

The CANADIAN BOOKMAN

A Monthly Devoted to Literature and the Creative Arts

FINDLAY I. WEAVER, Editor and Publisher

Editorial and Business Office:

125 Simcoe Street, Toronto 2, Ont.

Vol. IX., No. 1

TORONTO, JANUARY, 1927

25c a Copy
\$2.00 a Year

Who's Who in Canadian Literature

WILSON MacDONALD

By A. Ermatinger Fraser

IN Canada, it is not a frequent occurrence, stating the case mildly, to find a slim volume of some eighty poems by an author, whose previous output has been neither large nor widely popular, running into its third edition in less than two months. This, however, has been the case with Wilson MacDonald's *Out of the Wilderness*.

Having observed in his earlier volume, *The Song of the Prairie Land*, only passages here and there that appealed to me as unusually high in quality, I was somewhat surprised at the rapturous paeans of praise chanted by the reviewers both in Eastern Canada and in New York. Then, reading in the *Dalhousie Review* MacDonald's "Song of the Unreturning," there flashed upon the mind the recognition of a note that has been but slightly touched in Canada before—the haunting Celtic minor.

Our most noted group of poets heretofore—the "group of '61," Roberts, Lampman, Carman, and their friends—though of the New World by several generations, are yet mainly English in blood and in that endowment of mental inheritance, which persists through centuries. The South of Scotland has spoken in the songs of Charles Mair, in those of the

two Scotts, and in many others. But the Highlander in Canada has been so busy exploring mighty rivers to their sources, policing the plains, founding settlements, and preaching the Gospel in remote regions, that the distinctive Gaelic notes of music and of poetry have been little heard outside their own gatherings. One song from the Gaelic, much disputed in its English wording, has indeed echoed throughout this land for a century back:

"From the lone shieling and the misty
island
Mountains divide us and the waste of
seas;
But still our blood is strong, our hearts are
Highland,
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides."

Something of this quality sounded in poems of *Freedom, Love and Death*, by Frederick George Cameron; and it is the tragic and tender Highland spirit that throbs in "Flanders Fields," that brief lyric by John McCrae which Canada has taken deep within her heart.

It is a curious thing to consider that twenty centuries of close neighborhood have failed to lessen the eternal difference in spiritual outlook between Highlander and "Southron" in Scotland, between the Erse of Ireland

and the Ulsterman, between Welsh and English—in short, between the Celt and the Anglo-Saxon. The Celt dreams, feels, sees visions; the Anglo-Saxon decides, reasons, occasionally philosophizes. The Celt cannot help contemptuous pity for the "Sassanach" clod; the Englishman wonders why the Celt came to be a bit of a fool. Out of this age-long difference comes the fact that here in Canada where these strains blend in many families, the work of Wilson MacDonald is as ardently praised as sharply criticized, and often attracts and antagonizes at the same time: "My song is a cactus," he says truly enough, "that stings him who touches,

With misunderstanding, its sharp biting needles,
But blesses with beauty of yellow and crimson and all flaming colors
Whoever beholds it with wisdom and love."

The Celtic strain inherits a high degree of sensitiveness united frequently to a quick and irritable temper; pride and passion melting suddenly into tenderness; and a self-centred independence which one's friends call individuality, but which those less kindly-disposed are apt to term overweening egotism.

This influence in literature has been indicated in the passion for lovely vivid color, in delight in the lonely and cloudy aspects of Nature, in a sense of ever-present, brooding pathos, and in the peculiar lyric power of using a very few, very simple words to express profound emotion. These tendencies made a large part of the impulse that stirred the Romantic Revival a century ago, and were based on the wide-spread reading of translations and adaptations of Ossian, the influence of Chateaubriand, who was a Celt of Brittany, and of Byron, who was half a Highlander. They have been illustrated in our time by the work of Yeats, Synge, and "A. E." Russell. Consider now for a moment this "Song of the Unreturning:"

"Tonight a crimson sun
With no attendants by
Goes down in lonely splendor
An orange waste of sky.
Never in all the years
Garbed thus will he go from me;
Red is the sea-gull's wing
And blood-red is the sea.

