

# The Distaff Side of the Confederation Group:

## Women's Contribution to Early Nationalist Canadian Literature

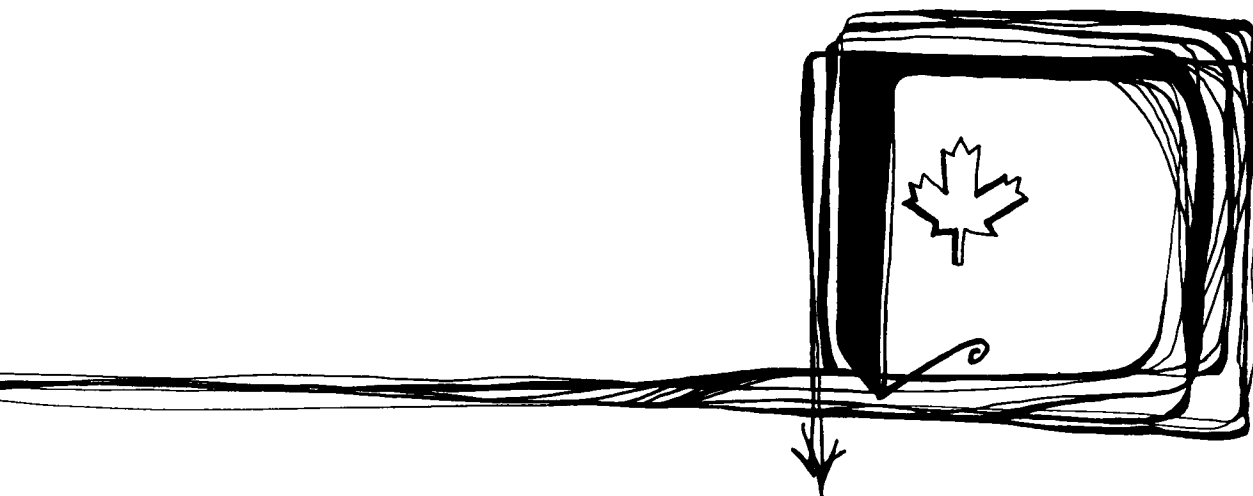
The growth of nationalism was essential to the development of a distinctive Canadian literature. The initial impetus was given by events surrounding Confederation in 1867 and it was encouraged the following year by the development of the Canada First Movement after the assassination of Thomas D'Arcy McGee, one of the fathers of Confederation whose death became a rallying point for the new nationalists. The creation of the Royal Society of Canada in 1882, in response to a hotly debated suggestion by the Governor General, Lord Lorne, brought together Canadian scientists and historians, writers and academics. From its meetings and the cross-fertilization of ideas it inspired came the challenge to



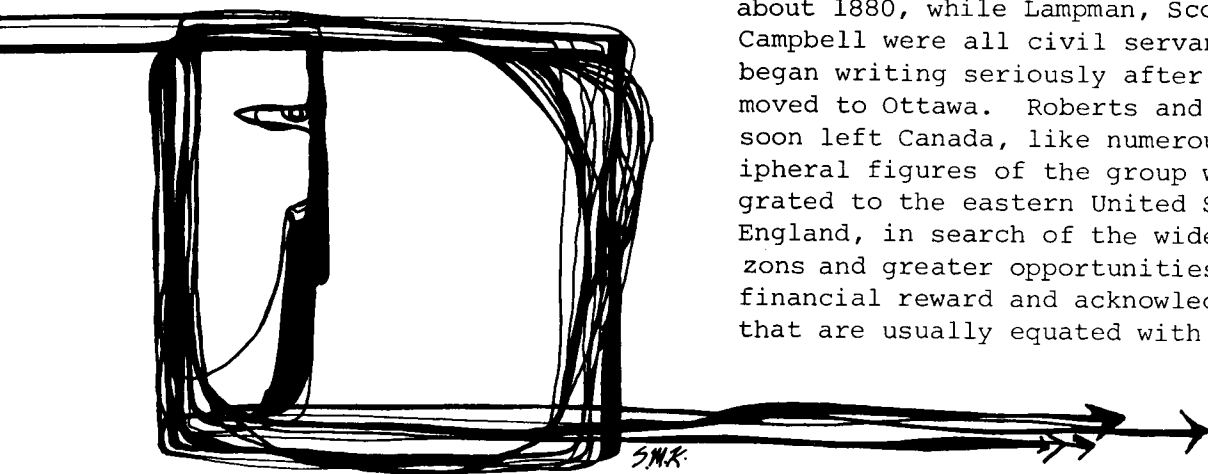
write in the spirit of unity and a distinctive Canadian identity began to take shape.

