

The Shamrock and the Maple Leaf: Yeats and Canadian Modernist Poetry

Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu

Abstract: Of all the seeds breeding Canadian poetry to the literary garden, Yeats's direct and indirect influences on representative post-WWI poets and literary movements in Canada cannot be dismissed. This essay attempts to trace Yeats's North American lecture tours (1903-4), still quite unremarked in Yeats Studies, and to examine how these lectures in some Canadian cities inspired the writers still striving to find a national, poetic voice. As in the works of G.D. Roberts and Bliss Carman, countless allusions and deliberate references to Yeats and his work pervade the Confederation verses. The literary cradle in Lower Canada, McGill University in Montreal, produced influential Canadian modernist poets, the McGill Group with Smith as a representative, with programmatic introductions of modernism into Canadian poetry in small magazines and literary journals such as *McGill Fortnightly Review*, edited by A.J.M. Smith and F. R. Scott. Smith particularly infuses the previous Confederation style with Irish modernist techniques into the poetic innovation. Smith's own work is highly reminiscent of Yeats for the Yeatsian principle of versification and fervent speeches. This essay thus aims to pick up these threads and weave onto the literary fabric the Canadian modernist verse influenced by Yeats's work and the Irish literary renaissance.

Key words: Yeats, Canadian modernist verse, Confederation Poets, Montreal Group, Celtic Twilight

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제목: 토끼풀과 단풍잎: 예이츠와 캐나다 모더니스트 시

우리말 요약: 캐나다 시의 정원에 뿌려진 씨앗 중에서 예이츠가 1차세계대전 이후의 캐나다의 대표적 시인들과 문학운동에 미친 직간접적 영향은 무시할 수 없다. 이 논문은 아직 예이츠 연구분야에서 잘 다루어지지 않은 예이츠의 북미 강연여행(1903-4년)

의 흔적을 찾고자 한다. 그리고 캐나다 본연의 목소리를 내고자 하는 작가들에게 캐나다의 몇몇 도시에서 행한 예이츠의 강연이 어떤 영감을 주는 지 연구할 것이다. G.D. 로버츠와 블리스 카먼의 작품에서처럼 예이츠와 그의 작품에 대한 수많은 비유와 비교점은 캐나다의 시에 깊이 베어있다. 시의 요람으로서 캐나다 남부와 몬트리올의 맥길대는 캐나다의 모더니스트 시인들을 생산하는데, 스미스를 대표로 하는 맥길그룹은 A.J.M 스미스와 F.R. 스콧이 편집하는 『맥길 격주 리뷰』와 같은 군소 문예지를 통해서 캐나다의 시에 체계적인 모더니즘 운동을 소개한다. 특히 스미스는 이전의 캐나다의 시 기법에 아일랜드의 모더니스트적 기법을 녹여서 시의 혁신을 가져온다. 스미스 자신의 작품은 시작법과 강한 어조는 쉽게 예이츠의 시를 연상시킨다. 이 논문은 예이츠와 아일랜드 문예부흥운동이 캐나다의 모더니스트 시 운동에 미친 가닥을 찾아서 문학의 직물을 짜고자 한다.

주제어: 예이츠, 캐나다 모더니스트 시, 연방 시인, 몬트리올 그룹, 켈틱 여명

저자: 베네트 유싱 푸는 국립대만대학교 외국어문학과 교수이다. 그의 연구분야는 캐나다문학과 당대 미국문학이다.

Compared with American and Anglo-European modernist tradition, modernism made a rather late entrance into Canadian writing, especially in poetry, following the modernist doctrines established in Anglo-Europe and in Canada's southern neighbor, the USA. The informal introductions of literary modernism appearing from "a scattering of Canadian writers, in no way organized or identified with any Canadian literary magazine, already reflected the changes taking place in the early 1920s" (Louis Dudek & Michael Gnarowski 3). However, concerning the European and American modernist influences on Canadian modernism — apart from the Canadian regional and historical formations happening within the nation — scanty scholarship has been attributed to the relationship between Yeats and Canada. One major objective of this essay attempts to trace such a hidden link between Yeats, Irish literary renaissance, and Canadian modernist verse.

