

Classic Poetry Series

Charles Mair
- poems -

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Charles Mair(21 September 1838 – 7 July 1927)

Charles Mair was a Canadian poet and journalist. He was a fervent Canadian nationalist noted for his participation in the Canada First movement and his opposition to Louis Riel during the two Riel Rebellions in western Canada.

Mair was born at Lanark, Upper Canada, to Margaret Holmes and James Mair. He attended Queen's University but did not graduate. On leaving college, he became a journalist.

In Ottawa in 1868, Mair was introduced by civil servant and writer Henry Morgan to young lawyers George Denison, William Foster, and Robert Haliburton. "Together they organized the overtly nationalistic Canada First movement, which began as a small social group."

Mair "represented the Montreal Gazette during the first Riel Rebellion, and was imprisoned and narrowly escaped being shot by the rebels."

Mair was a Freemason.

Mair "was an Officer of the Governor-General's Body Guard during the second Riel rebellion in 1885, and was later employed in the Canadian civil service in the West." He died in Victoria, British Columbia.

Mair published the first book of poetry in post-Confederation Canada, 1868's *Dreamland and Other Poems*. "Negligible as verse," says *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, "the volume gained interest when Mair escaped after being captured by Louis Riel during the Red River disturbances of 1869-70."

The *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (DCB) states that *Dreamland* "demonstrates a conventional colonial approach to poetry. Such poems as 'August' succeed in their attention to natural detail: descriptions of the blueflies, the milkmaids, and the 'ribby-lean' cattle in parched fields anticipate the mature nature poetry of Archibald Lampman. But too often he wrote not of the timberlands he knew but of a dreamland weakly modelled upon the romantic flights of Keats." However, the book was praised by "the established poet Charles Sangster, who referred to Canada's sophisticated literary tradition as one that was habitually overlooked in the popular press."

Writing later in the *Ottawa Journal*, William Wilfred Campbell saw *Dreamland* as a precursor to the nature poetry later popularized in Canada by the Confederation

Poets: "The thirty-three poems constitute the first attempt to deal with Canadian nature, in the manner of Keats and the other classic poets, and many of them in theme and treatment are similar to the verse of Lampman and Roberts.... And there are strong evidences in Mair's work that he influenced these poets to a great extent."

Mair published *Tecumseh*, a historical drama mainly in blank verse dealing with the War of 1812, in 1886. Canadian critic Alan Filewood wrote of the political and philosophical ideas expressed by Mair in the poem:

Mair's projection of Canadian nationhood is embodied in the character of Lefroy, a Byronesque poet who flees civilization to seek solace in nature's genius. He learns – tragically – from the British General Brock that natural law finds its outward form in the monarchic principle, and from the Indian chieftain Tecumseh that nature must be defended against the perversion of American materialism. The dying Tecumseh legitimizes the proto-(Anglo) Canadians as the natural guardians of the land, and Canadian manhood finds mature expression in a race of armed poets.(...) Mair looked to the day when the dominions would assume the responsibilities of adulthood: Then shall a whole family of young giants stand 'Erect, unbound, at Britain's side-' her imperial offspring oversea, the upholders in the far future of her glorious tradition, or, should exhaustion ever come, the props and supports of her declining years.

The DCB calls *Tecumseh* "a major contribution to our 19th-century literary heritage, wherein the War of 1812 is the central event of Canadian history. Among the many literary treatments of this war, including works by Sangster, John Richardson, and Sarah Anne Curzon ... *Tecumseh* stands as the most accomplished." The Canadian Encyclopedia says that the poem's "blank verse is pedestrian and untheatrical", but it also tells us that "*Tecumseh* was important in the development of Canadian drama. It presents a vision of Canada as a co-operative enterprise in contrast with the self-seeking individualism of the United States."

Mair was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1889.

In 1937 he was designated a Person of National Historic Significance.

Canadian folksinger Gordon Lightfoot adapted a line from *Tecumseh*, "There was a time on this fair continent," for the first line in his 1967 historical ballad, "The Canadian Railroad Trilogy" ("There was a time in this fair land when the railroad did not run").

