle of Canadian nationalism, an avid promoter of a transcontinental nation inhabited mainly by people of northern European stock. Yet this "expansionist hothead" (Leonard xxi) entertains considerable doubts about the group destined to acquire the new Canada, envisaging Euro-Canadians basically as a virus that cannot but despoil the Promised Land as they enter it. A similar tension exists in the poet's characterization of the First Nations. Mair, who styles himself as one of the elect "few" with the capacity to apprehend "the character of the true, aboriginal Indian, before he became abased and corrupted by the White Man" (qtd. in Wright 139), has a schizophrenic view of the First Nations. On one hand, as the previous quote intimates, he sees them as "corrupted" by whites, a "faded nation" (238). But on the other hand, he claims that they are an unalienated people, a people whose relationship to the land ought to be emulated. As he writes of northern Alberta in *Through the Mackenzie Basin*, it is "a real Utopia, such as Sir Thomas More dreamt not of, [I] being actually here, with no trace of abortive politics or irritating ordinance. Here was contentment in the savage wilderness—communion with Nature in all her unstained purity and beauty" (448). For Mair, whatever their future, the First Nations are clearly the first inhabitants of the land. Particularly in *Through the Mackenzie Basin*, he seems at pains to document their presence on it, usually citing the aboriginal names of rivers and villages he approaches. For example, he describes "Sturgeon River—the Namáo Sepe of the Crees—"; "Lilly Lake—Ascútamo Sakaigon—"; and "Vermilion River—the Wyamun of the Crees" (330-31). His ethnocultural chauvinism notwithstanding, he definitely would not appear to subscribe to the notion that the word Canada derives from the Portuguese phrase "Cá nada," an interpretation which sig-

nifies that the country was devoid of life prior to the arrival of the Europeans and which continues to have surprising currency even in our supposedly more enlightened times.[13]

In conclusion, Mair's significance as a writer is not formal or stylistic but cultural, the fact that he succeeds in "touching recurring concerns in English-Canadian culture" (Monkman 52). In terms of his work on the bison, what is most striking about it is the poet's passionate advocacy on behalf of the animal. His optimism about the bison's ability to rebound from what appears to be certain extinction is especially noteworthy since he lived at a time when people like George Armstrong Custer and his supporters ostensibly were determined to ensure that the only home that "both the buffalo and the Indian" would have would be "on the American nickel" (Ruffo, "Creating" 34). To quote Margaret Atwood, a writer for whom even a captive bison can elicit "anxious" fears ("Buffalo" 70), "The Last Bison" is "startlingly proleptic: the sentiments, if not the form, could have come straight from the ecology movement of the 1970s and 1980s" ("Introduction" xxxii). In fact, Mair's work on the bison constitutes less a lament for a vanishing species than a clarion call for its preservation.

Notes

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1 The response to *Tecumseh* by today's scholars is rather disparate. For instance, while Alan Filewod dismisses Mair's drama as "a pageant of rhetorical sentiments" that has been rightly consigned to "the dustbin of literary failures" (74), Glenn Willmott judges it "the most significant play of the Canadian nineteenth century" (135).

2 Unless otherwise specified, all references to Mair's works are to the 1926 edition organized by John Garvin (*Tecumseh* . . .), and appear parenthetically in the text.

3 In a note to "The Last Bison," Mair states: "A huge animal called by the half-breed plain hunters the burdash (the hermaphrodite) was occasionally found in a large bison herd. It was called by the Indians *ayaquauy*, namely of either sex" (270). In "The American Bison" he writes that the term burdash is "probably Norman French, for it is not Indian. If I am not mistaken the word *Bredache* is the patois of the French Canadian designates an animal of both genders. Its Cree name was Aya-quayu, meaning of 'neither sex'" (290)

4 In a striking contrast to Mair, Archibald Lampman attributes such ecological

abominations as the destruction of the bison, not specifically to white people, but to humanity in general: "The awful destructiveness of the human race is exemplified in small things as well as great. Not only are the magnificent pine forests disappearing, not only is the buffalo practically extinct and the wild pigeon rapidly becoming so, but wherever any wild thing of interest or beauty occurs in rare haunts it is instantly set upon and destroyed" (339).

5 Mair's image of the First Nations as natural ecologists is not universally held, either today or in the past. Upon witnessing the activities at a buffalo pound in the Edmonton area in 1840s, Paul Kane writes that "The Indians in this manner destroy innumerable buffaloes, apparently for the mere pleasure of the thing" (81). In his recent environmental history of the bison, Andrew Isenberg contends that the bison was decimated in the mid-nineteenth century by a "combination of Indian predation and environmental change" (3).

6 "The Song," which constitutes about half of Mair's poem, is the only part of "The Last Bison" reproduced in most recent anthologies of Canadian poetry that include the nineteenth century. See, for example, Atwood, *New Oxford* 15-17, and Gerson and Davies 123-25.

7 Mair's views on the Métis and interbreeding in general may reflect his fear of miscegenation, something he tends to associate with degeneration. For instance, in the first stanza of "The Last Bison," he describes "the Indians horse" as "Degenerate now, but from the 'Centaurs drawn—'" in contrast to the poet's runner, which is of "pure Indian blood" (237). This focus on the purity and Indianness of the runner is curious since, as is well known, the horse was introduced by "Europeans . . . to the New World" (Isenberg 1).

8 Shrives second book on Mair (*Voice*) is really a revised, and abridged, version of his first one (*Charles Mair*). As he suggests in the preface to the later work, the first book remains the "authoritative" study of Mair (*Voice* xi).

9 Mair's Ontarianism, the claim that he was a central "force in the Upper Canadianization of the west" (Duffy 65), is perhaps overstressed. As the historian David Leonard notes, Mair spent most of his adult life in Western Canada and came "to stake his own identity on the West" (xxiv).

10 For an incisive overview of the fear of "race suicide" in the United States at the end of the nineteenth-century, see Kassanoff.

11 In *Beautiful Losers*, Leonard Cohen writes that "White America has been punished by lung cancer for having destroyed the Red Man and stolen his pleasures" (94).

12 Mair, of course, did attempt to modernize or "Canadianize" his language but with not very successful results (Shrive, *Voice* 133).

13 The idea that Canada derives its name from "*Cá nada*," as opposed to the Wendat word *kanata*, has been promulgated by such prominent literary figures as Northrop Frye, Eli Mandel, and Réjean Ducharme. One of the more recent ones is David Staines (7).

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