It is universally acknowledged that the tradition of Canadian modernist verse commences with the Confederation Group: Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss

Carman, Archibald Lampman, and Duncan Campbell Scott. However, the Canadian pre-modernist poetry at the time was very much the offspring of English Victorian verse, and an authentic Canadian literary identity would emerge only until the 1920s after T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams had already made their name to the world. Even entering its jubilee year after the Confederation in 1867, Canada was still uncertain and diffident about its place in the world. Canadian literary traditions stemmed largely from British and European literature. Thomas Hodd and Janice Fiamengo accurately delineate the contours of modern Canada, alluding to Northrop Frye's classic statement, prefigured in its 19th-century manifestations: "the psychological garrison mentality, recoil from the land, awareness of the fragility of human order, and preference for polemic and practical treatises over poetry" (6). Verses and literature in the 19th century, for the Confederation Group in their pioneering endeavor, embody mainly "the attempt to make Canadian places home to take imaginative possession of unfamiliar geographies" (Hodd & Fiamengo 8). The Fryean "garrison mentality," coupled with the geographic explorations within the country, up to the turn of the century still locked this country in parochialism and in internal struggle for a unity. It is until the exchanges with European and American travelers and traders and certain national indentureship deals with Asia (e.g., Chinese laborers for the Canadian Pacific Railway) that Canada was gradually opened to a global vista. In literary explorations in the initial global encounters outside and inside Canada, unofficial visits and certain institutional formations of disciplinary studies promoted by keen writers and scholars played a crucial role.

In 1903, arranged by John Quinn, Yeats embarked on his first "North American Tour" to introduce his poetry on cultural nationalism to a wider readership outside of Ireland. This promotional tour successfully established "Yeats's reputation as a writer of international stature" and secured "a place for him in both the academic and popular canons" (McNeilly 1) in North

America. More importantly, especially in Canada, in lecture titles such as “Old Ireland – Her Ancient Culture,” the tours introduced the Canadian readers and audience to the emerging sense of culture and tradition of a mixed colonial heritage and commonwealth connections between Canada and Ireland. As Kevin McNeilly notices in an important essay “Provincials and Nationals: a Weekend in Canada with Yeats,” “Yeats receive[d] a rather contrary set of responses to his ideas of culture and nationalistic politics on the three stops that he made in Canada from December, 1903, to February, 1904” (1) where the Confederation poets (e.g., Charles G. D. Roberts) engaged in the polemic issues about literary centers and canons in Canada in relation to the Old World and to the USA. Roberts argues the writing of other commonwealth countries such as Australia and Ireland “has less of a separate corporate existence than ours, has a more decided tendency to look to the mother country for recognition than has ours” (“Canadian Poetry” 80). In other words, Roberts, together with other Confederation poets, attempts to situate the Canadian cultural basis within the “landscape and ‘Nature’ of Canada” (McNeilly 2). With Yeats’s lectures, the Confederation poets were faced with an impossible choice between the new world of Nature and Canada’s deferral to the colonial heritage. As McNeilly points out, “Yeats found in Canada audiences at once sympathetic to his need for national identity and disenchanted by his cultural stature” and in three major cities, Toronto, Kingston, and Montreal, Yeats was received with “both adulation and disapproval, with candid nostalgia and buried hostility” (2). To be precise, “his fervent nationalism stands in contrast to the self-conscious, recalcitrant provincialism of the Canadian literary scene” (McNeilly 2). However, Yeats found himself around the turn of the 20th century in a similar situation faced by the Confederation poets that he attempted to abandon “imperialistic domination of Anglo-European literary culture to rediscover his own national roots in Ireland.” Later, in a letter to Lady

Gregory postmarked January 31, 1904, Yeats mentions his trips to Canada to be quite a success with “his notions of cultural centredness rearranged” and that success came from “his assured position as an emerging nationalist” to have inspired the young Canadian writers. His poetic nationalism pointed to certain significance of relevance in Irish cultural revival for Canadians, other than a lack or a deferral at the heart of Canadian culture. In the lectures in 1904 at the University of Toronto, for example, he received more pluralistic than provincial responses.