Never again will the clouds
Group in this austere way;
Never again will love
Be as it is today;
Never again will the waves
Break as now on the shore:
Nothing in earth or heaven
Comes as it came before.

High Beauty will never return
In the same hood and gown,
Whether the rose grows red
Or the old oak burns brown,
Or the blue rain dances swiftly
Down the green-aisled sea,
Or whether on gray, winding roads
My love walks with me.

Here is the intense feeling for color that reminds us that Wilson MacDonald is artist, as well as poet, and musician; the lonely sky and sea, made more solitary by the plain brief words which yet haunt the memory; and the eternal sorrow of humanity for the passing of beauty, "Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue

Can burst Joy's grape against his
palate fine."

But where Keats worships at the "sovrain shrine" of unavailing sorrow, MacDonald adds to the inherited Celtic melancholy, bred of gloomy mountain and misty moorland, an optimism to which brighter New Worlds have increased the equally Celtic hope and vision of the future:

"The mourners come from the last dead rose
Crying: "Beauty is gone."
But I go up where the North wind blows
Out of the gap of dawn
And I shall sing when there's not a song
In all of the wastrel woodland, crying:
That Death is weak and that Life is strong,
And Beauty's birth is at Beauty's
dying."

The poignant grieving of the very lovely poem, "Exit," breaks into triumph at the last; and the verses on "Oaks," richly-tinted and tenderly-glowing in Autumn, end with the answered query:

"Shall we go to sleep—
To the unbreathing Deep—
Like black weeds touched with frost!
Nay! Age is the time for bright colors,
Though life be the cost.
Youth is a fine adventure,
But it's rare to be old
And to go to the Master of Colors
In russet and bronze and gold."

Autumn days, that season when
"Summer passes to the rhyme

Of hooded acorns tapping at her
feet," are, indeed, the background for
most of the poems. Truly in kinship
with ancestry from the "MacDonalds
of the Isles" (the mist-swept Inner
Hebrides) is this poet's love of "the
staccato of rain." He says:

"I wrap about me the cold cloak of rain,
Fibred with sullen smoke, and woven with
wind."

Again he declares:

"Upon my roof the slowly-tapping rain
Is anodyne sufficient for my pain."

In these scenes he confesses a strange
ancestral delight,

"Some nomad yearning burns within my
singing
For that bleak beauty scorned of lute
and lyre,
That loveliness of gray whereon are winging
The last wild lyrists of the marsh and
mire."

The season of the snow, instead of
being personified as a hoary, bowed
old man, is to him the Dian of the
woodlands,

"Those roofless, pillared temples where the
tameless
Young Winter soon will chase her frosty
spear."

Celtic, too, is the shuddering delight
in "the ghostly tale,"

"The prelude of that long and ghostly wail
In boughs that creak and shallows that
congeal."

There is macabre-like power in
"Ghost-Hornpipes," and a phantasy,
œrie as thistledown in moonlight,
peers through "The Toll-Gate Man,"

"Taking with ghost-palms
The old slim fare . . .
Strange coin I pay him,
Minted in my soul—
Tears I caught long ago
In a silver bowl,
Sighings for a lost love;
These I pay for toll."

One-third of this volume is devoted
to *The Book of the Rebel*. The Anglo-
Saxon can gird himself with dogged
persistence to stubborn fighting for
practical reforms; to desperate at-
tacks on pressing tyranny; but he is
relieved when the job is done. The
Celt, on the contrary, is never happier
than when in the shouting vanguard
of an unpopular cause, or going glori-
ously down to defeat for dead faiths
of the past or fair visions of the
misty future. Wilson MacDonald
irks some good folk, not because he is
Vegetarian, Pacifist, Brother of the
New Communities—and so forth; but
because he so obviously enjoys being
thus different from the common, con-
ventional herd—that ordinary hu-
manity, which he at one moment em-
braces fraternally, and, in the next
breath, withers with scorn. Your true
Celt has nothing to do with a grovel-
ing consistency, and can be splendid-
ly ferocious in the cause of Peace.

