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THE CANADIAN LANDSCAPE THROUGH POETRY

VOLUM I



TESI DOCTORAL DIRIGIDA PER LA DOCTORA SUSAN BALLYN.  
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Indians, have succeeded in achieving a considerable degree of autonomy that allows them to maintain their separate identity and take control of their own affairs. Very recently, on the 30th October 1992, Inuit leaders signed an agreement with the federal government whereby an Inuit territory named Nunavut (Our Land) was to be created out of the Northwest Territories. Nunavut will have an extension of 2.2 million square kilometers which is about a fifth of Canada's total extension.

## **2.2.— EUROPEAN PRESENCE IN THE NORTH**

Modern Canadian history begins with the arrival of the Viking frontiersmen in Greenland and on the coasts of Newfoundland in search of new harbours, fisheries and hay meadows. Although they established some colonies on what is now Canadian soil, these Icelandic warrior-farmers did not make any permanent settlements in the northern part of

the American continent because of the inhospitable conditions of the land and the hostility of the natives.

After the withdrawal of the Norse explorers, Canada remained, as Kenneth MacNaught puts it, "shrouded in the midst of medieval legend for 500 years".(\*5) The northern part of the country retained this mythical aureole much longer because the second wave of Europeans who arrived in Canada explored the coasts of Newfoundland and the Saint Lawrence and Great Lakes region where some of the first settlements were established before turning their eyes to the North as a possible home.

#### **2.2.1.- THE QUEST FOR THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE**

Up to the end of the 19th Century, the White man's interest in northern Canada, especially the Arctic region, was related to the search for the fabled Northwest Passage and the riches the land

might hide. The desire to open sea routes for trade with the Orient through North America became especially strong during the century following Columbus' discovery because overland journeys were too dangerous and the ships of Spain and Portugal policed the seas all the way from Spain to the Strait of Magellan.

The quest for the Northwest Passage began with the first of Martin Frobisher's three voyages in 1576. Frobisher sailed from England and reached Labrador and Baffin Island to return to his country with reports of mineral wealth and the belief that he might have discovered a route to Cathay. Two further expeditions to the same area followed in 1577 and 1578, but Frobisher found no gold and his attempts to establish a colony were unsuccessful.

Subsequent surveys of the area during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries proved that there was no quick route to the Orient through the Arctic Ocean. In 1610, Henry Hudson tried to reach the Far East through Hudson Strait but he soon

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realized that he had run into a blind alley and that the bay was land locked.

In 1769, more than a century after Hudson's discovery of Canada's great inland sea, the Governor of Hudson's Bay Company sent a young man called Samuel Hearne from port Churchill in northern Manitoba to investigate reports of a rich copper mine far to the northwest of the Bay. Hearne reached the Arctic Ocean and turned south to Great Slave Lake and then south east again to return to Churchill. He did not find much copper, but he became the first European to break through the coast of the western Arctic and to discover Great Slave Lake. Hearne's voyage also strengthened the belief that there could be no northwest passage from Hudson Bay to the Pacific, an idea confirmed a decade later by James Cook who sailed up the coast of British Columbia and passed the Bering Strait where he found a wall of ice that made further advance impossible. Cook concluded that any passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic was so far north that it would be blocked by ice and, therefore, useless to ships.

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The most dramatic attempt to find a northern route to the riches of Asia was made by John Franklin who perished with all his crew when his ships were trapped in the Arctic ice. Franklin's search for the Northwest Passage began on May 1845 when he sailed from England in two vessels aptly named "Terror" and "Erebus" carrying 138 officers and men. The ships were last sighted by whalers north of Baffin Island at the entrance to Lancaster Sound and it was not until 1859 that skeletons of Franklin's crew were found by a final rescue mission organized by Franklin's second wife.

It was in the present century that ships succeeded in passing northward around Canada and Alaska all the way from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This famous voyage was made by the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen although it took him three years to complete it. Forty years later, during World War II, a sergeant in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police named Henry Larsen sailed both ways through the Passage in a single season,

an achievement that nobody had been able to accomplish before him.

Today, the Northwest Passage is still one of the world's severest maritime challenges. Polar winds that can reach hurricane intensity, giant icebergs often hidden in dense fog and the ice pack most of which survives from year to year make navigation difficult even with the help of the most modern devices. The world underwater, however, is a different matter because nuclear propulsion has now made it possible for submarines to stay submerged for months and to travel thousands of kilometers without surfacing.

