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# Agnes C. Laut: High Ideals and Dreams of Unity

VALERIE LEGGE

Dear Land of Ice and Snow  
Dear Land of Summer Glow  
Awake, awake, awake  
From your long sleep, and take  
Your place, a nation's own!<sup>1</sup>  
— Agnes Laut, “O Canada!”

**I**N JULY 1924, AFTER RESIDING IN NEW YORK for two decades, Canadian author and historian Agnes C. Laut became an American citizen, an occasion so momentous that she bid farewell to the country of her birth in a nineteen-stanza poem titled “O Canada!”<sup>2</sup> In some ways, it was a choice that she had long hoped never to make. A handwritten note at the end of the typescript of “O Canada!” found among Laut’s recently discovered papers reads, “On taking out my American papers — delayed for twenty years in the hope England, Canada and the United States would become the World Leaders and Nationhood in One World become Nationhood in All.” For Laut, these transnational aspirations were part of a larger vision of historical transition. Also in 1924, she published *The Quenchless Light*, an esoteric work based upon the lives of the apostles and “their dauntless struggle to establish the new faith in a dying world” (ix). In the conclusion to that work, Laut wrote that “our own modern world seems to be passing through a welter similar to the apostolic ages” (283). By the mid-1920s, Laut imagined that the world was poised between “the passing of the Old Order” and the emergence of “a New Order,” a time “when a light shall burst over humanity with the effulgent radiance of the very heavens” (290-91). According to Laut, if Canada intended to play its proper role in a post-war world, it needed to “Catch hold of God’s own hand, / And bind in steel the band / Of three democracies!” (“O Canada!”).

Laut first took leave of the country that she loved in November 1902, following the overnight success of *Lords of the North* (1900) and *Heralds*

of *Empire* (1902), two historical novels celebrating Canada as a northern, virile nation occupying a special place within the British Empire (Hedler).<sup>3</sup> Leaving Canada, Laut joined that great mass of Canadian *émigrés* living and working south of the border (Mount). Between 1897 and 1902, the young woman had followed a peripatetic life, moving restlessly from the western prairies to eastern Canada, out to the Pacific Northwest, down to New York, up to Quebec, across Newfoundland and along the coast of Labrador, and back to Ottawa, where her parents rented a property on Besserer Street. Then in December 1903 the *New York Sun* reported that, when Laut's first two "books had furnished the bank account," the young woman went looking for a home within easy reach of New York City ("Books and Bookmaking"). She found Wildwood Place, a beautiful country estate in Wassaic, Dutchess County, once belonging to English travel writer, mystic, and idealist Laurence Oliphant.<sup>4</sup>

When asked by a Canadian journalist why she decided to forsake Canada for foreign soil, Laut replied that her decision was prompted by work considerations: "It's heartbreaking to leave one's country, but it's heartbreaking to run down to New York five times every six months" (qtd. in "Book Reviews"). Relocation was a matter more of professional convenience than of shifting commitments. In September 1902, when interviewed by *Manitoba Free Press* journalist Kate Simpson Hayes about her imminent departure to the United States, Laut confessed in similar terms that "this hurts [me] not a little, this going out into the wide, wide world," and that it was very difficult "to decide between love and duty" ("Miss Agnes Laut"). Hayes concluded that "business pressure from publishers more than outweighed a patriotic home-love (for we live by 'bread,' not 'kisses' in life), and, in order to keep pace with a large-growing list of undertakings and to keep faith with publishers," Laut was forced to "find a new home across the way where the little British 'run-a-ways' have built themselves a national fortress and flag."

