

Classic Poetry Series

Raymond Knister

- 4 poems -

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Raymond Knister (27 May 1899 – 29 Aug 1932)

John Raymond Knister was a Canadian poet, novelist, story writer, columnist, and reviewer, "known primarily for his realistic narratives set in rural Canada. Knister was a highly respected member of the Canadian literary community during the 1920s and early 1930s, and recent criticism has acknowledged him as a pioneer in establishing a distinctively modern voice in Canadian literature.

Born at Ruscom (now part of Lakeshore), Ontario, near Windsor, Knister attended Victoria College at the University of Toronto, but had to drop out after catching pneumonia. He worked on his father's farm until 1923.

In 1919 Knister began writing and publishing stories and poems about Canadian farm life. He worked in 1922 and 1923 as a book reviewer for the Windsor Border Cities Star and the Detroit Free Press. He moved to Iowa in 1923 to become associate editor of literary magazine The Midland ("the most important magazine America had produced," according to H.L. Mencken) in Iowa City for a year. During the same time he took courses in creative writing at Iowa State University.

By 1924 Knister was a taxi driver in Chicago, as well as a reviewer for Poetry magazine and the Chicago Evening Post. "In 1926 he moved to Toronto, where he freelanced; his work appeared in the Toronto Star Weekly and Saturday Night." In Toronto he became acquainted with writers Morley Callaghan, Mazo de la Roche, Merrill Denison, and Charles G.D. Roberts.

Knister had work published in the Paris literary magazine This Quarter in 1925.

In 1926, Knister put together a collection of nature poetry, Windfalls for Cider. Toronto's Ryerson Press accepted the book for publication, but later had to cancel because of the company's finances.

Knister married Myrtle Gamble in 1927. They had one daughter, Imogen, born in 1930.

In 1928, Knister edited the anthology Canadian Short Stories. The Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada (2002) calls the book a "trend-setting anthology."

Knister published his first novel, White Narcissus, in 1929. The book is still in print as part of McClelland & Stewart's New Canadian Library series of classic Canadian literature.

Knister was fascinated with [John Keats](http://www.poemhunter.com/john-keats/), the 19th century English Romantic poet who had died young. He accumulated "letters and stacks of books about Keats," according to his daughter, and enrolled his wife as a research assistant to help him go through it all. "Apparently, she was to use her reading time on this only, and he frowned upon her spending time reading women's magazines." The Knisters spent eight months researching Keats's life: the result was a 200,000-word, 700 page non-fiction novel, *My Star Predominant*.

In 1931, Knister moved to Montreal, Quebec. There he became acquainted with the poets of the Montreal Group – with poet Leo Kennedy he began planning an anthology, similar to his *Canadian Short Stories*, of Canadian modernist poetry (an idea that eventually resulted in the landmark *New Provinces* in 1936). He also got to know poet Dorothy Livesay and novelist Frederick Philip Grove.

Grove read *My Star Predominant*, and encouraged Knister to enter the manuscript in the Graphic Publishers' Canadian Novel contest. (Knister's daughter later said that her mother had encouraged him to enter the novel.) Knister cut the book to 120,000 words, mailed it off, and forgot about it. *My Star Predominant* won the \$2,500.00 first prize in the 1931 cross-Canada contest. However, "owing to the failure of the firm of publishers which offered the prize," the novel was not published.

In 1932, Ryerson Press, which had picked up the rights to *My Star Predominant*, offered Knister a job as an editor. Before he was to begin working there, Knister drowned in a swimming accident on Lake St. Clair while on a picnic with his family. (In a memoir published in the 1949 *Collected Poems of Raymond Knister*, Livesay maintained that Knister had committed suicide. His wife and daughter strongly disputed that allegation.)

My Star Predominant was published in 1934 in Canada by Ryerson and also in England.

Knister's daughter, Imogen Givens, wrote a 5,000-word memoir of him, "Raymond Knister: Man or Myth?". The memoir, which made extensive use of her mother's diary, was published in the journal *Essays on Canadian Writing* (No. 16, Fall-Winter 1979-80).

In 2007, Alberta poet Micheline Mayler published *Full Depth: The Raymond Knister Poems*, an account of Knister's life and death written as a series of poems.

Knister is buried in Port Dover, Ontario. His poem "Change" is inscribed on his tombstone.

Writing

Besides his four novels, Knister wrote roughly one hundred poems, almost as many short stories and sketches, and dozens of critical works, including essays, editorials, and book reviews. "To his own writing and criticism, Knister brought a mind attuned to new literary developments."

Fiction

"Farm work provided him with realistic details for his stories and his first novel, *White Narcissus* (1929)." Set in rural Ontario, "The novel concerns a writer, Richard Milne, who returns home in order to make a final attempt to convince his childhood sweetheart, Ada Lethen, to marry him. Ada feels it is her duty to stay at home because for years, as a consequence of a quarrel, her parents have communicated only through her.... While the novel is usually and justly considered a work of realism, it has also been suggested that it contains elements of romanticism, and that the lyricism of some passages approaches prose-poetry."

In 2006 Black Moss Press published "There Was a Mr. Cristi," a previously

unknown novel discovered by Knister's daughter Imogen. In it, Knister tells the tale of a woman who leaves her husband in 1930s Ontario, and moves to Toronto to open a boarding house. "What follows is a fascinating tale of life in the 1930s in a house that is inhabited by all these bizarre characters. In the background is the 'tall and dark and good looking' Mr. Cristi, and we begin to wonder if we will ever come to know him. He is shrouded in mystery as the characters in this rambling old house come alive vividly for us."