#### **2.2.2.- THE FUR TRADE AND MINING INDUSTRY**

In the days when interest in the North was dominated by the quest for a Northwest Passage, that is from the sixteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, the fur trade was the main economic mainstay of the area. The Hudson's

Bay Company controlled the British trading network that expanded to the north and northwest of the Territories because the French operated mainly to the south and east of Hudson Bay. The fur trade drew on native strengths and skills and created a mutually dependent economic system that has always been the most lasting and solid link between white Canadians and the natives, both Indian and Inuit, in northern Canada.

The fur trade continued but dropped into second place when the North began to yield its riches at the turn of this century. The Yukon gold rush in 1896 was followed by other important discoveries of uranium, silver, lead, zinc, copper, iron and oil that favoured the emergence of small mining centres and, eventually, large communities such as Whitehorse, the capital of the Yukon and Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories.

Although marginally, the Indians also became involved in the mining industry providing provisions and furs to the people in the camps and



working as short-term labourers and guides. The Inuit, however, continued to concentrate almost exclusively on the fur trade and the whaling industry that had began in the Arctic as early as the 1720s when American whalers entered Davis Strait.

At the turn of this century, the considerable influx of whalers, traders and miners to the North forced the Canadian government to revise its policy in this area. The first northern communities developed along American lines because the majority of miners were Americans. Besides, the prospectors were followed by gamblers, thieves and prostitutes contributing to the creation of a boisterous, often violent society on the fringes of social control. The federal government sent mounted patrols to the mining centres to impose peace and order and to assert Canadian sovereignty in the face of American competition.

At this point it is worth noting that Canada acquired its North by two massive grants as Farley Mowat reminds us:

*The fist came in 1870 when the Hudson's Bay Company was persuaded by the British government to sell its fiefdom to the Crown, which then transferred it to the new nation. At that date this commercial kingdom consisted of Rupert's Land (all the territories draining into Hudson Bay and Hudson Strait) and the Northwest Territories, which included all the remaining British territory west of Hudson Bay, except for British Columbia. Canada's second northern acquisition came in 1880 with the transfer to her of all British rights to the Arctic islands, which meant in effect most of the Arctic archipelago. Thus, by 1881, Canada officially embraced the same limits she does today, except for Newfoundland and Labrador (which joined the confederation in 1949 after a referendum). But the nation seemed more embarrassed than pleased by the acquisition of these vast territories. It was touch-and-go whether she would even bother to uphold her claims. (\*6)*

The Yukon gold rush changed this state of affairs by making government intervention necessary not only because Canadian sovereignty was threatened but also because miners and traders were regularly taking thousands of dollars in furs and gold without paying excise duties. The Yukon experience forced the federal cabinet to adopt a new administrative network, restructuring constitutional arrangements to prevent despoliation of natural resources and to chart the future of its northern lands. However, the Yukon and Northwest Territories were not given

the status of provinces because their population was sparse and mostly alien, that is, it was formed by Indians, Inuit, and American traders and miners. For this reason, there was a rooted aversion in Ottawa to popular democracy and self-government and, consequently, the federal cabinet decided to retain control over the area.

### 2.2.3.- STRATEGIC INTEREST IN THE NORTH

The next note of danger sounded when the North became a US military base during World War II. Americans took over the territory and built roads, airports and defence posts often without consulting Canadians. Kenneth Coates explains that it was Malcolm Macdonald, British High Commissioner to Canada, who "awakened Canadians' interest and convinced the government to take decisive measures".(\*7) Coates also reproduces part of Macdonald's critical report:

*It is surely unfortunate that the Canadian authorities have little real say as to, for example, the exact placing of these airfields*

*and the exact route of these roads on Canadian soil. The Americans decide these things according to what they consider American interests. They pay no particular heed to this or that Canadian national or local interest. This aspect of the matter assumes even greater importance when one realises fully the considerations which the American Army, and the other American interests working with them, have in mind in all their efforts in the North-West. Responsible American officers will tell you frankly in confidence that in addition to building works to be of value in this war, they are designing those works also to be of particular value for (a) commercial aviation and transport after the war and (b) waging war against the Russians in the next world crisis. (\*8)*

Coates goes on to say that Canadians responded to this warning by increasing supervision of their interests in the North and devising plans to take over defence projects after the war. The Canadian federal government launched social programs destined to improve the welfare of the natives and other communities in the area. They also granted subsidies to improve northern communications, drew new plans and regulations for the exploitation and development of natural resources and created new towns such as Inuvik in the western Arctic. With regard to national defence, Canada felt compelled to join forces with

the United States against their common enemies during the war and against the Soviet threat after the conflict.