During her first decade in New York, Laut published extensively on historical, political, and social issues from both Canadian and American perspectives. Albert Shaw of the *American Review of Reviews* claimed that he had discovered the young writer during the late 1890s when he had invited her to submit an article on the Klondike to his magazine. Circumstances had prevented Laut from accepting his offer, but in 1898, when the Anglo-American Joint High Commission began its

deliberations on international relations in Quebec before moving on to Washington, DC, Laut sent Shaw an article expressing “a Canadian perspective” for the *American Review of Reviews*, beginning what would be her very successful career as a North American magazine writer. Covering the conference in Quebec, Laut described Canada as the “meeting ground for the two great Anglo-Saxon nations” (“Canada’s Claims” 445). While the Canadian commissioners hoped to remove “every cause of friction between the republic and the empire,” they also worked “to promote Anglo-Saxon friendship” (446). According to Laut, the commissioners, motivated by “lofty ideals,” worked to strengthen the bonds of “an Anglo-Saxon brotherhood” (445). If the two “kindred races” (450) cooperated instead of pulling against each other, then both Canada and the United States would benefit.

Laut’s enthusiasm for this growing “Anglo-Saxon brotherhood” extended to an attempt to assuage concerns about American imperialism. In “Canada’s Claims before the Anglo-American Joint High Commission,” Laut addressed the anxieties of many Canadians who feared that closer economic relations with the United States would result in the Americanization of Canada. In a humorous little poem titled “International Negotiations, Miss Canada to Uncle Sam,” written in Quebec while she was covering the conference, Laut employed the popular image of Canada as a “pert,” “spunky,” “shy,” but slightly sassy young coquette being wooed by an older man. Miss Canada assured her American suitor that she “won’t be rated second hand.” If he wished to court her, then Uncle Sam had “better drop [his] uncly air / And treat [her] equal upon the square.” Canada, she declared, is “a big girl now,” and if Uncle Sam acts “in a really neighborly lover-like way / Why, who can tell, but that someday / We — that’s you and Momma and me” — might become “a cozy three.”

The two unpublished poems (“International Negotiations” and “O Canada!”), written decades apart, articulate Laut’s vision of Canada as a young nation with potential to be a great international power. From the outset of her writing career in 1897 to the summer of 1924, when Laut became an American citizen, she always identified as an ardent Canadian nationalist, an expatriate living and working abroad, one who imagined that someday she would return home. In fact, in the 1920s, the Canadian government rewarded her war work for the dominion with a parcel of land in Jasper National Park, Alberta, where Laut planned

to establish an artists' colony modelled on the ones that she had seen in Carmel, California, and Santa Fe, New Mexico ("Artists Building Colony"). Despite her long sojourn in the United States, Laut's heart was always in the Canadian west. So, after decades of declaring her undivided allegiance to Canada, what finally convinced Laut to become an American citizen?

Closer attention to Laut's changing ideas about Canada suggests that they might have had more to do with her evolving moral and political views than with the pragmatic tone that coloured her explanations for her initial move in 1902. By 1924, the idealistic young woman who had left Canada so long ago with great trepidation no longer existed, and an older and a more jaded woman now believed that her beloved country was not heading on a proper course. Alarmed by what she saw as Canada's new direction (she believed, for example, that materialism had become the country's new religion), Laut warned that it was not too late to "avert the shame / Of falling short." But, to do so, Canada needed to face a "brutal truth or two" about its failure to fulfill its destiny. It was time, she wrote, to "Throw off the carking mood! / Silence the carping brood!" It was time to "Call from the ends of earth / Races of every worth," to "Avert class strife," and to "Cast out the alien slur! / Soften the harsh hard burr / Of cynic sneer at New!" What had "stalled" Canada's progress for two decades, Laut suggested, was its political divisiveness, its failure to act decisively, its refusal to take chances, and its lack of vision. And, she reminded Canada, it had turned its back on many of its sons and daughters, who had been forced to emigrate to find success:

O giant sleeping long —  
'Tis you who pay  
For thrusting far away  
The work and love and joy  
Of native sons. ("O Canada!")

Had Canada believed in and supported those sons and daughters, they might have been providing their country with the vision that Laut believed Canada needed.