The promotion of nationalism as a theme in prose and poetry has been attributed to a handful of men born about 1861, who were the members of a loosely structured literary circle now called "the Confederation Group" or

by Margaret Coulby Whitridge



"the Group of '61." The leaders were Charles G.D. Roberts, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, William Wilfred Campbell and Bliss Carman. Roberts, several of his brothers, his sister Elizabeth and his cousin, Bliss Carman, were at the centre of a small corps of Maritimes' poets who began writing in Fredericton, New Brunswick, about 1880, while Lampman, Scott and Campbell were all civil servants who began writing seriously after they moved to Ottawa. Roberts and Carman soon left Canada, like numerous peripheral figures of the group who migrated to the eastern United States or England, in search of the wider horizons and greater opportunities for financial reward and acknowledgement that are usually equated with success.



The equally represented women in the group have been undeservedly forgotten or overlooked although, at the time, they were just as well-known in North American letters. Active, liberated and frequently well-educated, they strove to establish themselves during the decades from 1880 to 1900 in the creative arts in Canada and the United States. Following the example of Roberts and others, several went to other countries in pursuit of literary success. Often they published under pen-names like "Fidelis," "Seranus," "Bel Thistlewaite," "Medusa," "Esperance" and "Fleurange," and they wrote prolifically--poems, novels, critiques of society and politics, short stories, essays and travelogues. Some even ventured into the writing of dramas and operas, although with indifferent success. Some were newspaper reporters, teachers, archivists, naturalists and agitators. These women were innovators, trail-blazing in their chosen fields. The names and work of a few may be remembered: Agnes Machar, Susan Harrison, Sara Jeanette Duncan and, the maverick member of the group, the notorious Pauline Johnson. The names of other women writers who flourished in the late nineteenth century in Canada are now obscured and they have been denied the literary place they sought avidly and which some merited. There was a surprising number in their ranks--over two hundred women writing in every settlement in Canada from coast to coast.

This paper will focus on three Ontario women who lived within a one hundred mile radius of Toronto and who deserve attention as poets and as outstanding human beings: Helen M. Merrill, Susan Frances Harrison (better known as Seranus) and Agnes Ethelwyn Wetherald who wrote under the nom-de-plume, Bel Thistlewaite. Possibly Pauline Johnson was better known and Agnes Machar more versatile and productive. However, Machar, who wrote as Fidelis, seems to have been a lesser poet and Johnson has received the attention she deserves, so this paper is devoted to the achievements of three fine writers who previously have been neglected.

Susan Frances Harrison's contributions in prose and verse in North American and British periodicals and through publication of a number of varied books made her favoured nom-de-plume, Seranus, a "household word in the homes of literary Canadians," by 1891. (1) She also wrote under the pen-names Medusa and Gilbert King. (2) Harrison achieved success on the stage in Montreal, Toronto and Ottawa, not only as a singer and composer but also for her spirited reading of her own poems, particularly her light-hearted villanelles describing French-Canadian life in Quebec and eastern Ontario, which she knew well. These poems reveal her knowledge of the colourful habitant life with remarkable insight and humour. Poems like "Les Chantiers," "St. Jean Baptiste," and "Gatineau Point," part of her poetic sequence,

"Down the River" published in her book, Pine, Rose and Fleur de lis, were a delight to hear and demonstrate her kinship with the better known habitant poet, Dr. William Henry Drummond of Montreal.(3) These poems belong to a realistic genre that had been developing steadily in Canada and could be seen in the prose of Charles Roberts, Edward William Thomson and Duncan Campbell Scott, whose work was collected and published in 1896 in the book, In the Village of Viger.(4)