Many Canadians would probably disagree on the expression 'join forces' adducing that what Canada did was simply to accept the American protective umbrella. In this respect, it may be enlightening to quote the words of John Honerich who in 1987 wrote:

*Canada, it is often said, is a nation of three oceans, but only two are used. We have the world's longest coastline, with the waters of the Arctic archipelago and the Northwest Passage alone accounting for some 6.3 million kilometers of shoreline. Yet we have no independent means of knowing who is intruding into either our waters or our airspace. We have to rely on the United States to tell us. Our navy does not possess a single vessel capable of operating in the Arctic waters outside the summer season. We don't have any submarines that can navigate under ice despite the fact that one-third of our territorial waters is ice-covered most of the year, and only one of our current fleet of ice-breakers can manage in ice-clogged waters. (\*9)*

Honerich also refers to Canada's ambivalent attitude towards the North, especially the Arctic, saying that Canadian interest in the area has

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been cyclical, that is, the country has only turned its eyes to the North whenever it offered prospects of material wealth or Canadian sovereignty had to be asserted.

Today, in an age of increasing environmental concerns, the need to preserve the virgin lands of the North is paramount in Canadian society and, consequently, any signals of danger in this respect strike a responsive chord. According to professor Franklyn Griffiths from the University of Toronto, the reason for Canada's cyclical concern for its northern lands is that Canadians see the North as:

*(...) sublime, somehow absolutely sensationally beautiful and unsullied. It must be protected and yet, it is awesome and terrifying. It repels us and makes us fearful. This dual image moves Canadians to action if the Arctic is in any way threatened. But as soon as the threat dissipates, uncertainty and ambivalence takes over. (\*10)*

Professor Griffiths' remark removes us from the North as a tangible reality and introduces us to the realm of the imagination by suggesting that Canadians have idealised the North seeing it as a

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reservoir of natural beauty and spiritual values. This vision dominates the following chapters which deal with the poetic responses elicited by the North both as a physical region and as the symbol of Canada's idiosyncrasy.

**THE NORTH : CHAPTER TWO. NOTES**

1. Alan D. McMillan, Native Peoples and Cultures of Canada. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1988, p.20.
2. Ibid., p.41. McMillan explains that the term 'Red' does not refer to skin pigmentation but to their practice of smearing red paint, made from powdered ochre mixed with oil or grease, over the body and hair as well as on clothing and utensils.
3. Ibid., p.40.
4. Ibid., p.296.
5. Kenneth McNaught, The Penguin History of Canada. London: Penguin, (1969), 1988, p.7.
6. Farley Mowat, Canada North Now. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, (1967), 1976, p.32.
7. Kenneth Coates, Canada's Colonies. Toronto: James Lorimer, 1985, p.181.
8. Ibid., pp.181-182.



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9. John Honderich, "The Arctic Option" in The Canadian Forum, October 1987, p.7.
10. Franklin Griffiths, as quoted by John Honderich in "The Arctic Option". Ibid., p.7.

CHAPTER THREE

**THE NORTH:  
THE FORGING OF A MYTH**

No other region of Canada has exerted such beneficial influence on the Canadian collective consciousness as the vast, mysterious and impenetrable lands that lie beyond the limits of 'settled' Canada. This mythical vision of the North has never been destroyed because in spite of successive human assaults on Canada's northern lands, this area has always remained one of the least settled and exploited parts of the world. Weather conditions have always made it difficult

and costly to operate and maintain machinery and vehicles in the Arctic and Subarctic zones. Permafrost is an additional hazard because it is an obstacle to the building of houses, roads or pipelines. But, perhaps, the main deterrent to settlement in northern Canada has been the combination of extremely cold weather and little daylight during the endless Arctic winter. Long exposure to these environmental conditions is thought to affect non-natives in a negative way. This explains why the white population in the Yukon and Northwest Territories has never been larger than the native one. The miners and traders that moved north during the boom of the fur, fishing and mining industries were transient, tied to the sojourner mentality of making money and returning to more hospitable areas as soon as possible. Today, the Northern Territories are still very sparsely settled and the most northern Arctic islands are almost uninhabited.