To understand Laut's change of attitude toward Canada, we need to understand more about her formative years. Her father, John Laut, born on a tenant farm in Ayrshire, arrived in Canada in 1852 with

little more than a spoon to eat his porridge and a copy of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Laut settled briefly in Belleville, Ontario, which, according to Susanna Moodie, living there at the same time, had become a bustling town with saw mills, flour mills, newspapers, cloth and paper manufactories, tailoring and shoemaking establishments, a variety of churches, a grammar school, four large common schools, and markets. There were regular steamships running between Belleville and Kingston and Quebec as well as "plank and macadamized roads branching out in all directions" to surrounding country towns (*Roughing It* 544). As evidence of the claim that culture had kept pace with economic progress, Moodie noted that, when she first arrived in the town, there were "no more than five or six piano-fortes," but "now there are nearly one hundred of a superior description" (540). With a fondness for British literature and with cultivated neighbours from Scotland, Laut must have felt quite at home in "the rising village" (Goldsmith). In 1855, he met and married Eliza George, at that time residing in Kingston with her father, the Reverend James George, who as the principal of Queen's University had become an intellectual light for some of Canada's leading writers and thinkers, such as Alexander McLachlan, Alexander Muir, Charles Sangster, Charles Mair, Agnes Maule Machar, and George M. Grant. By 1856, Laut had left Belleville, and at the time of their marriage he and Eliza were living in Guelph, which had attained town status just a few years earlier when the great railway boom brought real-estate developers and land speculators such as John A. Macdonald to town. John and Eliza remained in Guelph until just two months before the birth of their first child, Margaret, but marital tensions were already becoming apparent. In a letter to Eliza dated April 1857, Reverend George counselled his daughter to leave Guelph and return to Kingston "without a moment's loss of time . . . but not [before] the roads are good. The journey on the roads as they are now would kill both you and the child."

His urgent letter to his daughter implies early signs of trouble in the Laut marriage, but Eliza stated her intention to stay with her husband, at least until the birth of their child. Fearful that she would be "left entirely without means," Reverend George sent her "a draft for € 25" but placed it in her older sister Margaret's name "for a reason which needs no explanation. She will draw the money and pay it over to you." Uneasy with Eliza's decision to stay with her husband, he "patiently submit[ted] to the Lord's will in the matter" and "trust[ed] that [Eliza]

will be enabled to bring [her] mind to [her] lot." Two months later her daughter was born in Milton, Ontario. By 1859, the Laut family had moved once again, this time to Brooklyn, a small village in the township of Whitby, where Laut was listed as a farmer.

In 1883, the Laut family embarked on a much more dramatic move, this time out west in search of new opportunities, but, according to Agnes's *Autobiography of a Happy Woman*, the move only intensified her parents' marital problems. In her autobiography, Laut identified her father's treatment of Eliza as the family prepared "to join the great migration West" (28) to Winnipeg in the early 1880s as a pivotal moment in her childhood. "There was," she says, "something in the home that made us children want to play outside in the sunlight. We would never stay in" (16). Her older sisters were sent away to school, and her brothers left home as soon as they were able to obtain employment. As the years passed, Laut sensed that "the shadow in the house was deepening; but what it was, childhood could not define" (22). On a spring morning, shortly after her father had returned to Brucefield, Ontario, to arrange for the family's move out west, she stumbled onto the secret as her mother stood alone in the orchard: "She did not see me in time to hide the secret revealed on her face. . . . It was despair of life; the utter end of hope; heartbreak mute for a lifetime. She did not speak. Neither did I. I was ten years old; and childhood fell away . . ." (23). Awakened to the reality of her parents' lives, Laut made herself a promise: "I would never enter the Hell of a loveless union, which wrecked so many women's lives" (130).

The move to Winnipeg must have been traumatic for Eliza, raised in a genteel eastern environment marked by culture and privilege. Winnipeg, that "modern Gomorrah" of the west,<sup>5</sup> was a long way from the cultured confines of the Burlington Ladies' Academy, which she and her sister had attended in Hamilton, or the literary milieu of their early home in a Kingston manse. George H. Ham, founder of the *Winnipeg Tribune*, described Winnipeg as "one of the two wickedest places in Canada" (51). During the boom years of 1881-82, wrote Ham in *Reminiscences of a Raconteur: Between the 40s and the 20s* (1921), "the city was all ablaze with the excitement of prospective riches." For a time, "Champagne replaced scotch and soda." There Laut would witness the many ways in which women could come to ruin. The Manitoba press was surprisingly forthcoming about the many social problems plagu-