Enter General Brock And Lefroy

BROCK. You may be right, Lefroy, but, for my part,
I stand by old tradition and the past.

My father's God is wise enough for me,
And wise enough this gray world's wisest men.

LEFROY. I tell you, Brock,
The world is wiser than its wisest men,
And shall outlive the wisdom of its gods,
Made after man's own liking. The crippled throne
No longer shelters the uneasy king,
And outworn sceptres and Imperial crowns
Now grow fantastic as an idiot's dream.
These perish with the kingly pastime, war,
And war's blind tool, the monster, Ignorance,
Both hateful in themselves, but this the worst.
One tyrant will remain-one impious fiend
Whose name is Gold-our earliest, latest foe.
Him must the earth destroy, ere man can rise,
Rightly self-made, to his high destiny,
Purged of his grossest faults: humane and kind;
Co-equal with his fellows and as free.

y, such thoughts let loose would wreck the world.
The kingly function is the soul of state,
The crown the emblem of authority,
And loyalty the symbol of all faith.
Omitting these, man's government decays-
His family falls into revolt and ruin.
But let us dropp this bootless argument,
And tell me more of those unrivalled wastes
You and Tecumseh visited.

LEFROY. We left
The silent forest, and, day after day,
Great prairies swept beyond our aching sight
Into the measureless West; uncharted realms,
Voiceless and calm, save when tempestuous wind
Rolled the rank herbage into billows vast,
And rushing tides which never found a shore.
And tender clouds, and veils of morning mist,

Cast flying shadows, chased by flying light,
Into interminable wildernesses,
Flushed with fresh blooms, deep perfumed by the rose,
And murmurous with flower-fed bird and bee.
The deep-grooved bison-paths like furrows lay,
Turned by the cloven hoofs of thundering herds
Primeval, and still travelled as of yore.
And gloomy valleys opened at our feet,
Shagged with dusk cypresses and hoary pine;
The sunless gorges, rummaged by the wolf,
Which through long reaches of the prairie wound,
Then melted slowly into upland vales,
Lingering, far-stretched amongst the spreading hills.
BROCK. What charming solitudes! And life was there?
LEFROY. Yes, life was there, inexplicable life,
Still wasted by inexorable death!
There had the stately stag his battle-field-
Dying for mastery among his hinds.
There vainly sprung the affrighted antelope,
Beset by glittering eyes and hurrying feet.
The dancing grouse, at their insensate sport,
Heard not the stealthy footstep of the fox;
The gopher on his little earthwork stood,
With folded arms, unconscious of the fate
That wheeled in narrowing circles overhead;
And the poor mouse, on heedless nibbling bent,
Marked not the silent coiling of the snake.
At length we heard a deep and solemn sound-
Erupted moanings of the troubled earth
Trembling beneath innumerable feet.
A growing uproar blending in our ears,
With noise tumultuous as ocean's surge,
Of bellowings, fierce breath and battle shock,
And ardour of unconquerable herds.
A multitude whose trampling shook the plains,
With discord of harsh sound and rumblings deep,
As if the swift revolving earth had struck,
And from some adamant peak recoiled,
Jarring. At length we topped a high-browed hill-
The last and loftiest of a file of such-