The myth of the Great North as a land of promise and a spiritual dynamo has therefore persisted to the extent that to speak about the

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North is to speak about the essence of Canada for it represents all that Canadians cherish and are proud of. The Canadian national anthem speaks of "the true North strong and free" and thus highlights Canada's 'northernness' as a powerful identity marker and a source of national pride. The questions that may come to mind now are: what is the full significance of the term 'northernness'? and how is Canada's northern character reflected in its literature?.

In his article "The Northern Frontier: Key to Canadian History" William Morton explains that this character "springs not only from geographical location, but from ancient origins in the northern and maritime frontier of Europe" and he goes on to say:

*That frontier extends from Norway by Scotland and the North Atlantic islands to Greenland and Canada. Within that area from medieval to modern times there is discernible a frontier of European culture developing across the Northern latitudes in which the forward movement was largely by sea. It was not a Turnerian frontier, but it was a frontier in every sense, and it was this frontier which began the exploitation and settlement of Canada. Many of its characteristics survive in Canada to this day, and presumably will continue to do so indefinitely. (\*1)*

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According to Morton, the characteristics of this northern frontier are the maritime nature of settlements and the nomadic habits of their people. Although the northern frontiersmen cultivated the land, the brevity of the harvest season forced them to supplement farm labour with fishing and hunting activities which, very often, were the chief occupation of this race of northerners and one that demanded constant mobility and the exploration of new lands. Morton implicitly highlights the bold and adventurous nature of the first Canadians of European ancestry by presenting them as daring explorers who managed to survive in one of the world's most inhospitable areas since it was in the Arctic and Subarctic regions that the first Europeans who arrived in Canada established temporary settlements. The dauntless courage of these people is also brought to the fore in Norton's article by contrasting their adventurous personality with the more sedentary character of people from southern latitudes. However biased and inaccurate this contrast may be since boldness and courage are not the monopoly of northern races, Morton's article

opens an interesting angle on the Canadians' collective personality by unveiling positive traits which, although present in Canadian literature, have not been sufficiently emphasized by critics due to the pervasive influence of scholarly theories about the Canadians' tendency to see and explain their country in negatives. Morton reminds us that the first white 'Canadians', first the Norse and then the Bristol traders and Norman fishermen, were Europeans who made their way across the North Atlantic in search of fish, timber, furs and trading routes. Whether of Norse, British or French origin these early pioneers do not fit the description of Canadians as people who shrink back in fear of the wilderness and who prefer to stay at home instead of exploring the terrain. Morton's article implies that the seminal blood of Canadian society was that of men whose daring and robust nature had been shaped by the harshness of land and weather that characterizes the most northerly parts of our planet.

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The idea that living conditions in northern lands are more difficult than in temperate areas led to the belief that the North promotes physical and psychological strength whereas the South favours slothness and disease. This feeling was behind Canada's immigration policy. When Canadian authorities launched a promotional campaign to attract settlers to the west, their aim was to recruit people from Britain and northern Europe and it was in these parts of the continent that their official propaganda was mainly distributed. They regarded southern Europeans as poor pioneer material for a cold continental region. Hardiness was the key and Canadian authorities considered that this quality could only be found among northerners.

To a great extent, this policy was influenced by the philosophy of a group of young men in Ottawa who in 1868, one year after Confederation, formed a political and literary group known as the Canada First movement. The aim of the members of this group who were descendants of loyalist families was to advance the growth of a national

sentiment based on the racial superiority of Canadians. In his book Tradition in Exile John Pengwerne Matthews refers to Robert Haliburton, one of the members of the Canada First movement in the following terms:

*Robert G. Haliburton, inheriting many of his famous father's aristocratic loyalties and sympathies, knew more clearly than the others what it was he wanted. Sharing his father's fondness for outspoken criticism, he introduced an element of patriotic pride which was not entirely divorced from a Herrenvolk theory. The Canadians were a northern race, which, he asserted, had been proved by history to be superior to the others. As the North had dominated European life for centuries, so the Canadians were the Northerners of the American continent. Theirs was the "manifest destiny", and to them would come the prize, not to the heterogeneous racial confusion inhabiting the United States. Five years older than any of the others, Haliburton, with his confident assertions, left his mark upon his more impressionable colleagues. (\*2)*

In spite of this, the influx of 'second-class' citizens could not be prevented because of the constant demand for unskilled labour to build the railways or to work in the fur, fishing or mining industries. However, ethnic identity was an important factor in Canadian society. Outside Quebec, cultural standards remained British and



social and economic leadership rested firmly in the hands of British Canadians. Fortunately, the psychology of a mass or a master race has never been strong in a country like Canada where minorities may retain their culture, language and traditions and be Canadians. Canada's national pride rests on the Canadians' ability to reach a compromise between groups of different language, culture and religion and on their high standard of living. But, above all, Canada's idiosyncrasy springs from its northern location sublimated in its art and literature through the idea that this huge, wild and sparsely-settled country retains the values of an uncultivated and unurbanized hinterland where the poetic and political thrust towards a new humanism may be made. G. Ross Roy expresses this idea in his book Le Sentiment de la Nature Dans la Poésie Canadienne Anglaise :

*Tout d'abord il faut signaler que l'impression prédominante dans la poésie canadienne anglaise de la nature, c'est celle de faire partie d'un pays qui vit à côté d'un vaste inconnu vers le nord. La vraie frontière du Canada est au nord. Même quand nos regards se tournent vers le sud, nos pensées, subconscientes au moins, sont constamment en présence du nord. Ceci est un sentiment qui est unique dans la littérature de langue anglaise; les Anglais ne l'ont pas connu, car ils habitent une île, leur frontière est la*

*mer. Les Américains non plus ne l'ont jamais éprouvé, car ils ont toute la partie habitée du Canada qui leur sert d'écran. Les Russes ont connu ce sentiment dans leur littérature; les sagas nordiques nous montrent que leurs auteurs en étaient conscients. ... Evidemment, un phénomène qui joue un rôle aussi important est devenu un des principaux symboles de la poésie de la nature: Le symbole existe pour la plupart des poètes non seulement au niveau de la nature, mais sur le plan national et patriotique aussi: c'est l'immense puissance du nord et du froid qui purifie les Canadiens et les rend dignes de leur avenir. (\*3)*

The following chapters deal with some of the artists who have celebrated Canada's northern location and its salutary effects on the mind and body of Canadians. Since it would be impossible to analyse the work of every Canadian writer who has incorporated the North as a subject to his or her poetic production, I will concentrate on the Confederation poets who were the first to articulate the myth of the North and I will then analyse the poetic production of E.J. Pratt and Al Purdy in an attempt to show that the line initiated by the Confederation group has never been broken in spite of the emergence of new literary trends and ways of rendering the Canadian northern wilderness.

**THE NORTH : CHAPTER THREE. NOTES**

1. William Morton, "The Northern Frontier: Key to Canadian History" in A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom, William Kilbourn (ed.). Toronto: MacMillan, 1970, p.280.
2. John Pengwerne Matthews, Tradition in Exile. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962, pp. 81-82.
3. G.Ross Roy, Le Sentiment de la Nature Dans la Poésie Canadienne Anglaise. Paris: A.G.Nizet, 1961, pp.13-14. My translation: First of all, it must be pointed out that the first impression produced by Canadian nature poetry written in English is that it refers to a country which lies next to a northern, unexplored wilderness. The north is the real frontier of Canada. Even if we turn our eyes to the south, our thoughts, at least unconsciously, are always directed towards the North. This feeling is unique in the literature written in English. The British have not experienced it because they live on an island, the sea is their frontier. The Americans have never experienced it either since the inhabited part of Canada constitutes a natural shield that separates them from the North. The Russians express this feeling in their literature. The Norse Sagas show that they were conscious of being

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northerners. Given the importance of this phenomenon, it is understandable that it has become a major symbol in Canadian nature poetry written in English. This symbol, which is used by most Canadian poets, does not only refer to nature but to national and patriotic feelings as well. It is the mighty power of the north and the cold weather that purifies Canadians making them worthy of their future.