ing Winnipeg at that time, and Laut grew up exposed to stories that she would have been somewhat sheltered from in the east. These stories, coupled with her own mother's mistreatment, catalyzed her feminist convictions. In the United States, she became associated with the Childhood Conservation League. And eventually she concluded that often divorce was a woman's only salvation. What Laut saw emerging in America at that time was "a new mental attitude to life" (*Autobiography* 5). She had read Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll House* (1879). Women were leaving unhappy marriages; they were embracing new professions; they were being empowered by sisterhood; and they were establishing personal and professional relationships based upon "a new chivalry, a new womanhood, a new race, a new religion" (*Autobiography* 373). Having witnessed her own mother's suffering, Laut felt connected to that "new womanhood." For example, she and her sisters were the first women in their family who, through necessity, had to enter the workforce. In some ways, they were the women that her godmother, Agnes Maule Machar, wrote about in "The New Ideal of Womanhood." Perhaps, as she watched Laut growing into womanhood, Machar saw and encouraged the young woman's "natural gift" or talent for writing, knowing that it would "become not only a worthy interest throughout life, but also a source of honourable independence should it be [her] lot to require to maintain [herself]" (670).

Laut's growing political consciousness found its focus in the competing dynamics of national consolidation and dissent that converged in what Robert Kroetsch has described as Canada's two competing meta-narratives: the completion of the CPR and the hanging of Louis Riel in 1885 (21). Fourteen years old when these two interconnected events occurred, Laut had personal connections to both. She was acquainted with the key players memorialized in the photograph captioned "The Last Spike" (1885): Donald Alexander Smith (Lord Strathcona, who owned Silver Heights, an experimental farm on the outskirts of Winnipeg) was a family friend; Donald D. Mann's wife (J.E. Williams) was from Winnipeg, and his sister-in-law, A. Maude Williams, was one of Laut's Manitoba College friends; and, as a young journalist, Laut travelled with William C. Van Horne on cross-country trips and socialized with James J. Hill. But Laut was also personally acquainted with the more contentious side of Canadian sovereignty. Riel's family lived across the bridge from her family's home in Winnipeg. And she knew and



corresponded with Riel's secretary, Honoré J. Jaxon, and with Clotilde Grant, the wife of Johnny F. Grant, one of Cuthbert Grant's descendants. Laut's godmother, Agnes Maule Machar, responded to Riel's death with "Quebec to Ontario, a Plea for the Life of Riel, September, 1885." Clearly, Machar saw Riel as a champion for both French Canadians and the Métis. Her poem, write Cynthia Sugars and Laura Moss in *Canadian Literature in English: Texts and Contexts* (2009), is "a courageous piece that ran counter to much public opinion of the time" (308).

These issues dovetailed with Laut's burgeoning sense of a more general moral purpose that had been fostered at Manitoba College, which had opened its doors by the early 1890s to "lady students." Granted a leave of absence from her teaching duties in Winnipeg in the summer of 1891, Laut began her program of study at the college in September. Like her grandfather Reverend George, she studied moral and mental philosophy, taught by Reverend John M. King, but there were also a number of societies that the "lady students" could attend: the Manitoba College Literary Society led by Reverend George Bryce and the Shakespearean Club, devoted to the study of elocution, led by J.D. McArthur. Her classmate Isabella Conklin belonged to both societies, and Laut joined the editorial staff of the *Manitoba College Journal*. Its editor-in-chief, Reverend John N. Maclean, published her first work, an essay titled "Ideals and Ideals Made Real."<sup>6</sup> Displaying her growing moral (rather than religious) evangelicalism, Laut wrote that "A noble ideal, conscientiously adhered to, may not make us great, but it will certainly make us good and noble and true" (105). Laut likely would have read Machar's *Roland Graeme: Knight: A Novel of Our Time* issued that year, and, like Machar's heroine, philanthropist Nora Blanchard, she might have realized that reform alone was not enough to cure the ills of society: "There must also be a higher moral ideal, and a higher strength in which to attain it" (*Roland Graeme* 285).