Susan Frances Riley was born in Toronto in 1859, daughter of an Irish innkeeper, proprietor of the Revere House. She was educated in private schools and, when her family moved to Montreal, she studied English and philosophy at McGill University under a distinguished member of the Confederation Group, Professor Clark Murray. At sixteen, she began writing and publishing poetry under the pen-name, Medusa. She became an active member of the Montreal Ladies Literary Society and was well known in musical circles as a soloist and composer. The musical compositions of the ambitious teenager were soon being published in Canada and the United States. These talents were appreciated by J.W. Harrison, an Anglican church organist, whom she married and accompanied to Ottawa. The new Mrs. Harrison attained fleeting fame as composer and singer of "A Song of Welcome" to the new Governor General, the Marquis of Lansdowne, on his first public appearance in Ottawa in 1883. She also

collaborated with F.A. Dixon of Ottawa in composing an elaborate comic opera on a Canadian theme, the three-act work, Pipandor, which proved too expensive to stage when it was completed.

In 1886, Seranus published her first book, Crowded Out and Other Sketches, describing effectively and romantically the beauties of Muskoka and the landscape of lower Canada. This was followed in 1887 by a collection of excerpts of Canadian poets, Canadian Birthday Book, which included thumbnail criticisms of the authors. Lampman, the lyric sonneteer, was described as a writer "of fugitive verse of high merit, mostly Swinburnian in style," although she knew the poet well enough to realize that the name of Swinburne was anathema to him.(5) She may have been retaliating for a description of herself, attributed to Lampman or a friend, as a lady who "sometimes wrote fragments instinct with intense passion." She was not a woman who wanted to be remembered for fragments of passion in the printed world.

Harrison's most acclaimed collection of poems, Pine, Rose and Fleur de lis, appeared in 1891 and received high praise. For a time she was Ottawa correspondent of the Detroit Free Press.(6) The Forest of Bourg-Marie, her first novel, written on a French-Canadian theme, was published in 1898 and her only other novel, Ringfield, appeared in 1914. Her final collec-

tion, In Northern Skies and Other Poems, was published in 1912.

Her absorption with French-Canadian cultural traditions, her knowledge of the Metis and Indian races in Canada and her understanding of their fate as minority groups, despite their prior claims, made her an important nationalist writer. She was a talented poet and novelist who earned her place at the centre of the Confederation Group. A quotation from her popular book, Pine, Rose and Fleur de lis, will illustrate this point:

#### GATINEAU POINT

A half-breed, slim, and sallow of face,  
Alphonse lies full length on his raft,  
The hardy son of a hybrid race.

Lithe and long, with the Indian grace,  
Vers'd in the varied Indian craft,  
A half-breed, slim, and sallow of face.

He nurses within mad currents that  
    chase--  
The swift, the sluggish--a foreign  
    graft,  
This hardy son of a hybrid race.

What southern airs, what snows embrace  
Within his breast--soft airs that waft  
The half-breed, slim, and sallow of  
    face,

Far from the Gatineau's foaming base!  
And what strong potion hath he quaff'd,  
This hardy son of a hybrid race,  
That upon this sun-bak'd blister'd  
    place

He sleeps, with his hand on the burning  
    haft,

This hardy son of a hybrid race!(7)

In villanelles like these, she expounded upon the problems affecting Canada's native people. This particular poem, with the setting of the Gatineau River, a few miles from Ottawa in the Gatineau Hills of Quebec, combines her major themes--the beauty of the natural scene against which Canadians of very different origins acted out lives that were often tragic in destiny, a setting heightened by her awareness of man's humanity. The half-Indian, half-French lad is tormented by conflicts inherent in his mixed heritage--conflicts that have not yet been resolved.