Prior to Yeats’s lectures, Charles, G.D. Roberts, the leader of the Confederation Group, shared in his writing some poetic ideals found in Yeats’s poetry. In 1885 G.D. Roberts took a position as Professor of English in Nova Scotia, and together with his cousin Bliss Carman, another Confederation poet, contributed to the finding of a Canadian voice in its early years. Roberts’s exposure to international writers and contemporary intellectual movements also afforded him to travel and meet writers abroad. The face-to-face exchanges and the epistolary correspondences with the European writers certainly shaped earlier Canadian literary formation. Roberts was particularly close with British writer William Sharp, who had a strong interest in occult, and their relationship began sometime in 1887 in their works included in the same anthologies. What must have influenced Sharp was Yeats and his work. Sharp connected Roberts and Carman with Yeats through the Celtic Twilight, an artistic movement in which writers from Ireland and Scotland tried to resurrect the mythical elements of their Celtic ancestors. Through the Celtic Twilight and occultism, Roberts and Carman were also quite influenced by Yeats, particularly in their literary friendship and in Carman’s visits with Yeats in London. Roberts was Carman’s literary mentor, and Carman was the first editor of *The Chap-Book*, an American journal running from 1894 to 1898, where he played an important role in publishing Sharp’s work in the pages, and another contributor was W. B. Yeats, whose

short story “St. Patrick and the Pedants” was published in the June 1, 1896 issue. It is “a story that explores the spiritual tensions between Christianity and Celtic spirituality in a narrative about a dying druid who wished to touch Michael Bruin’s rosary” (Hodd 48). Carman would travel to London later that summer and was introduced to Yeats by Arthur Symons, Yeats’s lifelong friend.

Apparently there is a strong kinship of Yeats and Carman, especially in the latter’s early work such as “Low Tide on Grand Pré.” Yeats’s own essay “The Symbolism of Poetry” (1900) and his doctrines in versification, according to James Cappon, provide “the powerful support of a well-filled background of national tradition and legend” (55). Carman describes a call to Yeats in London escorted by Arthur Symons: “Dark alley, near midnight, silent door, loud knock, moment of silence, footsteps groping down stairs, rattle of key in lock, door opened – and there lamp held high above his head, stands your dark Celtic velvet inspired mystic eloquent refined W.B.Y. himself, the William Blake of this smaller generation” (Gundy 109-10). It’s interesting that Carman compares Yeats to William Blake because Blake embodies Yeats’s mystical doctrines connected to the Romantic visionary as well as the kinship of “the symbolic and poetic tradition and a sense of cultural wholeness which Carman, in poetry, wants to emulate” (McNeilly 3). Canadian critic Terry Whalen finds the formulators of Carman’s “intelligent modesty” in writers such as Yeats. In “Low Tide on Grand Pré,” for example, Carman writes about Canadian landscape and the history of the Acadie – the region of the former French colony of eastern Canada – but one finds the incantatory repetition resonating with early Yeatian poetic music and dreaminess, a certain influence of the *symbolistes* of the ‘nineties. The subject matter and musicality of “Low Tide on Grand Pré” resonate with Yeats’s earlier poems such as “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” and both poems depict a utopian site of longing for idealization: Yeats’s Innisfree and

Carman's Acadie:

The sun goes down, and over all
These barren reaches by the tide
Such elusive glories fall,
I almost dream they will yet bide
Until the coming of the tide.
.....
A grievous stream, that to and fro
Athrough the fields of Acadie
Goes wandering, as if to know
Why one beloved face should be
So long from home and Acadie. (11-12)

Another propelling force behind the belated Canadian modernism must have certain connections with the commonwealth conditions in Europe. Yeats's lectures in Canadian cities, mainly at universities for his fervent speeches on cultural nationalism, disseminated and promoted by the Canadian scholars, students, writers, must have lingering effects on the then fermenting modernist poetics in Canada. Rather than certain canonical manifestations by American literary gurus such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot in the manifestos that decided the epochal poetics, in Canada, it would be the rise of little magazines serving as the initiator and disseminator of modernism in Canada. Ken Norris pinpoints that "the little magazine in Canada has been the most important single factor behind the rise and continued progress of modernism in Canadian poetry." These little literary magazines, usually edited by university students, prevailing from the 20s to the 60s, almost parallel to the development of modern poetry, cover "initiating manifestoes and examples of change" (Norris). A cradle of nurturing the literary stars in the years to come was McGill University in Montreal. A.J.M. Smith and F.R. Scott, two graduate students at McGill University, were the major pushing hands of

these literary movements. They edited the first issue of *The McGill Fortnightly Review* and before so, Smith had edited the *McGill Daily Literary Supplement*, another student magazine publication. The name came from a famous nineteenth-century magazine published in London since 1865, *The Fortnightly*. In the initial issues, Smith and Scott would ally themselves with the bastions of tradition and institutionalism (based on a series of Bliss Carman's lectures at McGill) and then later launched fiery battles about modernist traditions and developments in Canadian poetry.