"Of Knister's many short stories, probably the best known is 'Mist-green oats', about a young man's break with his life on the family farm. His stories recurrently focus on some form of psychological initiation." For example, "The First Day of Spring," which "dramatizes the moment when an adolescent farmboy moves from imagining love's pleasures to learning about its possible horrors (a baby's murder, or at least a savage accident) and his naiveté gives way to a need for order."

Knister also wrote novellas. In "Innocent man" the story of a man's wedding frames the tale of his false arrest and wedding-night spent in a Chicago jail. During the night each prisoner tells the story not of his guilt but of his innocence; the tension between black and white prisoners, and between inmates and guards, threatens to explode in violence. "Peaches, peaches" is set on a fruit farm; as an overabundant crop of peaches ripens, a young man first encounters sexual politics.

Poetry

Knister is now considered one of the first modern poets in Canada. His poetry, which contains powerful descriptions of nature, is usually associated with the imagist school, although Knister also employed the forms of the prose-poem ("Poisons"), the serial poem ("A row of horse stalls"), and the longer poem ("Corn husking").

Knister's imagist nature poetry includes "such poems as 'The Hawk,' 'Boy Remembers in the Field,' 'Lake Harvest,' 'A Row of Stalls,' and 'The Plowman,' which vividly depict rural experience and the Canadian landscape. In both his poetry and his fiction Knister presented sharply realistic portrayals of everyday images and events in order to illustrate their exceptional qualities, and communicated these impressions in a conversational language style." Also read the hokku-like "Reverie: The Orchard on the Slope," the metaphysical "Change", and the whimsical "The Quiet Snow."

Poet Anne Burke says of Knister: "Like Edwin Arlington Robinson whom he reviewed as 'A Great Poet of Today' his work is exemplified by simple straightforward stanzas about modern life and aims at the starkness of absolute truth. Note 'Wind's Way,' 'Reply to August,' 'Night Whistling,' 'Moments When I'm Feeling Poems,' 'Autumn Clouds,' and others. The complexity of Knister's work, like that of Robert Frost, has been overlooked because of its surface simplicity, bucolic tone, and emphasis on exactly what the poet felt. Knister on his Ontario farm resembles the adolescent Frost especially A Boy's Will, 1913 and North of Boston, 1914."

In 2003 *After Exile*, the first reprint of Knister's verse in over 20 years, was released by Toronto's Exile Editions. The book presents dozens of poems never before in book form, plus 30 new poems, and selected prose pieces and letters.

Works:

Poetry

Collected Poems of Raymond Knister. Dorothy Livesay ed. Toronto, Ryerson, 1949.

Windfalls for Cider: The poems of Ray Knister. Joy Kuropatwa ed. Windsor, ON: Black Moss, 1983.

After Exile complete poems compiled by Gregory Betts (Exile, 2003)

Prose

White Narcissus. London, UK: Cape, 1929. Toronto: Macmillan, 1929.
Toronto: McClelland & Stewart New Canadian Library, 1962, 1990.
My Star Predominant. Toronto: Ryerson, 1934.
Selected Stories of Raymond Knister. Michael Gnarowski ed. Ottawa. U of
Ottawa P, 1972.
Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays ed. David Aronson (1975)
The First Day of Spring. Stories and Other Prose. Toronto, Buffalo: U of
Toronto P, 1976.
There Was a Mr. Cristi (Windsor: Black Moss, 2006)
Boy Remembers in the Field (2006)
Grapes (2006)
Hackman's Night. Windsor: Black Moss, 2007.
Soil in Smoke (unpublished)
Turning Loam (unpublished)

Change

1 I shall not wonder more, then,
2 But I shall know.

3 Leaves change, and birds, flowers,
4 And after years are still the same.

5 The sea's breast heaves in sighs to the moon,
6 But they are moon and sea forever.

7 As in other times the trees stand tense and lonely,
8 And spread a hollow moan of other times.

9 You will be you yourself,
10 I'll find you more, not else,
11 For vintage of the woeful years.

12 The sea breathes, or broods, or loudens,
13 Is bright or is mist and the end of the world;
14 And the sea is constant to change.

15 I shall not wonder more, then,
16 But I shall know.

Raymond Knister

Plowman's Song

Turn under, plow,
My trouble;
Turn under griefs
And stubble.

Turn mouse's nest,
Gnawing years;
Old roots up
For new love's tears.

Turn, plow, the clods
For new thunder.
Turn under, plow,
Turn under.

Raymond Knister

Reverie: The Orchard on the Slope

1 Thin ridges of land unploughed
2 Along the tree-rows
3 Covered with long cream grasses
4 Wind-torn.
5 Brown sand between them,
6 Blue boughs above.

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7 Row and row of waves ever
8 In the breaking;
9 Ever in arching and convulsed
10 Imminence;
11 Roll of muddy sea between;
12 Low clouds down-pressing
13 And pallid and streaming rain.

Raymond Knister

The Quiet Snow

1 The quiet snow
2 Will splotch
3 Each in the row of cedars
4 With a fine
5 And patient hand;
6 Numb the harshness,
7 Tangle of that swamp.
8 It does not say, The sun
9 Does these things another way.

10 Even on hats of walkers,
11 The air of noise
12 And street-car ledges
13 It does not know
14 There should be hurry.

Raymond Knister