Helen Merrill was another light-hearted and personable poet in the Confederation Group, one who barely escaped the regional epithet that characterized many of the four hundred and fifty voices in the Group, originally thought to consist of five men, three of them in Ottawa and two in New Brunswick. The daughter of a county court judge in Picton, Ontario, she was born in near-by Napanee and was educated at Ottawa Ladies' College. She returned home to a not unhappy life in the bosom of her family, spent caring for aging parents, entertaining friends, writing, attending meetings of half a dozen societies and sailing, which was the real love of her life.

Like Susan Harrison, Helen Merrill was sympathetic to the cause of Canada's Indians. She knew a great deal about their history and customs because Napanee is located at the edge of a large Indian reserve. Helen and her friend, Agnes Machar, the Kingston, Ontario writer, were tremendous joiners, much given to causes, no doubt due to their constricted, rather high-level social existences, which might otherwise have verged on boredom. Both were bird watchers, loved animals, liked to entertain and liked to be on or near the water with their friends. Both found inspiration in Lake Ontario where it joined the great St. Lawrence River, which they could see daily from their windows.

The Merrills were United Empire Loyalists, interested in preserving the New England traditions acquired by their French Huguenot ancestors who had landed in America in 1633. For many years, Helen toiled with Ottawa archivist and poet, William Wilfred Campbell, on a labour of love, gathering information for an historical work on the Loyalist settlers of Canada. She edited for publication the 1792-1796 diaries of John White, the first attorney general of Upper Canada. She also presided as president of the Canadian Society for the Protection of Birds and as secretary of the United Loyalists Association of Canada. Not until her father died did the tenor of her life vary, and she moved to Toronto with her mother. There Helen embarked

upon a career in very modern fashion. She joined the staff of the Ontario Archives where her historical knowledge and writing ability were greatly appreciated. The Oneida Band of the Six Nations Indians adopted her into their tribe and gave her the name, Ka-ya-tonhs, which means "a keeper of records." (8) Later she officiated at the Sir Isaac Brock Commemoration at Queenston Heights. Finally, when she was almost fifty, Helen, an extremely handsome woman, married Frank Egerton, a former British army officer who had come from Maidstone, England, to settle in Toronto.

Her work appeared frequently in The Week and other periodicals. It was much admired and anthologized, but she was too busy to polish and publish to any great extent. Instead, she produced a fascinating anthology of her own and her friends' work. This book, Picturesque Prince Edward County, a charming conversation piece in the record of Canada's nationalist writers, was printed in Picton in 1892 (9). An early paper-back, it sold for twenty-five cents and ran to 128 pages. The volume contained several of her essays describing a sailing trip taken by herself, her brother and their literary friends. There were snapshots of the happy group at lakeside resorts and some charming sketches of the coves and sand dunes. However, there the regional nature faded for the collection contained samples of the work of the major post-Confederation

writers--Campbell, Roberts, Scott, Sangster, Davlin, Bengough and several notable women writers, including Charlotte Holmes of Picton, who later eulogized Lampman, Pauline Johnson, Agnes Machar and her friend, Annie Rothwell. Helen Merrill contributed several poems including "Sand Waifs," "The Little Forest Drummer," "The Lake on the Mountain" and "Villeneuve House." They are good examples of her impressionistic style and easy naturalism.

That her range extended farther is made clear in another poem, "The Canada Wind." For inspiration, her imagination led her to look south to the United States, east to her French and English ancestors and only glancingly west. Then she asked:

Whence bloweth the Canada wind?  
Its path is the way of the world's  
    wide rim,  
The strange white tracts of the barren  
    zone,  
Immutable, luminous, wild and lone;  
Spaces enduring through aeons dim,  
Veiling the sky and the blue sea's  
    brim,  
Striving for ever, yet never free,  
Fetters which ever bind--  
The Canada wind is the keen north wind,  
The wind of the secret sea,  
And quickens the soul of me. (10)

Obviously, Helen Merrill's chief source of inspiration was the developing nation to which she belonged. Like

Scott and Lampman, Susan Harrison and Pauline Johnson, she saw clearly the threads that must unite to create in Canadians a strong and undeniable sense of identity--the heritage of the native Indians and Aleuts, and of the later founding fathers, the French and English, together with the Loyalist influences brought from the eastern United States. A hundred years ago, nationalists were agitated by a proposed education act in Manitoba, which would inhibit French Canadians who lived there from educating their children in the language of their choice. Today, they would be supporting Canada's recent Official Languages Act. In this setting, Helen Merrill is an interesting member of the nationalist movement.