And lo, before us lay the tameless stock,
Slow wending to the northward like a cloud!
A multitude in motion, dark and dense-
Far as eye could reach, and farther still,
In countless myriads stretched for many a league.
BROCK. You fire me with the picture! What a scene!
LEFROY. Nation on nation was invillaged there,
Skirting the flanks of that imbanded host;
With chieftains of strange speech and port of war,
Who, battle-armed, in weather-brawny bulk,
Roamed fierce and free in huge and wild content.
These gave Tecumseh greetings fair and kind,
Knowing the purpose havened in his soul.
And he, too, joined the chase as few men dare:
For I have seen him, leaping from his horse,
Mount a careering bull in foaming flight,
Urge it to fury o'er its burden strange,
Yet cling tenacious, with a grip of steel,
Then, by a knife-plunge, fetch it to its knees
In mid career and pangs of speedy death.
BROCK. You rave, Lefroy, or saw this in a dream!
LEFROY. No, no; 'tis true-I saw him do it, Brock!
Then would he seek the old, and with his spoils
Restore them to the bounty of their youth,
Cheering the crippled lodge with plenteous feasts,
And warmth of glossy robes, as soft as down,
Till withered cheeks ran o'er with feeble smiles,
And tongues, long silent, babbled of their prime.
BROCK. This warrior's fabric is of perfect parts!
A worthy champion of his race-he heaps
Such giant obligations on our heads
As will outweigh repayment. It is late,
And rest must preface war's hot work to-morrow,
Else would I talk till morn. How still the night!
Here Peace has let her silvery tresses down
And falls asleep beside the lapping wave.

Charles Mair

Tecumseh

There was a time on this fair continent
When all things throve in spacious peacefulness.
The prosperous forests unmolested stood,
For where the stalwart oak grew there it lived
Long ages, and then died among its kind.
The hoary pines—those ancients of the earth—
Brimful of legends of the early world,
Stood thick on their own mountains unsubdued.
And all things else illumined by the sun,
Inland or by the lifted wave, had rest.
The passionate or calm pageants of the skies
No artist drew; but in the auburn west
Innumerable faces of fair cloud
Vanished in silent darkness with the day.
The prairie realm—vast ocean's paraphrase—
Rich in wild grasses numberless, and flowers
Unnamed save in mute Nature's inventory,
No civilized barbarian trenched for gain.
And all that flowed was sweet and uncorrupt
The rivers and their tributary streams,
Undammed, wound on forever, and gave up
Their lonely torrents to weird gulfs of sea,
And ocean wastes unshadowed by a sail.
And all the wild life of this western world
Knew not the fear of man; yet in those woods,
And by those plenteous streams and mighty lakes,
And on stupendous steppes of peerless plain,
And in the rocky gloom of canyons deep,
Screened by the stony ribs of mountains hoar
Which steeped their snowy peaks in purging cloud,
And down the continent where tropic suns
Warmed to her very heart the mother earth,
And in the congcal'd north where silence self
Ached with intensity of stubborn frost,
There lived a soul more wild than barbarous;
A tameless soul—the sunburnt savage free—
Free, and untainted by the greed of gain:
Great Nature's man content with Nature's food.

LEFROY. I love you better than I love my race;
And could I mass my fondness for my friends,
Augment it with my love of noble brutes,
Tap every spring of reverence and respect,
And all affections bright and beautiful—
Still would my love for you outweigh them all.
IENA. Speak not of love! Speak of the Long-Knife's hate!
Oh, it is pitiful to creep in fear
O'er lands where once our fathers stept in pride!
The Long-Knife strengthens, whilst our race decays,
And falls before him as our forests fall.
First comes his pioneer, the bee, and soon
The mast which plumped the wild deer fats his swine.
His cattle pasture where the bison fed;
His flowers, his very weeds, displace our own—
Aggressive as himself. All, all thrust back!
Destruction follows us, and swift decay.
Oh, I have lain for hours upon the grass,
And gazed into the tenderest blue of heaven—
Cleansed as with dew, so limpid, pure and sweet—
All flecked with silver packs of standing cloud
Most beautiful! But watch them narrowly!
Those clouds will sheer small fleeces from their sides,
Which, melting in our sight as in a dream,
Will vanish all like phantoms in the sky.
So melts our heedless race! Some weaned away,
And wedded to rough-handed pioneers,
Who, fierce as wolves in hatred of our kind,
Yet from their shrill and acid women turn,
Prizing our maidens for their gentleness.
Some by outlandish fevers die, and some—
Caught in the white man's toils and vices mean—
Court death, and find it in the trader's cup.
And all are driven from their heritage,
Far from our fathers' seats and sepulchres,
And girdled with the growing glooms of war;
Resting a moment here, a moment there,
Whilst ever through our plains and forest realms
Bursts the pale spoiler, armed, with eager quest,
And ruinous lust of land. I think of all—