CHAPTER FOUR

**THE ARTICULATION OF THE MYTH:  
THE CONFEDERATION POETS**

The phrase 'Confederation Poets' refers to a group of writers who were almost born with the nation since none of them was more than seven years old at the time of Confederation in 1867. Their work constitutes a very important part of Canada's cultural heritage because they were the first to produce a new and independent perception of their country by adapting European cultural trends to the particulars of the Canadian scene.

Wilfred Campbell (1858-1918), Charles G.D. Roberts (1860-1945), Bliss Carman (1861-1929), Archibald Lampman (1861-1899) and Duncan Campbell Scott (1862-1947) were born as a school in 1880 after the publication of Orion and Other Poems written by Charles G.D. Roberts whose work proved to be a considerable influence on the other members of the group. Archibald Lampman expressed thus his enthusiasm for the volume:

*Like most of the young fellows about me, I had been under the depressing conviction that we were situated hopelessly on the outskirts of civilization, where no art and no literature could be, and that it was useless to expect that anything great could be done by any of our companions still more useless to expect that we could do it ourselves. I sat up most of the night reading and re-reading Orion in a state of the wildest excitement and when I went to bed I could not sleep. It seemed to me a wonderful thing that such a work could be done by a Canadian, by a young man, by one of ourselves. (\*1)*

After reading these words one can't help wondering what Orion contained to leave Lampman so entranced and to encourage other Confederation poets to embrace Roberts' style and themes. First of all, it must be pointed out that the

poetic thought of these artists was congenial with that of Roberts and, for this reason, the publication of Orion and its success in Canada, Britain and the United States was a stimulus to giving free vent to similar feelings and ways of writing rather than a discovery. In other words, all of them shared the pride of being northerners and were aware that Canada had to find a complete expression of itself through an art that could reflect Canada's northern character. They also shared the enthusiasm of being the first generation of poets to sing the values of the new nation.

The message underlining Roberts' volume was that in the absence of glorious battles or historical events to be transmuted into poetry, Canadian artists could find in the wilderness which surrounded them a way of attesting to Canada's greatness. Besides, Roberts' success gave them the courage and self-confidence to take the first daring step in the difficult and unpromising path of creating a recognizably Canadian literature. The Confederation poets greeted

Roberts as a kindred spirit and, like him, made use of existing literary and philosophical trends adapting them to suit their artistic needs and patriotic feelings. Romanticism, Transcendentalism and Darwin's evolutionary theories helped these artists achieve their aim of creating a national ethos based on the idea that Canada's strength sprung from its privileged northern location.

#### **4.1.— THE CONFEDERATION POETS AND ROMANTICISM**

The rationalism of the 18th century together with the utilitarian philosophy bred by the Industrial Revolution had provoked man's estrangement from nature and a feeling of moral and spiritual failure that Romanticism sought to dispel by relocating man's hopes for a more humane and satisfying existence in a benevolent, organic view of nature. The natural world, as described by Wordsworth, became a physically and spiritually



soothing environment where man's purification and renewal were possible.

When the Confederation poets produced the main bulk of their work during the 1880s and 1890s, the Romantic thrust had lost some of its initial force but its spirit survived in the work of Victorian artists such as Tennyson and Arnold who continued to use Romantic conventions to articulate their experiences. The retreat into nature, the sense of irreparable loss in time, the feeling of serene solitude, the confusing sadness in response to nature's beauty and the world of dreams as somehow preferable to reality were still present in the work of post-Romantic writers both in Britain and Canada. However, the idea that man could define and realize himself in his encounter with nature was much more prominent in the work of the Confederation poets than in the writings of their British contemporaries because the Canadian wilderness was too overwhelmingly present to be ignored and the new nation needed a sustaining myth for its nascent literature. Man's kinship with nature was therefore a central theme in the

poetry of the Confederation group. Charles G.D. Roberts speaks of man's frustrated attempts to find answers to questions concerning the origin and significance of his existence and concludes that only the natural world offers plausible explanations:

*In ignorance we stand  
With fate on either hand,  
And question stars and earth  
Of life, and death, and birth.  
With wonder in our eyes  
We scan the kindred skies  
While through the common grass  
Our atoms mix and pass  
We feel the sap go free  
When spring comes to the tree;  
And in our blood is stirred  
What warms the brooding bird.  
The vital force we breathe  
That bud and blade bequeath,  
And strength of native clay  
In our full veins hath sway. (\*2)*

