

REAPPRAISALS:
CANADIAN
WRITERS

University
of Ottawa
Press 1977

**THE
E.J. PRATT
SYMPOSIUM**

edited and with
an introduction by
Glenn Clever

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**RE-APPRAISALS:
Canadian Writers
Department of English, University of Ottawa
General Editor: K.P. Stich (Acting)**

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Oak Sable to Calgary. Van Home took off
 His coat. The harts must wait, for that would mean
 The shirt as well. Dirl and immediate
 This prairie pledge - ~~five~~ hundred miles, and it
 Was winter. Failure of this trial promise
 Would mean - no, it must not be there for meaning!

Orders were given to be carried out.

A Cable started rolling hills in Europe:

A tap of horse sent hundreds to the bush,

~~like that in Minnesota or Red Portage,~~

Where axes swung on spruce and the saws sang

Changing the timber into pyramids

Of poles and sleepers: Clicks, despatches, words,

Like lanterns in a night conductor's hands,

Started the wheels: a rod put Shaughnessy

In Montreal: Supplies moved on the minute.

~~A whistle sent, and like a pack of hounds~~

~~Thousands of men and mules and horses slipped~~

~~Three thousand men, four thousand horses slipped~~

Into their togs and harness night and day.

The grass that fed the buffalo was turned over,

The black alluvial mould ^{land here} ~~remained~~, the bed

Scattered and scraped. As individuals

The men lost their identity; as groups,

As gangs, they massed, divided, subdivided

~~Like numbers only~~

~~Like numbers only~~ Sub-contractors, gangs

Of engineers, and shovel gangs for bridge,

~~And~~ Culverts, gangs of mechanics stringing wires,

Sodding, unloading and reloading gangs,

And, with the rails on sleepers, ~~spiking~~ gangs

Putting a silver polish on the rails.

Signalled

and on wheels

at signs only



The E.J. Pratt Symposium

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by GLENN CLEVER**

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K.P.S.

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ELIZABETH BREWSTER

AFTERMATH OF THE TITANIC

If I were to write a poem about the *Titanic*
(as, after Pratt, I don't think I shall)
I think I would choose that moment
just after the ship had gone down
when the great cry rose up from the water
of the drowning freezing
knowing now their false
useless courage
now that the ship was broken
and the band no longer played

and the half-empty lifeboats
pushed away
from the cries of the drowning,
the screams they would never forget
which would come back in nightmares
all their lives.

Or maybe I would write
about that lifeboat full of women
that pulled a drunken stoker on board
and could only keep him quiet
by taking turns sitting on him
(I like to think of those fat
stodgy practical women
no pretence of heroism
but weighed down
by heavy Titanic dinners)

Or the investigations later
recriminations, rumors true and false.
Did the captain kill himself?
Was the ship speeding
because one of the company directors
wanted to make New York
in time for a dinner date?
Did the *Californian*
see those signals
and ignore them?

I might speak
of the great usefulness
of the wreck for the newspapers
back in those peaceful doldrum days
two years before the War.

And yes I would write
how for months thereafter
ships were wary
of that stretch
of the Atlantic,
sailors thought it haunted
by lights and voices

and passengers were disturbed
when ships encountered
(as they did sometimes)
the bodies of the dead
unrecognizable
floating
upheld by life preservers.

INTRODUCTION

The Pratt Symposium held May 1-2, 1976, by the Department of English at the University of Ottawa, brought together a wide range of readers and scholars united by their common interest in "Ned Pratt" (1883-1964), the man and the poet. Many of those present had known him personally; and below the surface of the discussion one sensed the deep friendship and respect for Pratt that occasionally, in intonation or gesture, rippled on the surface.

The two days of discussion included an evening devoted to readings from Pratt's poems by the poets present, highlighted by the voice of Pratt himself on tape, reading from his own work — a most memorable occasion.

This volume presents a partial record of the events. The full taped record is available.

