

E. J. PRATT: THE EPIC PHASE IN CANADIAN POETRY

Edwin John Pratt (1882-1964) dominates Canadian poetry in the first half of the twentieth century and, therefore, he belongs, at least chronologically, to a generation of artists who witnessed two world wars and who, as a result of this appalling experience, set aside the youthful enthusiasm of the Romantics and the didactic impulse of the Victorians to voice the pessimism of the new age. In Europe, the echoes of the old faith in man's ability to achieve a more meaningful existence could still be heard, but the dominant mood was one of scepticism about the progress and future of mankind. Romantic and post-Romantic poets had generally adopted the role of guides who could provide the right orientation for existence. The most influential modern artists, on the contrary, chose to highlight man's decadence and frustration. Against this, the poetry of E. J. Pratt, seems to be more Romantic than modern because this Canadian artist is essentially optimistic about man's potential and celebrates progress, strength and resilience instead of brooding on life-destructive forces. To a great extent, the reason for this vitality and optimism is to be found in the social and political climate that dominated Canadian life in the first decades of this century. In an article entitled "The 1920s: E. J. Pratt Transitional Modern", the critic Sandra Djwa contrasts the aftermath of World War I in Europe and the United States with the effects that the conflict produced in Canada and explains the reasons for the wave of optimism that pervaded Canadian society when peace was restored:

In Europe and in the United States, the reaction to the war had been one of profound disillusionment. But in Canada, despite the appalling casualties of the war, the mood of the post war years was buoyant. In effect, the war represented a political coming of age. For some of the returning soldiers, there was a sense of optimism and hope; and this hope for the future was centered in that which distinguished Canada from older Europe - in the land itself. In effect, they were leaving behind the waste lands of the battlefields of Europe for the fresh, clear northerland of Canada.¹

The critic Sandra Djwa goes on to say that in this social context poems such as "The Lonely Land" by Arthur J. M. Smith (1902-1980), which is a celebration of Canada's rugged beauty, were resonant symbols whereas "The Waste Land" found little of no echo among Canadians. Indeed, Eliot's view that he lived in an age of decline did not reflect the Canadian reality. Canada was rapidly changing from a pioneer to a technological society and the sense of nationhood was stronger than ever. In the literary sphere this wave of nationalism brought with

¹ Sandra Djwa: The 1920s: Pratt, Transitional Modern. In *The E. J. Pratt Symposium*, Glenn Clever, (ed.) 1977: 56-57. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.

it, as in the times of Confederation, a desire for a truly Canadian literature that would confirm the existence of the new nation. The country demanded a new and virile art worthy of the young and powerful Canadian nationality. Like the Confederation poets and the painters of the Group of Seven, E. J. Pratt realized that Canadian history was an important chapter in a distinct and even unique human endeavour, the civilisation of northern and Arctic lands and that it was from this landscape that Canadian artists had to make their myths in order to forge a national consciousness. Besides, E. J. Pratt was acutely aware of the fact that Canada as a young country lacked the epic phase that enriched older cultures, so he attempted to fill this gap by producing extended treatments of two epic stories- one going back three centuries and involving the physical endurance and religious fervour of the French missionaries martyred by the Iroquois in 1649, and the other belonging to the most immediate past exploring a secular, even technological subject such as the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. However different these subjects may seem, they both recount the battle between man and brute nature which is a central theme in Pratt's poetry. These long poems entitled "Brébeuf and his Brethren" and "Towards the Last Spike" also illustrate the artist's belief that the Canadian landscape offers greater opportunities for living on a grander scale. Indeed, in Pratt's vigorous narrative poems the harshness of the Canadian wilderness bears testimony to the physical and moral vigour of its inhabitants. The landscape is seen to increase in scale and power to fantastic, mythical proportions and the figures who move in it, who ultimately may be seen as the embodiment of Canadian society, acquire the same epic dimensions as the physical environment in which they are immersed. In "Brébeuf and his Brethren" E. J. Pratt is first and foremost concerned with the affirmation of the land and of its people through the dramatisation of the struggle between Canadians and their physical environment. The poem is a celebration of the idealism, martial courage and ancestral honour of the founding fathers of the Canadian nation who began to tame and humanize the land for future generations. The destructive power of the natural world is intensified by the brutality of the natives who symbolise the element of risk and danger in the Canadian wilderness as well as its amoral nature. A letter that Brébeuf sent to France is pithy enough:

This country is the breeding place of vermin
Sandflies, mosquitoes haunt the summer months.
In France you may have been a theologian,
A scholar, master, preacher, but out here
You must attend a savage school; for months
Will pass before you learn even to lisp
The language. Here barbarians shall be
Your Aristotle and Saint Thomas. Mute
Before those teachers you shall take your lessons.
What of winter? Half the year is winter.
Inside your cabins will be smoke so thick
You may not read your Breviary for days.
Around your fireplace at mealtime arrive

The uninvited guests with whom you share
Your stint of food. And in the fall and winter,
You tramp unbeaten trails to reach the missions,
Carrying your luggage on your back. Your life
Hangs by a thread.¹

These last words were indeed a premonition for the Iroquois captured the missionaries and tortured them to death:

Now three o'clock, and capping the height of the passion
Confusing the sacraments under the pines of the forest,
Under the incense of balsam, under the smoke
Of the pitch, was offered the rite of the font. On the head
The breast, the loins and the legs, the boiling water!
While the mocking paraphrase of the symbols was hurled
At their faces like shards of flint from the arrowheads. (lines 2023-2028).

If we set aside religious considerations we may say that in this poem Pratt exults at the spectacle of the frightening vitality of the wilderness and the savagery of its creatures represented by the Indians. In contrast to the Wordsworthian view of nature as the benevolent attendant on human emotions adopted by the Confederation artists, Pratt stresses the mechanistic and dangerous aspects of his physical surroundings thereby destroying the illusion of the wilderness as an expression of beatitude. E. J. Pratt clearly departs from the magical view of the world that pervades the writing of his predecessors and adopts a more realistic stance towards nature which places him in the context of modern poetry. For the Confederation poets nature was a mother, for Pratt it was often a murderess to whom he was, however, powerfully attracted as the reading of "Brébeuf and his Brethren" and the rest of his compositions suggests.

In the same way, the poem "Towards the Last Spike" celebrates the awesome nature of the Canadian wilderness and its invigorating effects on the mind and body of the people who attempted to bring this harsh land into subjection. In this long narrative, Pratt gives a detailed and well-documented account of the parliamentary debates that took place before and during the building of the railway, and describes the unimaginable natural barriers the builders had to overcome before the driving in of the last spike in 1885. He tells us that the prairies were relatively easy to conquer:

The grass that fed the buffalo was turned over,
The black alluvial mould laid bare, the bed
levelled and scraped²

¹ E. J. Pratt: Brébeuf and his Brethren. In *E. J. Pratt Complete Poems*, Part II, Sandra Djwa & R. G. Moyles (eds.) 1989 (1939): Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Pp. 68-69, lines 749-776.

² E. J. Pratt: Towards the Last Spike. In *The E. J. Pratt Complete Poems*, Part II, op. cit., p. 226, lines 830-832.

However, the Laurentian Shield and the Rockies were obstacles that 'put cramps in hands and feet / Merely by the suggestion of the venture'.¹ E. J. Pratt endows the mass of Precambrian rock along the north shore of Lake Superior with mythological status by likening it to a female dragon that had lain undisturbed for aeons 'snug' against another huge reptile representing the full extent of the Shield:

On the North Shore a reptile lay asleep-
A hybrid that the myths might have conceived
But not delivered as progenitor
Of crawling, gliding things upon earth.
She lay snug in the folds of a huge boa
Whose tail had covered Labrador and swished
Atlantic tides, whose body coiled itself
Around Hudson Bay, then curled up north
Through Manitoba and Saskatchewan
To Great Slave Lake. In Continental reach
The neck went past the Great Bear Lake until
Its head was hidden in the Arctic seas.
This folded reptile was asleep or dead;
So motionless, she seemed stone dead- just seemed:
She was too old for death, too old for life,
For as if jealous of all living forms
She had lain there before bivalves began
To catacomb their shells on western mountains. (lines 870-887).

Then, with the humour that T. S. Eliot recommended should be included in every piece of writing however serious its theme might be, E. J. Pratt says that, at first, the 'horde of bipeds that could toil like ants' only 'tickled her with shovels. However, when dynamite perturbed the monster's sleep that 'had lasted a few seconds of her time', this dragon awoke in rage and warned the intruders with a trial of her strength:

(...) the trestles tottered;
Abutments, bridges, broke; her rivers flooded:
She summoned snow and ice, and then fell back
On the last weapon in her armory (lines 947-950).

