



The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse (Wynford Books)

Wilfred Campbell (deceased), Len Early

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A century ago Oxford University Press published the first anthology of Canadian poetry—a beautiful blue edition with gilt edges. "There are selections of verse in this volume which now appear for the first time in the pages of any Canadian anthology," proudly writes volume editor and poet Wilfred Campbell in his preface. While he argues that "the so-called Canadian spirit is the voice of the Vaster Britain," his original selection submitted to the publisher was considered too traditional and British, poorly representing contemporary writers. The selection was revised, and a host of younger poets were included—poets now associated with early attempts to forge a uniquely Canadian voice.

Perhaps hoping he could sell his poetry to Empire readers, many of Campbell's poems reflect the British literary tradition of dark, cold, and dangerous landscapes. Cold is a recurring metaphor for emptiness and dislocation in this early immigrant poetry, as in C.D. Shanly's "The Walker of the Snow," Charles Heaveseg's "Winter Night," and Mrs. R.A. Faulkner's "Frost on the Window." There is a less-than-subtle connection between cold and death, as in Rev. R.J. McGeorge's "The Emigrant's Funeral," J.R. Ramsay's "November. A Dirge," Evan M'Coll's "The Highland Emigrant's Last Farewell," and John J. Proctor's "Dead." Other poems likely chosen to draw the curiosity of British readers include historical topics (Charles Mair's "Tecumseh," Charles Sangster's "Brock," and Thomas D'Arcy McGee's "Jacques Cartier") and Aboriginal themes ("The Indian's Grave," "Indian Summer," and "The Red Men").

Midway through the collection enter the younger, contemporary voices of now-famous poets, many whom were published here for the first time. Bliss Carman, Charles G.D. Roberts, Duncan Campbell Scott, and Archibald Lampman—known as the Confederation Poets—explore a range of themes, from war to women to the Canadian landscapes. The later poetry includes E. Pauline Johnson, a Mohawk writer and performer otherwise known as Tekahionwake, among other women poets.

This anniversary edition provides insight into how early Canada looked and felt to newcomers, evolving attitudes about Canadian identity, and the early canonization of the nation's literature. The Wynford edition is introduced by Len Early, associate professor of English at York University.

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