As with the previous symposia, on Grove (1973), Klein (1974), and Lampman (1975), the intention was to help establish the literary identity of the author. The panels and papers, and the keen discussion following them, helped to create a unified impression. The opening biographical panel, chaired by Fred Cogswell, led the way by presenting Pratt as seen through the sensibilities of those who knew him well. The talks by Carl Klinck and Ralph Gustafson put alive before us Pratt's warm, humorous personality, and his devoted and concentrated pursuit of poetic excellence.

The depth and variety of Pratt as poet took on new dimension in the papers that followed. Germain Warkentin showed that Pratt's shorter poems are not just the left-overs from the magnificent nar-

ratives but an essential part of his poetic nature, mythopoeic in effect, "defining and articulating what Pratt could give voice to in no other way," and that they exist as finished, poetic wholes. Gustafson had commented that "language makes a poem, not its contents"; Peter Stevens, in discussing Pratt's use of language, expressed the view that in Pratt, precise and impacting as the language is, "the power of the poems transcends the language that clothes it, and that in comparison to the effect of Pratt's poems, the "language is tied to feet of clay" — the spirit of the poetry exceeds it.

In the afternoon Peter Buitenhuis, discussing the role the sea plays in Pratt's poetry, concluded that though the sea always remained a potential threat, yet his poetry shows an "evolving awareness of man's complex relations with" and "ultimate dependence upon" the sea as life-sustaining for humanity. Sandra Djwa tackled the paradox that Pratt, who seems so major a figure and so modern alongside many Canadian poets of early 1920s, is scarcely acknowledged as a trend-setter towards modernism in Canadian literature, and developed the interesting proposition that much like the Group of Seven in painting his was a new function, the "heroic affirmation of the land and its people...an essential item in the literary development of any nation."

Peter Hunt, in an interesting account of the relationship of *Brébeuf and His Brethern* to its sources, challenged all those who would deny Pratt's Christian outlook, and asserted that to the contrary he "was inspired by a spiritual theme which struck deep chords in his own life," a life which was "one of true humanity and religious quest."

The following morning Glenn Clever in a review of Pratt's poetry of war and conflict presented the view that Pratt had no consistent moral attitude towards the problem of violence in the human situation and that this sometimes led to an aesthetic imbalance in specific poems. In the second paper, Agnes Nyland discussed *Brébeuf and His Brethern* in its historical context; her presentation reinforced the views of Peter Hunt that Pratt wrote from deep Christian convictions, and that this tone pervades and shapes this major poem.

In the afternoon Robert Gibbs placed Pratt, as a lyrical poet, squarely in "the modern tradition of wit," a lyricist of complexity yet one who sings from the sincerity of a "particular vision and particular feelings." The Symposium concluded with a panel discussion chaired by Louis Dudek on the achievement of Pratt. Throughout the many views presented one sensed the awareness that to those who read him he represents a unique and outstanding voice in Canadian literature.

In the concluding paper in this volume, unrepresented at the Symposium, Louis MacKendrick points out that we perhaps lean too heavily on the standard *Collected Poems*, that there is a large quantity of uncollected poems, and that these merit as much critical consideration as do those in the *Collected Poems*. He nominates "several new candidates for inclusion in a standard work."

I am much indebted to Mrs. Lila Laakso for providing the Preliminary Checklist, also unrepresented at the Symposium, which completes this volume, and point out that she requests additions or corrections be forwarded to her. Grateful acknowledgements are due to the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ottawa, for their support; and to Miss Lorna D. Fraser, Librarian of the Victoria University Library of the University of Toronto, and Mrs. Laakso, for making possible the excellent display of Pratt material.

GLENN CLEVER

RALPH GUSTAFSON

SOME PERSONAL APROPOS OF NED*

It is thirty years — or nearly that — since Ned Pratt invited me for my first party at the York Club in Toronto with him. “My dear Ralph,” he wrote to me in New York City on May 28, 1948, “You are to be my guest for dinner at the York Club, Toronto, on Wednesday June 2nd. It will be a delight to see you. The best ever, Ned Pratt.”