The same Wordsworthian tradition of drawing human significance from nature is present in the work of the other members of the Confederation group. Bliss Carman also turns to the natural world where he finds the peace and comfort that dissipates his fears and uncertainties:

*My forest cabin half-way up the glen  
Is solitary, save for one wise thush,  
The sound of falling water, and the mind  
Mysteriously conversing with the leaves.*

*Here I abide unvisited by doubt,  
Dreaming of far-off turmoil and despair,  
The race of men and love and fleeting time  
What life may be, or beauty, caught and held  
For a brief moment of eternal poise. (\*3)*

Similarly, Archibald Lampman makes constant references to nature's therapeutic powers and reinforces the idea that only through his relationship with the natural world will man be able to achieve serenity and self-definition:

*Far violet hills, horizons filmed with showers,  
The murmur of cool streams, the forest's gloom,  
The voices of the breathing grass; the hum  
Of ancient gardens overbanked with flowers:  
Thus, with a smile as golden as the dawn,  
And cool fair fingers radiantly divine,  
The mighty mother brings us in her hand,  
For all tired eyes and foreheads pinched and wan,  
Her restful cup, her beaker of bright wine;  
Drink, and be filled, and ye shall understand (\*4)*

These are only some examples of the powerful influence that Romanticism had on the work of the Confederation poets. The list of verses where this influence comes to the fore could be almost

endless since this group of Canadian artists seldom departed from Romantic canons.

However, the Wordsworthian idea that all is well with nature did not always fit the Canadian reality. In Canada, the landscape contained wilder, more disturbing aspects than were to be found in the Lake District of Wordsworth, in Tennyson's Lincolnshire or Arnold's Oxfordshire. Thus, as the Confederation poets looked at nature through Romantic lenses but were also aware of the particulars of the Canadian scene, a certain ambiguity towards the natural world was inevitable. This ambiguity resulted from the combination of the Wordsworthian feeling of contentment with nature and references to the latent hostility that the Confederation artists perceived in the Canadian wilderness. Wilfred Campbell speaks of the 'joyous tremor' he experienced in a wintry landscape where:

*The fields were dead, the wind had lost its will,  
And all the lands were hushed by wood and hill,  
In those grey, withered days. (\*5)*

And Archibald Lampman explains that he felt 'A nameless and unnatural cheer/ A pleasure secret and austere' in a fearsome and inhospitable site. (\*6) The following lines express a kind of death-like trance induced by the menacing elements lurking in the Canadian landscape:

*It was a bleak and sandy spot  
And, all about, the vacant plot  
Was peopled and inhabited  
By scores of mulleins long since dead.  
A silent and forsaken brood  
In that mute opening of the wood,  
So shrivelled and so thin they were,  
So grey, so haggard, and austere,  
Not plants at all they seemed to me,  
But rather some spare company  
Of hermit folk, who long ago,  
Wandering to and fro,  
Had chanced upon this lonely way,  
And rested thus, till death one day  
Surprised them at their compline prayer,  
And left them standing lifeless there. (\*7)*

It could be argued with reason that Romanticism also includes the attraction for sinister and frightening scenes as exemplified in Gothic writings and more specifically in the work of Edgar Allan Poe. However, in the case of the Confederation poets the mixture of delight and fear towards the natural world does not entail

morbid tendencies but a desire to render the contradictions inherent to the Canadian experience. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Canadian people have traditionally been both attracted and repelled by the vastness and majesty of the landscape and, consequently, have described their land as both heaven and hell, a matrix of life and a source of terror and death. In Canadian literature, this dual response to nature was first articulated by the Confederation poets by combining contradictory elements such as the descriptions of fearsome scenes and their soothing effect on the individual.

Apart from conveying the special characteristics of the Canadian experience, the aim of this combination was to celebrate the robustness of mind and body bred by a northern environment as G. Ross suggests in his book Le Sentiment de la Nature Dans la Poésie Canadienne Anglaise. This critic explains that the awesome scenery of the Canadian landscape forced its artists to embrace the idea that nature in Canada was a refuge and a source of joy only for robust