

Classic Poetry Series

William Chapman

- poems -

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William Chapman is best known as a nationalistic French-Canadian poet of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His worst poetry, often ridiculed for its bombast and technical clumsiness, makes him an easy scapegoat for a literary fashion that has long since declined. Nevertheless, no anthology of French-Canadian poetry is complete without some of Chapman's best poems, which were greatly admired in his day and still stand as robust expressions of national sentiment.

George William Alfred Chapman was born in Saint-François de Beauce (Quebec), a prosperous rural region. His father, George William Alfred Chapman, was a businessman from England who had settled in what was then Lower Canada; his mother, Caroline Angers Chapman, was the daughter of a French-Canadian military and legal family. Chapman studied in Levis and Quebec City, without distinction, but well enough to gain a place at Laval University, where he entered his poem "L'Algonquine" in a competition in 1873. Chapman was awarded a "mention honorable"; it is thought that he might well have won the prize had his poem not offended religious susceptibilities by portraying a priest in physical combat with an Indian woman.

Chapman immersed himself in the French-Canadian literature of the day. Later he was to remark that he had read nothing else, but the influence of major French Romantics is also recognizable in his work. He abandoned law studies to take up writing, including journalism, and in 1876 he published a volume of collected verse, *Les Québécoises*. This was the second such volume in Canada (the first being Louis Fréchette's *Mes Loisirs*, 1863) and earned the congratulations of François Coppée, at that time possibly the most popular of the Romantic poets in France.

The prominent themes in this first collection are national history, Canadian scenery, and nature in general. There is also much comment on world events--showing Chapman's ultramontane Catholicism and arch-conservatism--as well as a few conventional love poems. Occasional verse in the tradition of [Octave Crémazie](http://www.poemhunter.com/octave-cremazie/)

plays a large part. The quality of the versification and style is uneven, and the poet himself later dismissed much of the collection as youthful errors.

During the next ten years, Chapman turned his hand to various types of writing. He translated poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, he worked for

newspapers, and he published two volumes in prose. *Mines d'or de la Beauce* (Gold Mines of Beauce, 1881) is a well-documented report on local gold mining. *Guide et souvenir de la St-Jean-Baptiste* (1884) gives an account of the Montreal feast of Saint John the Baptist (Canada's patron saint).

Les Feuilles d'érable (The Maple Leaves, 1890) is Chapman's second poetry collection; despite characteristic weaknesses, it is considerably better than the first. The best verse, in the manner of Coppée, contains moving evocations of the life of simple people. The celebration of nature gives the New World a place in the aesthetic consciousness. "L'Aurore boréale" (first version), a word painting of the northern lights, is a reveling in spectacular beauty. A feature imitated in Canadian tourist illustrations ever since is the placing of a moose in the foreground of the symphony of light and color. In other poems, the search for effect is all too visible. Religion, patriotism, and folk tales are the basis of other poems, which thus continue Chapman's tradition, including his didacticism.

The year 1894 seems to have included considerable bitterness for Chapman. He had given up regular journalism, and his hopes of success as a writer were seriously threatened by criticism; his subscription campaign to publish another volume was disappointing; and he was short of money. Meanwhile, Fréchette had been honored by the Académie Française in 1880 with the title of "laureate" and was lionized in Montreal. Chapman had been one of his devoted admirers and imitators. Jealousy was exacerbated by ideological differences, and Chapman attacked Fréchette's support for secular education in Quebec. (Opposition to secular schools was a powerful rallying cry until 1966.) In the ensuing quarrel Chapman attacked Fréchette's verse, using (with some justification) the very complaints that had been levelled against his own poetry: plagiarism and clumsiness. Fréchette riposted and Chapman then published his own collected articles in a volume entitled *Le Lauréat* (1894). These complicated maneuvers constituted a major literary event, doing little for the reputation of Chapman.

Continuing to write on controversial topics, he produced *A propos de la guerre hispano-américaine* (1898), a condemnation in verse of the American invasion of Cuba. Chapman upholds the bond of the Latin peoples, their sense of chivalry, and a Romantic notion of the hispanic character, contrasted with the materialism and bellicosity of Americans. A milder version was published in his next collection, *Les Aspirations* (1904).

After working as a civil servant and as an insurance salesman in the Eastern Townships, Chapman returned to Ottawa as a translator. He at last traveled overseas and saw France in 1903. Renewed contact with the soil and with France inspired the poetry he was now composing for his next three volumes, generally

considered his best.

Les Aspirations was published in Paris. While it seems obvious that Chapman was seeking recognition in France such as his rival Fréchette had enjoyed, there can be no doubt of the strong feeling for the land of his cultural ancestry. "Notre langue," first published in *Le Monde Illustré* in 1890, gives vigorous and varied expression to the French Canadians' attachment to their mother tongue. "A la Bretagne" is a movingly explicit revelation of nostalgia for the country of origin, whose landscapes, legends, and ancient traditions are cherished, while evocations of sea and ships link the two countries. The collection also contains a high proportion of rural Quebec scenes, including "Le Laboureur," probably Chapman's most anthologized poem; in a colorful Parnassian description, the ploughman is first identified with his land, and then his productive activity is sanctified by association with God. Again Chapman produced an image that was to be much repeated, degenerating into a literary and political cliché. This volume's best poems earned it a good reception and it was honored by the Académie Française.

Two more of Chapman's collections were to be honored by the Académie. *Les Rayons du nord* (The Northern Lights, 1909) and *Les Fleurs de givre* (Frost Flowers, 1912) continue Chapman's well-established themes, stressing the Canadian landscape and further developing scenes with Amerindians, lumbermen, trappers, and hunters, as well as relating folktales. Word pictures of wild-life express the poet's yearning for the noble, the pure, and the grandiose. They probably also reveal the yearnings of his generation for escape and greater personal freedom, but such intimations must have been mainly unconscious; Chapman remained a conservative and conforming Roman Catholic. One finds no reference to his late and somewhat unhappy marriage to Emma Gingras (1909).

With his strengths and his weaknesses, William Chapman is characteristic of French-Canadian poetry at the turn of the century. From a modern critical distance, the stylistic difference between him and Fréchette seems unimportant. Chapman may well have been more clumsy more often, but they speak the same grandiloquence. Meanwhile, the symboliste movement was at its height in France, and in Canada, Emile Nelligan's work was highly appreciated by the Montreal avant-garde. Yet Chapman's nationalistic vision of the Canadian land with its muscular inhabitants and symbolic fauna is a lasting contribution, anticipating by ten years the *terroir* (Quebec rural) school of writing. His unequivocal support for a supranational French-language community remains an important part of Quebec's identity in a more complex cultural and political scene.

Il Neige

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L'Aurore Boréale

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Le Laboureur

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Notre Langue

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