“The best ever” it certainly was. And it was always the delight of Ned to see the other person. It never entered his head that the truer place for the delight to be was in the head of the other fellow, the delight of being with Ned. It was more than a delight. It was a blessing. I had written an article called “Poetry can’t Wind Clocks but it Can Tell the Time.” “Dear Ralph,” his next letter to me started off, “I loved your article. I take the *Saturday Review* and saw it before your letter. God bless you. When are you coming up again? Any chance before going to Europe? When you decide to go and can get a relatively permanent address, let me know, so I can send you a hamper of food. You may need it for variety... Affectionately, Ned.”

A hamper of food: Where in the annals present and past and to come of Canadian poetry can you and will you find the like spontaneous extravagance of friendship? And where will you find another such patent falsity of excuse to be generous as Ned saying he was sending the food since there was possibly not enough variety in Europe? Ned was the true liar.

By 1952, Ned’s letters to me began: “Good old Ralph.” Ned was 26 years older than I was. He had graduated from the University of

* Presented during the biographical panel.

Toronto when I was two years old. Here he was, no letting a quarter of a century make any difference, and letting me graduate into the circle of Canadian poets. I was grateful. I hadn't sent any of my poems to Ned and here he was writing of them to me. He invariably did that — concern himself about poetry and not his place in the hierarchy.

I wanted my poems to be known but it was recognition of another sort which was impelling me too. I knew, like Ned, that Canadian poetry was better than the general accolades that were being handed around inside Canada; and I certainly knew that Canadian poetry was better than the indifference with which it was being treated abroad. And I knew that Pratt was an invaluable answer to that indifference — as Canadian poetry was. I was saying so, in London's *Life and Letters*, in New York's *Tomorrow* magazine, and in the anthologies for Penguin's and for New Directions. I was after those ponderous, dull, overloaded, well-meaning anthologies of Canadian poetry which, not only internally, but externally, were having, so it has since proved, almost irretrievably harmful results — consolidating the right to indifference abroad and consolidating parochialism and false virtue at home: the well-meaning but fallacious *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* edited by Wilfred Campbell, and the Garvin *Canadian Poets*, for instance. Anachronisms that still persist. Scott and Smith's *New Provinces* was in existence but made less than any headway. Frank Scott tells me that the bulk of the edition of 250 copies of *New Provinces* remained for years in boxes in his attic. Something in the way of a popular elitist explosion had to be set off. In the opening year of the Second World War, when the invitation came to me to provide an anthology of Canadian verse for the popular, world-distributing firm of Penguin's in London, the needed opportunity was presented. I had been juggling a probable anthology in 1938 and 1939 in London. The war seemed to knock that project on the head. Instead, the war propelled the whole project into reality. A paperback anthology was needed for distribution to the Canadian troops. Despite the paper shortage and the apparent irrelevance of poetry in the face of Hitler, the anthology was launched. The man I regarded as the key poet for the book was E.J. Pratt; Ned was the first man I wrote to; he was the first in encouragement.

There was no room for an extended introduction in that original war-time anthology which came out under the series-title of *Pelican* — a label for the Penguin books which were original in writing and not reprints. What I said at the first opportunity was this:

Romanticism is done. The majority belonging to the span of years before the century got well started, trying to write out of the romantic tradition, were, or are, too late.

Striding the breach of accomplishment is a redoubtable poet, E.J. Pratt. A master narrator, a technician of splendour and man of compassion and ironic depth. Pratt is one of the outstanding figures of Canadian writing. The pace, scope, dauntlessness, and comedy — Canada is everywhere in him.