Her experiences in Winnipeg gave Laut a view of Canada as a country in the process of becoming something other than the land of her Scottish ancestors, something other than the Canada to which her parents had immigrated, and something other than the country that her siblings had chosen as their new home. Immigrants from the United States and different parts of Europe were pouring into the prairies. The old order, based upon class, religious, and political prejudices, insisted Laut in *Canada, the Empire of the North*, was giving way to a

new order, based upon opportunity and equality. Women and workers had important roles to play in that new world. Yet, while America grew and prospered, Canada seemed to be slow to progress. These failures only heightened her passion for reform. Laut's junior year at Manitoba College had been marked by a number of public debates regarding Canada's future, in particular its relationship with the United States. In 1891, Goldwin Smith published *Canada and the Canadian Question* advocating a union of Anglo-Saxon people, which would result in the annexation of Canada by the United States.

In July 1902, Laut's old Manitoba College classmate Reverend John N. Maclean was invited to give a series of lectures to the students of Victoria College in Toronto. In his address, Maclean described "the new evangelism" coming out of western Canada at that time, and he identified Laut as one of three western writers promoting that gospel. Maclean told his eastern audience that out west

A new empire is in the making. . . . Bound by ties of kinship and inspired by a national ideal, the people are rising to meet their opportunity to mould great and noble institutions worthy of their fathers. . . . The mountains, lakes, and rivers are making rugged men, and the day is dawning when we shall develop national bards to sing the songs of the west. (20-21)

That new empire with its new evangelism became the subject of several of Laut's early works: *Lords of the North* (1900), which concludes with an allusion to missionary Father Albert Lacombe; *Freebooters of the Wilderness* (1910), which includes a story modelled on the life of missionary "Rev. Jack Matheson"; and "The Borderland Woman," an essay published in *Collier's* (1909) about the contributions of western women missionaries such as Lucy Margaret Baker and Louisa Irvine Riggs.

For Laut, this evangelicalism was grounded in a strong sense of the economic and moral future shared by Canada and the United States. In "The Twentieth Century Is Canada's: The Romantic Story of a People Just Discovering Their Own Country," which appeared in *World's Work* in 1907, Laut informed her American readers about Canada's "industrial awakening." The statement attributed to Sir Wilfrid Laurier signalled a shift in national perspective: "Instead of the Dominion being dependent on the British Empire, the Empire's most far-seeing statesmen were looking to Canada for the sinews of imperial strength" (8499). Laut

presented her readers with a “romantic story” about how the provinces entered Confederation “like beads on a string a thousand miles apart” (8501) yet became a nation by developing its rich natural resources, building railways, and encouraging immigration. When “the United States erected a tariff wall that Canada could not climb,” it gave Canada its “first impetus to . . . nationhood. It compelled just what confederation lacked — cohesiveness” (8503).

According to Laut, who had it on authority from James J. Hill, “the swift progress of the United States meant exhaustion of natural resources” (“Twentieth Century” 8506), and when that occurred the Americans turned their gaze northward. Now, wrote Laut, American immigrants and American capital were pouring into Canada: “The presence of the big neighbor is helping forward rather than dwarfing the Dominion” (8506). With considerable American investment in Canadian wheat lands and Canadian mines, “Canada’s hard times are past” (8516), she predicted, and its “future is that of a New Nation” (8517). Laut concluded her article with a definitive statement about her dream of nationhood: “If [Canada] flies the British flag while American capital develops its resources, there may yet be that commercial compact of an Anglo-Saxon brotherhood of which idealists have dreamed.” The following year, while Quebec was celebrating its tricentennial, Laut published “The New Nation to the North” in the *American Review of Reviews*, an article outlining Canada’s close ties with “its nearest neighbor, — nearest as to place, race, speech, and financial interests,” how the country had become a nation, and why it was prospering (557). Again she assured her readers that close economic ties did not imply annexation: “You can search Canada from Halifax to Victoria and you cannot find one genuinely sincere annexationist who is a representative man, except Goldwin Smith, and he is not a Canadian” (557).<sup>7</sup>