It is in this kind of environment, hard, northern and vital that Pratt places his characters endowing them with superhuman faith and courage. In "Brébeuf and his Brethren" the protagonist is described as a man of noble ancestry whose extraordinary courage and endurance did

¹ Ibid. p. 231; lines 991-992.

not only spring from religious fervour and the wilderness experience but also from racial origins. In the same way, "Towards the Last Spike" includes many references to the qualities of leadership and physical strength of the race of men who were behind the project of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The poet stresses the determination of people of Scottish origin such as Prime Minister Macdonald and suggests that such arduous task would have never been possible without the stamina of northern people.

The first reference to the robustness of mind and body of those who decided to conquer the sleeping dragon of the Canadian space appears in the second section of the poem entitled "The Gathering" which is full of images related to the human body intended to prove that men are made what they are by their food:

Oatmeal was in their blood and in their names.
Thrift was the title of their catechism.
It governed all things but their mess of porridge
Which, when it struck the hydrochloric acid
With treacle and skim-milk, became a mash.
Entering the duodenum, it broke up
Into amino acids: then the liver
Took on its natural job as carpenter:
Foreheads grew into cliffs, jaws into juts.
The meal, so changed, engaged the follicles:
Eyebrows came out as gorse, the beards as thistles,
And the chest-hair the fell of Grampian rams.
It stretched and vulcanized the human span:
Nonagenarians worked and thrived upon it.
Out of such chemistry run through by genes,
The food released its fearsome racial products: -
The power to strike a bargain like a foe,
To win an argument upon a burr,
Invest the language with a Bannockburn. (lines 64-90).

Apart from adding another touch of humour to the story, the aim of this surprising description of the intestinal workings of the men who made the project of the railway possible is, as Arthur. J. M. Smith remarks, to endow these people with the same qualities of the paleolithic beast they had to bring into subjection:

The images here are not mainly pictorial, nor are they intended to be decorative. They are functional and while they suggest forcefully the characters of the men whose interior workings are so vividly laid before us, they are means not ends. The analogies not only are, they

act. What they do is powerfully create a metaphorical identity between these rock-like Scottish financiers and engineers and the hardness and toughness of their antagonistic nature.¹

Further references to the daring character of the Scottish Canadians who were involved in the construction of the railway appear in the poem when, after many parliamentary debates and sleepless nights, John Macdonald decided that 'there was enough strychnine in their names / to make flip a penny for the risk'. And when the last spike was finally laid after innumerable vicissitudes which included a rebellion of prairie Indians, Pratt concludes the narrative saying that 'the breed had triumphed after all'. The land route which united the Canadian provinces was completed and the protagonists of this epic enterprise were lifted to the stature of heroes by the power of poetry.

However, Pratt's decision to make the Scots the heroes of his story was criticised by other artists such as F. R. Scott who, in a poem entitled "All the Spikes but the Last", accused Pratt of having forgotten the numerous workers of Asiatic origin who contributed to the success of the enterprise:

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

(...)

Did they fare so well in the land they helped to
unite? Did they get one of the 25,000,000 acres?²

This accusation is well founded because Pratt only devotes a few lines to the Chinese labourers in the passage that describes the laying of tracks around Fraser Canyon. However, Pratt's choice may be understood and even justified if we bear in mind that he was first and foremost concerned with the stirring of national pride. This feeling could hardly have been elicited if he had made the Chinese the heroes of his story. Canada was founded by two nationalities, the French and the British, the two communities Pratt celebrates in his epic narratives. This seems to be part of the poet's achievement. He fused the two Canadas imaginatively into one nation where the power of a northern landscape is matched by the stature of its people.

E. J. Pratt's fascination with force and magnitude, with extreme situations and heroism in the face of death make much more sense if we relate them to the country that inspired his poems. Like the Confederation poets, Pratt takes the wilderness with him when he writes and his poetry is marked by intense affirmation. However, he speaks with an idiom which seems to be more appropriate to the Canadian landscape than the Romantic idiom adopted by the

¹ A. J. Smith: Some Poems of E. J. Pratt: Aspects of Imagery and Theme. In *The Pratt Lecture*. St. John, Newfoundland: Memorial University, 1969: 17.

² F. R. Scott: All the Spikes but the Last, as quoted by Peter Buitenhuis in *Canadian Writers and their Works*, vol. 3, Robert Lecker, Jack David & Ellen Quigly (eds.) 1983: 150. Downsview, Ontario: Essays on Canadian Writing Press.

Confederation artists. Indeed, if the Canadian wilderness had a voice it would certainly sound like the poetry of Edwin John Pratt.

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