Apart from my emphasis on comedy, to say that now is to say the

obvious. But it was not so obvious, and certainly not obvious abroad, a quarter of a century ago. The article on Pratt which I asked E.K. Brown to do for a subsequent anthology, *Canadian Accent*, in 1943, is one of the first of substance. Pratt was the figure bestriding the transition in Canadian poetry from worn-out romanticism of the late 19th century to the accuracy introduced by Yeats and Pound. Historically, I have always linked Ned with that irruption of Pound onto the literary scene of London. Pound read his “Sestina: Altaforte” to the circle of poets who got together for a weekly Thursday meeting at the Soho restaurant of 1909. Loud and full of quavers and vibrations, Pound declaimed:

Damn it all: all this our South stinks peace.
You whoreson dog, Papiols, come! Let’s to music!

Pound’s snarl stopped waiters in their rounds, forks and spoons halted between tablecloth and chin, heads turned and astonished eyes stared — so Charles Norman tells us in his life of Pound.

Pratt’s irruption onto the Canadian scene is the same in kind. Suddenly someone was writing:

A bull moose that had died from gas
While eating toadstools near Ungava.

The same grand buckle and boisterousness. The same arrival of a rambunctious personality. The same unstuffed reality! That was Ned, throwing his windows open. Fresh air from Newfoundland. A witches’ brew as well as Brébeuf and his brethren to be. Where were Mair, Sangster, and Campbell now; the vagabond Carman?

Ned’s work was central to the modern momentum underway in Canadian poetry. There had been W.W.E. Ross and his northern lyrics; there had been Raymond Knister and his swilling pigs. I had had correspondence with the one and looked up the other in the little magazines on file at the New York Public Library. Neither had the power and linguistics of Pratt; no one had his sense of comedy and therefore his affectionate irony and alertness to the tragedy of man’s nobility; no one had his indomitableness. Here was Pratt with Newfoundland crags in his mind and what beat on them; the titanic struggles of beast with beast, man with ocean, and man with machines, and man with man. Here was the pivot for any anthology.

Early in January of 1941 Ned had written me that he “was honoured indeed” to contribute to the Penguin; a month after, he was writing me: “If you should run up this way later, will you let me know in advance. I should love to ‘throw a little party’ for you.” *He* was honoured! All I could do to set things in their proper place was myself fly up to Toronto with a box of cigars.

Excerpts from “The Cachelot” and *The Titanic*, the poems “From Stone to Steel” and “The Prize Cat,” those lyrics central to the impulse behind all Pratt’s poetry, these all appeared in the *Pelican*. I wrote up asking for something more. He sent me “Still Life” in its first version. It had not been published in book form and

was in his own possession and accordingly I was “welcome to it.” Ned was forever keeping in mind the fact that I might be in need of a hamper of food for variety’s sake. Indeed I was. Canadian publishers were making me pay through the nose for copyright permissions, hoping to quash this cheap paper upstart of a *Pelican* which, so they said, was eating into what they called “their hard-earned royalties.”

That year (1942) I wrote up to Ned asking for something new; I was preparing a Canadian issue of an American periodical called *Voices*. Ned sent me down a poem. “You might like this one,” he wrote. The poem went into *Voices*. *Might* like it! What I got was the summation of the man. The poem was “The Truant.” Here was not only Charlie Chaplin caught in the machinery of “Modern Times”; here was man in the midst of the machine and war; both thumbing their noses.

I had spoken to Allen Lane, director of Penguin Books in London, persuading him that an annual of contemporary Canadian writing was well justified. Lane said go ahead. I named the projected series *Canadian Accent*. The paper shortage stopped the ambition. But one appeared. Ned was the staunch supporter. I had wanted, this time, to present both prose and poetry. “There are two men in this country,” Ned wrote me, “who ought to be able to put you into the best prose. One is professor Pelham Edgar ... he is excited over a novel on Halifax called *Barometer Rising* by a friend of mine — Hugh MacLennan. You may have heard of him. The other man is E.K. Brown, now assistant to the Prime Minister. You probably know him....”