A third woman writer of the period, Agnes Ethelwyn Wetherald, further extends our knowledge of women's participation in the early nationalist literature of Canada.

At noon, on March 2, 1896, writer Archibald Lampman dropped into an Ottawa book store and bought a small collection of poems by a writer he knew casually through a Toronto friend, journalist and biographer, Joseph Edmund Collins. He felt a sense of interest and was always glad to see another Canadian writer in print. The contents moved him and when he finished reading the book at his office, he jotted down a brief poem on the fly leaf. It can be read today in his

copy of Ethelwyn Wetherald's book, The House of the Trees and Other Poems, at Queen's University, in Kingston. This volume was given by Lampman's self-appointed executor, Duncan Scott, to Lorne Pierce, the late Canadian publisher. Lampman's tribute read:

Little book, thy pages stir  
With a poet's brighter life;  
In days that gloom with doubt and  
    strife,  
To many a silent sufferer.

Thou shalt bring a balm for pain,  
Felt behind his prison bars,  
The spirit of the sun and stars,  
The spirit of the wind and rain.(11)

Although he was ten years married, Lampman was deeply troubled at the time by his hopeless love for an Ottawa woman, Katherine Waddell. As Professor Thomas O'Hagan of the University of Ottawa wrote five years later, "Miss Wetherald is the poetess of love," and the appeal of her work for Lampman must have been immediate. (12)

Of course, Ethelwyn Wetherald was more than a romantic. She was a seasoned journalist on the international scene, an ardent feminist, totally involved in the life of her day (and her day was a long one, lasting from April 26, 1857 to March 8, 1940). She was an active participant in the nationalist movement who saw and evaluated the influence of the United States on the prospect of lasting Canadian indepen-

dence. Perhaps her failing lay in being too readily and totally committed, to love, to social change, to politics, as in other important aspects of life. She sustained at different times, apparently, deep-rooted affections for two major writers, both well-known men in Canada who moved to the United States to expand upon their success. She never married. Under her pen-name, Bel Thistlewaite (her mother's maiden name), she achieved distinction as a solid journalist and as a writer of high rank among women poets, and high fame, both in Canada and the United States, where her books enjoyed joint publication and excellent sales.(13) In those days, she was better known than men like Lampman, Scott or Campbell. In 1893, she presented a rather sensational report on "Women in Journalism" at an international conference in Chicago; it was reported in The Week, Canada's major literary periodical and a nationalist organ, on June 23rd.(14)

This poet was born in Rockwood, Ontario where her father, the Reverend William Wetherald, was principal of Rockwood Academy. Educated at a Quaker boarding school in New York, then at Pickering College outside Toronto, by thirty she was women's editor of the Advertiser in London, Ontario. It was then that she began publishing haunting nature poems and love poems that imprinted themselves on the memory, by their undercurrents, more than by their conventional rhymes. A poem about birds and trees would suddenly soar



into the universal tragedy inherent in personal experience and conclude:

That was where the heart's guest  
Brooded months ago,  
Where the tender thoughts pressed  
Lovingly--and lo!  
Dead leaves in the heart's nest  
Under falling snow.(15)

Lampman would have sympathized with the lines in, "There Is a Solitude,"