Despite these historical contingencies, literary adjacencies, and political ramifications about the identity of Canadian poetry, one cannot dismiss the influences of Yeats and Irish renaissance on both writers from two generations in eastern Canada: from Roberts and Carman to Smith and Scott. From the Confederation Group to the McGill Group, Canadian poets sought to transplant the European and American models of the new modern poets such as Pound, Yeats, and Eliot. By far we see Yeats's strong influential connection between the two Canadian groups: A.J.M. Smith himself was studying and emulating Yeats; Smith was quite influenced by Carman; and Carman formed a close poetic intimacy with Yeats's work. Influenced considerably by Yeats's invigorating language and the Irish renaissance, Smith wrote an article in the *McGill Fortnightly* about science changing the world, thus an inevitable change to replace old poetic forms ("An Afternoon with F. R. Scott" 13). In the final paragraph of the article, Smith quotes Yeats on the role of symbolism in relation to Canadian modernism: "a principle running strictly counter to the poetic indulgence of the previous fifty years" (qtd. in Norris). For Smith and the McGill Group, as Smith quotes Yeats in "Symbolism in Poetry" in *The McGill Fortnightly Review*, symbolism should effect "a casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of the moral law, a casting out of all anecdotes and of that brooding over scientific opinion that so often extinguished the central

flame in Tennyson, and of that vehemence that would make us do or not do certain things” (16). Smith also makes an explicit statement that Yeats-Eliot, rather than Pound-Williams, has had greater effects upon the later Canadian writers. Yeats’s presence and allusions to Yeats’s poetic forms are ubiquitous in Smith’s poetry, for example, in the famous metaphysical poem “Like an Old Proud King in a Parable”:

A bitter King in anger to be gone
From fawning courtier and doting Queen
Flung hollow scepter and gilt crown away
And took a staff and started out alone
And wandered on for many a night and day,
And came, at length, half dead, half mad with pain,
Into a solitude of wind and rain
And slept alone there, so old writers say,
With only his Pride for a counterpane.

Alan Richard compares both poets and provides an interesting link of Canadian modernism and Irish Twilight:

“A bitter King” throws away his crown (lines 1-3) as did kings in Yeats’s poem, “He Remembers Forgotten Beauty” (4-5). Yeats’s “Sad Shepherd” travelled alone in an unsympathetic landscape on a futile quest to recover the lost Arcady of “The Song of the Happy Shepherd,” and Smith’s king wanders “a solitude of wind and rain” (7). Yeats’s poems, published in 1899, twenty-seven years before Smith’s poem appeared in the *McGill Fortnightly Review*, lament art’s transitory quality and mourn the twilight of an old aesthetic; their grief heralds modernism’s dawn. It is not grief, however, that Smith voices in “The Proud Parable” but anger that an insipid Romanticism still exists. (117)

Smith reifies “the bitter king” to represent the new modern Canadian poet to shift from the old traditions rooted in the European continent, represented by

the “fawning courtiers and doting queen.” As modernism enters its twilight in Europe, Smith’s bitter king “abandons an enervated aesthetic in search of a voice for a Canada asserting itself in the decades after the First World War” (Richard 118). Smith’s poems in the *Canadian Mercury* contribute to the magazine’s creation of a transition between “the tradition of late Romanticism that dominates Canadian poetry during the first three decades of the twentieth century” and “an emerging strain of modernism that will displace that tradition” (Richard 118). The dis-enthroned king, like a new Canada still living with the “hollow scepter” of the British Queen, bespeaks the deferral or belatedness of modernism into Canadian literature in the nation’s longstanding paradoxical psyche: one the one hand, Canada’s inseparable commonwealth connections that the new nation tried to sever, but on the other, Canada’s resistance against and discerning from the giant neighbor to the south.

Yeats is a fascinating iconic figure for multifarious studies and interdisciplinary reinterpretations. These contextualized, unrelated threads between Yeats and earlier Canadian modernism, through the genealogical connection, can thus be woven onto the literary fabric of Canadian modernist verse. Along the literary trajectory of Canadian modernism for a semi-centennial span, from the Confederation poets to the McGill Group, Yeats’s influences of poetic revitalization and literary nationalism on Canadian poetic formation certainly cannot be dismissed. While so much scholarship has glossed over the nativist Canadian literary identity shaped within a Fryeian context and temperament, certainly Yeats as an important pushing hand behind these literary pioneers needs to be acknowledged.

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