Hugh MacLennan had given me permission to extract the “explosion” section from his novel; E.K. Brown wrote that he was determined that of the many themes he might like to treat none of the others would “be so immediately useful as an attempt to study Pratt’s work.” Brown, as all of us, found it hard to understand the extramural indifference to Pratt’s vitality and significance. Pratt was aware of this indifference. I remember Pratt disguising the awareness. E.K. Brown wrote about Pratt with an audience in view that is outside Canada. The *Penguin* book provided it. Pratt said that he had thought of incorporating ten shorter poems into his volume *Dunkirk*, but decided against it; if I wanted one of the short verses for *Canadian Accent*, I could have it. He sent me four poems; each, he repeated in thoughtfulness, was “absolutely in my own possession.” One of the poems was “Come Away, Death.” Indeed I wanted it! The atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. I parallel “Come Away, Death” with Archibald MacLeish’s earlier poem, “The End of the World”. Both poems are before Hiroshima, but I quote from Shelley’s “A Defense of Poetry”:

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present.

Exceptions to outside indifference to Pratt’s work at the time I write of were Henry W. Wells who collaborated with Carl Klinck on a full-

fledged book, *Edwin J. Pratt: The Man and His Poetry*, and William Rose Benét whom I knew as editor of the *Saturday Review* and at whose apartment in New York I met Ned Pratt. Benét said it was “a gross oversight” that Pratt was so little known in the United States. He later introduced Pratt’s *Collected Poems* which Alfred A. Knopf produced. It was a good evening at Benét’s and a joint conclusion was arrived at that having a message never yet produced a work of art. Pratt said that he had more to say than he’d ever have time for; but the prior demand was another kind of impulse and joy; manipulation of the English language.

This theme was one that was often touched on in chats with Ned on my visits to him of Glencairn Avenue and Elm Avenue. From that, eventually the conversation always brought in his two pet subjects: Mozart and Napoleon. What a combination! The power and the glory! He was grateful when I asked if I could reprint “Come Not the Seasons Here” in a revised *Penguin* anthology. He more than once wondered aloud if his personal lyrics must pass unnoticed.

I stress the point that language makes a poem, not its contents. Symbolical levels of meaning may be there in the poem, but like as not the poet is spontaneously deliberate about that seventh word rather than that seventh heaven. Pratt had too much of comedy in him ever to succumb to the scholastic in poems and the thematic. Life was complex and comic and poetry was verbal and active. Spontaneous as Mozart and pragmatic as Napoleon. Pratt liked verbal scope and music that you could hear. He wasn’t superficial; he was simply, first, a poet whose materials were language. First, language; then, as you will: Darwin and Freud and Saint Paul and eschatology and the unconscious. Nothing of Yeats’ “Celestial Geometry” for him. Ned used extra copies of his doctoral dissertation of the eschatology of Saint Paul to light fires at his parties. “It was very dull stuff,” he said, “but burned with an extraordinary hot flame.” One thinks of poor Tom Eliot eschewing the world and crying with Buddha and Saint Augustine: “Burning, burning, burning burning.” Ned’s line “bugles on the barricades” in his poem “The Truant” is really not Christian ethics but alliterative poetic energy. Plato is not our greatest poet; Saint Paul is not our great poet. The poet who has mastered language is our great poet. The emphasis I am making makes me recall the Symposium on Pound last year at the University of Maine: three-days on Pound, Money and Banks Today, on Pound and typography, on Pound and everything else but the actual poetry until I blew up and Professor Terrell, the master of ceremonies, himself read the 45th Canto. The symposia (note that plural) at the University of Ottawa always have an airing of and a reading of the poetry itself, but I recall making the point at the Klein Symposium that Klein just possibly may have partly written the phrase “the body odour of race” not because the content of the colloquium written about was hot but because the room where it took place was. And that judgment at the Lampman Symposium that declared Lampman’s political sonnets were good sonnets because they were social — “I

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