Not everyone saw Canada’s future in terms that embraced its “brotherhood” with the United States, though. Shortly after Confederation, Sanford Fleming (the chief engineer for the projected CPR), along with his secretary Grant, travelled from Halifax to the Pacific Ocean to survey “the great lone land” that would comprise the new dominion. At the conclusion of *Ocean to Ocean: Sanford Fleming’s Expedition through Canada in 1872* (1873), Grant declared his faith in the new nation: “A great future beckons us as a people onward. To reach it, God grant to us purity and faith, deliverance from the lust of personal aggrandizement,

unity, and invincible steadfastness of purpose" (358). An ardent imperialist, Grant believed that, with Britain's protection, Canada would "go forward, to open up for our children and the world what God has given into our possession, bind it together, consolidate it, and lay the foundations of an enduring future" (365). That future, insisted Grant, did not include forging closer ties with the United States: "We are sometimes told that a Republican form of Government and Republican institutions, are the same as our own. But they are not ours" (367). "Loyalty" to Britain, wrote Grant, is "essential to [Canada's] fulfilment of a distinctive mission, — essential to its true glory." So Canada's only possible course was "to seek, in the consolidation of the Empire, a common Imperial citizenship, with common responsibilities, and a common inheritance" (367). When Grant published *Ocean to Ocean*, he might also have been responding to a sentiment expressed by the American press in 1869: "The exodus of Canadians to the US is as great as ever. If it continues much longer we shall have nothing but a howling wilderness to 'annex'" (*Orangeburg News*).

In January 1892, the *Manitoba Free Press* printed a series of letters exchanged between John S. Ewart, a Winnipeg lawyer, and Dr. George M. Grant, a friend of Laut's grandfather, himself now the principal of Queen's University. These letters considered the subject of Canada's close ties with the United States ("Canada's Future"). In them, Grant reiterated that no "self-respecting" nation would choose commercial development with its neighbour over development of its own national life, a philosophical position that Ewart rejected (Grant, "Canada's Future"). Laut had initially positioned herself on the far side of this nationalist vision. Raised within the shadow of her grandfather, the Reverend James George, and his eastern circle of like-minded thinkers, Laut accepted the conviction that Canada's destiny was bound to that of Britain. But by 1924 Britain no long beckoned. Nor, Laut warned, was postwar Canada living up to what she had seen as its moral promise. Between 1905 and 1907, Laut spent time in England, where she witnessed the impacts of poverty and unemployment on the lower classes, especially on women and children ("England's Problem"). And in England she became acquainted with the work of Reverend Wilson Carlile's Church Army and that of General William Booth's Salvation Army. She returned to the United States with a deeper understanding of why her ancestors had left Europe and with a greater appreciation for

what America represented in terms of “salvation” for the immigrant. In the United States, her association with progressive men and women (Lillian Wald, Maude Wetmore, Norman Bridge, Anne Morgan) seeking to reshape social and political institutions led her to consider a more woman-centred, progressive, and international perspective.

Ironically, while Laut’s move to the United States was bound up in many ways with her evolving radical ideals, Reverend George’s emigration from the United States to Kingston resulted from his growing conservatism. Having followed his Scottish-born parents and siblings to the United States in 1829, he eventually declared that he “preferred to work under the old flag” (Campbell). According to publishing historian H. Pearson Gundy, Reverend George left Scotland “imbued with radical social ideas” and “strongly opposed” to particular Tory policies, but his brief sojourn south of the border “cured him of his radical republicanism” (306). In 1837, when William Lyon Mackenzie led the rebellion against the Tories in Upper Canada, Reverend George joined forces with the men of Scarborough to protect the Tory government.