And own Tecumseh right. 'Tis he alone
Can stem this tide of sorrows dark and deep;
So must I bend my feeble will to his,
And, for my people's welfare, banish love

Charles Mair

The Last Bisson

EIGHT years have fled since, in the wilderness,
I drew the rein to rest my comrade there-
My supple, clean-limbed pony of the plains.
He was a runner of pure Indian blood,
Yet in his eye still gleamed the desert's fire,
And form and action both bespoke the Barb.
A wondrous creature is the Indian's horse;
Degenerate now, but from the 'Centaur's' drawn-
The apparitions which dissolved with fear
Montezuma's plumed Children of the Sun,
And throned rough Cortez in his realm of gold.

A gentle vale, with rippling aspens clad,
Yet open to the breeze, invited rest.
So there I lay, and watched the sun's fierce beams
Reverberate in wreathed ethereal flame;
Or gazed upon the leaves which buzzed o'erhead,
Like tiny wings in simulated flight.

Within the vale a lakelet, lashed with flowers,
Lay like a liquid eye among the hills,
Revealing in its depths the fulgent light
Of snowy cloud-land and cerulean skies.
And rising, falling, fading far around,
The homeless and unfurrowed prairies spread
In solitude and idleness eterne.

And all was silent save the rustling leaf,
The gadding insect, or the grebe's lone cry,
Or where Saskatchewan, with turbid moan,
Deep-sunken in the plain, his torrent poured.
Here Loneliness possessed her realm supreme,
Her prairies all about her, undeflowered,
Pulsing beneath the summer sun, and sweet
With virgin air and waters undefiled.
Inviolate still! Bright solitudes, with power
To charm the spirit-bruised, where ways are foul,
Into forgetfulness of chuckling wrong
And all the weary clangour of the world.

Yet, Sorrow, too, had here its kindred place,
As o'er my spirit swept the sense of change.
Here sympathy could sigh o'er man's decay;
For here, but yesterday, the warrior dwelt
Whose faded nation had for ages held,
In fealty to Nature, these domains.
Around me were the relics of his race:
The grassy circlets where his village stood,
Well-ruled by custom's immemorial law.
Along these slopes his happy offspring roved
In days gone by, and dusky mothers plied
Their summer tasks, or loitered in the shade.
Here the magician howled his demons up,
And here the lodge of council had its seat,
Once resonant with oratory wild.
All vanished! perished in the swelling sea
And stayless tide of an enroaching power
Whose civil fiat, man-devouring still,
Will leave, at last, no wilding on the earth
To wonder at or love!

With them had fled
The bison-breed which overflowed the plains,
And, undiminished, fed uncounted tribes.
Its vestiges were here-its wallows, paths,
And skulls and shining ribs and vertebrae:
Gray bones of monarchs from the herds, perchance,
Descended, by De Vaca first beheld,
Or Coronada, in mad quest of gold.
Here hosts had had their home; here had they roamed,
Endless and infinite-vast herds which seemed
Exhaustless as the sea. All vanished now!
Of that wild tumult not a hoof remained
To scour the countless paths where myriads trod.

Long had I lain 'twixt dreams and waking, thus,
Musing on change and mutability,
And endless evanescence, when a burst
Of sudden roaring filled the vale with sound.
Perplexed and startled, to my feet I sprang,
And in amazement from my covert gazed,

For, presently, into the valley came
A mighty bison, which, with stately tread
And gleaming eyes, descended to the shore.
Spell-bound I stood. Was this a living form,
Or but an image by the fancy drawn?
But no-he breathed! and from a wound blood flowed,
And trickled with the frothing from his lips.
Uneasily he gazed, yet saw me not,
Haply concealed; then, with a roar so loud
That all the echoes rent their valley-horns,
He stood and listened; but no voice replied!
Deeply he drank, then, lashed his quivering flanks,
And roared again, and hearkened, but no sound,
No tongue congenial answered to his call-
He was the last survivor of his clan!