Yet, ardent warrior as the Celt has
ever been, his reforming zeal has had
less influence upon the world than
that faery gift of eyes ever open to
Beauty, which is the race-heritage.
There are, in this section of the book,
passages liable to the accusation of ex-
travagance or crudity; there are, too,
certain poems such as "The Volga,"
and "The Song of the Hemp," that
are unforgettable in their hot inten-
sity of indignant passion. But, since
they deal with horrors that are—
mercifully—temporary, they have not
the unending charm of this simple
harp-note in praise of Beauty—

"He loved her not in days of splendor only
But in the gray of fogs, the dark of rain;
In droning streets or woodlands wild and
lonely
She never called his poet-heart in vain."

The gray moth growing grayer in the moon-
ray,
The brown bee growing browner in the
sun,
The strong hills burning amber in the noon-
day,
Or vales at dusk—he loved them every one.

Great God, when Thou dost grieve my way-
ward faring,
Let this one virtue all my sins defend;
And may I hear Thy voice at last declaring:
“He kept high faith with beauty to
the end.”

BIOGRAPHICAL

Wilson MacDonald was born at Cheap-
side, Ontario, in December, 1880, the
son of Alexander MacDonald, a minister of
the Baptist church, who had come to Canada
from Scotland. His mother was a native
Canadian, the daughter of Rev. William
Pugsley.

Receiving his early education in the Port
Dover Public and High Schools, the boy
went from there to Woodstock College and
the University of Toronto. An early achieve-
ment was that of passing at the head of the
list for the whole province in the High
School entrance examination.

His poetic tendency asserted itself early
in life, encouraged by his parents, Prin-
cipal William Henry Smith, of the Port
Dover Public school, and Theodore Harding
Rand. His first published poem appeared in
the *Toronto Globe* in 1898.

But for the strong influence of this pre-
dilection for the poetic art, Wilson Mac-

Donald might easily have achieved out-
standing success in any one of several dif-
ferent fields of activity. He is an adept
illuminator, as indicated by his decorative
work in *Out of the Wilderness*, and many
other examples of this art, some of the
latter ranking very high in point of merit.

What is not generally known is that he
possesses marked musical talent.

He could have been a Canadian “Her-
man,” or “Keller,” or “Thurston,” to
which those who have witnessed his mar-
vellous feats of magic can amply testify.
Another indication of his versatility was his
success as an inventor, bread and pie pat-
ents giving him a substantial financial start
in life. But of this phase of his career,
MacDonald speaks very bitterly regarding
the machinations of those who deprived him
of the money which his inventions had
earned.

His poem “The Undertow” was inspired
by his trip to England on a cattle boat in
1902. He has had many other adventures,
having sailed the Labrador Coast and the
Pacific Coast from Mexico to the far north-
ern Canadian territory. He has lived in
every province of Canada, seeing much of
wild life, which afforded the inspiration for
his wilderness poems.

Since coming to Toronto he has been
prominent in literary circles and was the
founder of the Poetry Society of Toronto.

CHECK LIST OF FIRST EDITIONS.

- The Song of the Prairie Land*, Toronto,
1918.
The Miracle Songs of Jesus, Toronto, 1921.
Out of the Wilderness, Toronto, 1926.

Gifts

By T. D. Rimmer

O H, I have known the gifts of life,
The rose-leaf and the thorn;
The road that sears the naked feet,
The burden that is borne;
And Love that goes with eager tread,
And Pain whose step is slow;
The clear, red wine of youth and health
That is so quick to go.

The rose-leaf mingles with the thorn
And wounds the outstretched hand;
And Love falls in with Pain's slow gait
And limps at his command;
And youth is but a glass of wine
That at a draught is gone—
And birth to death is measured by
The casting of a stone.