For Laut, exposure to American culture had the opposite effect: it strengthened her growing reformist views. By 1911, she had begun to observe the emergence of a new gospel sweeping America, one especially relevant for the modern woman: the Agrarian or Land Movement. Between 1908 and 1909, she published a series of articles titled “The New Spirit of the Farm” in Caspar Whitney’s *Outing Magazine* on how science was professionalizing farming. Juxtaposing scripture and science, Laut treated both as “revelations of the God behind the Scheme of Things” (“New Spirit V” 342). When she discussed the series that she was writing with Professor James Robertson, the principal of Macdonald College in Guelph, he cautioned her: “[D]on’t forget the *moral* side of [scientific farming], without which all you say will be so much waste” (“New Spirit III” 705). Initially, Laut wondered if Robertson’s comment was “just that Scotch Presbyterian habit of dragging religion in by the scruff of the neck” (705), but when she read his lectures she concluded that modern farmers needed to be scientifically informed; they needed to be intelligent. Otherwise, they “could not be moral in the deepest sense of the word” (705).

During the first decade of her career as a writer, Laut viewed the world through the lens of what A.B. McKillop calls “a moral imagina-

tion" fuelled by a "concern for preserving cultural traditions" that she and many others of her generation had inherited (3). To some extent, the Scots Presbyterian common sense of her Laut ancestors tempered a tendency toward the "high idealism" inherited from her Presbyterian grandfather George, but by 1910 Laut was ready to put aside the "sturdy conservatism" (35) of her parents and grandparents and to explore the connection between "high ideals" and everyday practicalities, confident that, "to-day Canada is in the very vanguard of the nations. Her wheat fields fill the granaries of the world; and to her ample borders come the peoples of earth's ends, bringing tribute, not of incense and frankincense as of old, but of manhood and strength, of push and lift, of fire and hope and enthusiasm and the daring that conquers all the difficulties of life" (*Canada, the Empire* 436).

When Laut published *The Canadian Commonwealth* in 1915, she still believed that Canada was destined for greatness on the world stage despite some economic, social, and political setbacks. But by 1921, when she published *Canada at the Cross Roads*, she began to predict that Canada was approaching a critical turn in the road. Travelling across Canada on a Chautauqua tour to promote *Canada at the Cross Roads*, Laut told people in the west that she had an "evangelical" message for Canada ("Canada at Turning"). Several years later she told a Winnipeg audience that mental attitude, not economics, was responsible for Canada's doom and gloom. The country, she told them, suffered from "a conflict of thought" ("Many Women"). By 1924, Laut suspected that "the altar fires of Canada's ideals" might be "burning low" (*Canada, the Empire* 437).

When she criticized Canada for not fulfilling its potential, a "leading editor of Canada" suggested that she had "contracted the American disease of 'bounce' through living in the US" (*Canada, the Empire* xv). In fact, Laut was already becoming actively involved in American society. In 1914, she was one of more than a dozen American women writers honoured by the Pen and Brush Club of New York. She was also a member of the National Civic Federation, serving in 1916 along with Anne Morgan, Maude Wetmore, and other well-known American philanthropists as elected officers of that federation. That year Laut qualified for membership in the Woman's City Club of New York, an organization formed in 1915 by one hundred suffragists for the purpose of bringing together women interested in social welfare.

Laut's ambivalence about Canada's moral health was epitomized in her predictions about the country's response to the poet and theosophist Albert Durrant Watson, whose book *A Dream of God: A Poem* she had recently read and reread. Corresponding with Canadian publisher Lorne Pierce in January 1924, Laut wrote that Watson "has struck a new note in Canadian literature, so new that he will probably be snuffed out, or crucified by neglect. He is so far and away beyond Canada's present riot of rank materialism that she won't know he exists till he is dead." In another letter a month later, Laut declared that Watson was as "great a seer for Canada as Whitman for the US," but almost because of this she did not expect Canadians to recognize the poet's greatness: "We are curiously backward mentally to the signs of our own times — still fail to see the Old Order is crashing about our ears, and that the future of the world depends on following the Visions of Light." Laut suggested that the United States had acknowledged what was happening and was "trying to stabilize the transition. England is doing the same; but Canada is clinging to the Old gods." Growing disillusionment with her country would ultimately culminate in her decision to finally become an American citizen. As she lamented a few years later in "A Letter from Canada," Canadians were not hearing the "deeper notes" expressed in Robert Service's *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* (1916) or John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields." They did not understand Lawren Harris's "shy poems" or the works being produced by the Group of Seven. "The fault," she wrote, "is not that Canada has been dwarfed by American or Imperial influence. The fault is that Canada has not been as big in soul as in her heritage" (466). The country, suggested Laut, "must rededicate her soul, not to slavish imitation of success in British and American literature but to the expression of her own high national and international aims" (466).