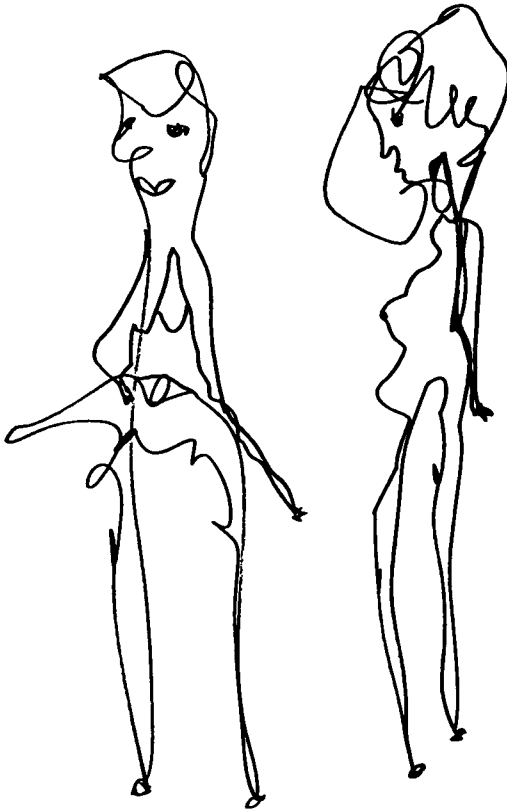
O thou that feels the dust mount and  
mount  
Up to the jaded nostrils, smarting  
eyes,  
There is a solitude within thy heart;  
Go wash yourself.(16)

Miss Wetherald's second volume, Tangled in Stars, was published in Boston in 1902 by the Gorham Press which brought out her next work, The Radiant Road in

1904. A collection of her best one hundred and sixty poems was published by William Briggs in Toronto in 1907. A critic commented, "It was warmly welcomed generally, by reviewers and lovers of poetry, and it at once established for the poet enduring fame." (17) The Governor General, Earl Grey, wrote to tell her how much he liked it and purchased twenty-five copies to give to friends. After writing for the Toronto Globe for some years, she retired to the family farm at Fenwick, Ontario. Her final books were The Last Robin: Lyrics and Sonnets and the 1931 collection, edited by John Garvin, Lyrics and Sonnets. Like the other women whose work has been briefly described, Ethelwyn Wetherald was a distinguished member of that "grand old group of the sixties." Much can be learned from their daring and their intellectual integrity.

NOTES

1. Anonymous, "Our Library Table," The Week, 27 Nov. 1891, p. 836.
2. Ethelwyn Wetherald, "Some Canadian Literary Women: I. Seranus," The Week, 22 Mar. 1888, p. 267.
3. Susan F. Harrison, Pine, Rose and Fleur de lis (Toronto: Hart and Company, 1891), pp. 1-70.
4. Duncan C. Scott, In the Village of Viger (Boston: Copeland and Day, 1896), 114 pages.
5. Susan F. Harrison, Canadian Birthday Book (Toronto: C. Blackett Robinson, 1887), p. 413.
6. Wetherald, "Serasus," p. 267.
7. Harrison, Pine, Rose and Fleur de lis, p. 33.
8. John Garvin, "Canadian Poets: XIX. Helen M. Merrill," Public Health Journal, Oct. 1915, pp. 519-523.
9. Helen M. Merrill, Picturesque Prince Edward County (Picton: Globe Printing House, 1892), 128 pages.
10. Garvin, "Helen M. Merrill," p. 522.
11. Archibald Lampman, untitled poem, written on the flyleaf of The House of Trees and Other Poems by Ethelwyn Wetherald. PS8473/A64L34, in the Lorne Pierce Collection, Queen's University Library, Kingston.
12. Thomas O'Hagan, Canadian Essays (Toronto: William Briggs, 1901), p. 82.
13. John Garvin, "Canadian Poets: VII. Ethelwyn Wetherald," Public Health Journal, Oct. 1914, pp. 636-640.
14. Anonymous, "Literary and Personal," The Week, 23 June 1893, p. 712.
15. Ethelwyn Wetherald, "Dead Leaves," in Garvin, "Wetherald," p. 639.
16. Ethelwyn Wetherald, "There Is a Solitude," in Lyrics and Sonnets by Ethelwyn Wetherald, edited by John Garvin (Toronto: Nelson, 1931), p. 233.
17. Garvin, "Canadian Poets: VII. Ethelwyn Wetherald," p. 637.



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*I was allowed to ask a question.*