Huge was his frame! the famed Burdash, so grown
To that enormous bulk whose presence filled
The very vale with awe. His shining horns
Gleamed black amidst his fell of floating hair-
His neck and shoulders, of the lion's build,

Charles Mair

The Song

Here me, ye smokeless skies and grass-green earth,
Since by your sufferance still I breathe and live!
Through you fond Nature gave me birth,
And food and freedom—all she had to give.
Enough! I grew, and with my kindred ranged
Their realm stupendous, changeless and unchanged,
Save by the toil of nations primitive,
Who throve on us, and loved our life-stream's roar,
And lived beside its wave, and camped upon its shore.

They loved us, and they wasted not. They slew,
With pious hand, but for their daily need;
Not wantonly, but as the due
Of stern necessity which Life doth breed.
Yea, even as earth gave us herbage meet,
So yielded we, in turn, our substance sweet
To quit the claims of hunger, not of greed.
So stood it with us that what either did
Could not be on the earth foregone, nor Heaven forbid.

And, so companioned in the blameless strife
Enjoined upon all creatures, small and great,
Our ways were venial, and our life
Ended in fair fulfilment of our fate.
No gold to them by sordid hands was passed;
No greedy herdsman housed us from the blast;
Ours was the liberty of regions rife
In winter's snow, in summer's fruits and flowers—
Ours were the virgin prairies, and their rapture ours!

So fared it with us both; yea, thus it stood
In all our wanderings from place to place,
Until the red man mixed his blood
With paler currents. Then arose a race—
The reckless hunters of the plains—who vied
In wanton slaughter for the tongue and hide,
To satisfy vain ends and longings base.
Thus grew; and yet we flourished, and our name

Prospered until the pale destroyer's concourse came.

Then fell a double terror on the plains,
The swift inspreding of destruction dire—
Strange men, who ravaged our domains
On every hand, and ringed us round with fire;
Pale enemies who slew with equal mirth
The harmless or the hurtful things of earth,
In dead fruition of their mad desire:
The ministers of mischief and of might,
Who yearn for havoc as the world's supreme delight.

So waned the myriads which had waxed before
When subject to the simple needs of men.
As yields to eating seas the shore,
So yielded our vast multitude, and then—
It scattered! Meagre bands, in wild dismay,
Were parted and, for shelter, fled away
To barren wastes, to mountain gorge and glen.
A respite brief from stern pursuit and care,
For still the spoiler sought, and still he slew us there.

Hear me, thou grass-green earth, ye smokeless skies,
Since by your sufferance still I breathe and live!
The charity which man denies
Ye still would tender to the fugitive!
I feel your mercy in my veins—at length
My heart revives, and strengthens with your strength—
Too late, too late, the courage ye would give!
Naught can avail these wounds, this failing breath,
This frame which feels, at last, the wily touch of death.

Here must the last of all his kindred fall;
Yet, midst these gathering shadows, ere I die—

Responsive to an inward call,
My spirit fain would rise and prophesy.
I see our spoilers build their cities great
Upon our plains—I see their rich estate:
The centuries in dim procession fly!
Long ages roll, and then at length is bared
The time when they who spared not are no longer spared.

Once more my vision sweeps the prairies wide,
But now no peopled cities greet the sight;
All perished, now, their pomp and pride:
In solitude the wild wind takes delight.
Naught but the vacant wilderness is seen,
And grassy mounds, where cities once had been.
The earth smiles as of yore, the skies are bright,
Wild cattle graze and bellow on the plain,
And savage nations roam o'er native wilds again.

The burden ceased, and now, with head bowed down,
The bison smelt, then grinned into the air.
An awful anguish seized his giant frame,
Cold shudderings and indrawn gaspings deep—
The spasms of illimitable pain.
One stride he took, and sank upon his knees,
Glared stern defiance where I stood revealed,
Then swayed to earth, and, with convulsive groan,
Turned heavily upon his side, and died.

Charles Mair