By the late 1920s, Laut's health began to decline. In her final decade, Laut turned her attention to American themes: *Enchanted Trails of Glacier National Park* (1926), *The Romance of the Rails* (1929), *The Overland Trail* (1929), and *Pilgrims of the Santa Fe* (1931). And, while Canadian readers began to forget about the young woman from Winnipeg who had achieved literary fame south of the border, American readers continued to respond positively to her work. Some even claimed her as their own. In 1924, Will C. Wood, the superintendent of California schools, called for curriculum reform in American

schools. One of the most brilliant educators on the Pacific coast, Wood believed that introducing American writers into the school curriculum would “inculcate ideals” and help students to “interpret the American spirit.” Among the writers whom he recommended was Laut.

Laut died at her Wassaic home in New York in November 1936. In December, when Hayes saw Laut’s obituary in a Vancouver newspaper, she paid one final tribute to her old friend from Winnipeg. “The passing of Miss Agnes C. Laut,” she wrote, “tells us that she died under an alien flag. This fact should give Canada something to ponder over” (“Tribute”). Hayes reminded Canadians of Laut’s great literary success in the United States and identified the personal sacrifices that Laut had made for her family. But “the great grief of Agnes Laut,” wrote Hayes, “was that she was obliged to seek a living under an alien flag, owing to the fact that Canada held out no helping hand to the struggling writer.” “I wonder,” Hayes continued, whether Canada will “ponder over the fact that the home fields have been heavily watered by the tears of the writers of this young Dominion?”

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “O Canada!” is included in a 284-page typescript titled “Song of Songs and Other Songs” found in the Agnes Laut Papers. Written on a small envelope tucked into the volume is a note that reads “Poems. Some have been published and some were written in the last few years.” I have not been able to locate “O Canada!” anywhere in print.

<sup>2</sup> Laut might have been referencing Charles G.D. Roberts’s “An Ode for the Canadian Confederacy,” which contains a repeated call to the country to “Awake,” when she concluded “O Canada!” with the following imperative:

Go pray  
The old man’s prayer! Awake,  
Awake, awake and take  
Your nation stride!  
Awake!

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Hedler traces the notion of Canada as a northern country back to the Canada First Movement, which emphasized the relationship between the country’s northern climate and its national identity. Laut, writes Hedler, reinforced the “assumption that Canada’s climate was especially suited to the production of strong, virile men” (38).

<sup>4</sup> Laut likely responded to an ad in the classified section of the *New York Times* (“Country Houses to Let”): “Wassaic House, 22 rooms, billiard room, ballroom, bowling alleys; steam heated throughout; water introduced; stable and carriage house; 90 acres; 1000 feet elevation; rent low.” The ad had been placed by William Nelson, a wealthy Manhattan real-estate agent who owned the Wassaic mansion as well as many New York City properties. Oliphant, one of the original occupants of the property, had a Canadian connection. In the 1850s, prior to his involvement with the Harris commune, he served as Lord Elgin’s



private secretary and helped to negotiate a free-trade agreement between Canada and the United States.

<sup>5</sup> In November 1894, the *Manitoba Free Press* reported that Dr. Lucas, a correspondent for the Winnipeg newspaper, had been found dead in his room at Lisgar House, Selkirk. At the time of his death, he had been working on a manuscript titled "Winnipeg: Or, the Modern Gomorrah" ("Wrote the Story").

<sup>6</sup> In April 1927, Maclean was living in Montana when David J. Donnan, reviewing Laut's *The Blazed Trail of the Old Frontier* (1927), recommended the book to him. Maclean informed Donnan that he was responsible for the first article that Laut had written, and in fact he still had a copy. He quoted a passage for Donnan: "Patience, not dogged patience, but calm reliance on God, and unswerving faith in right, is a lesson every brave soul must learn" (Donnan).

<sup>7</sup> Laut's junior year at Manitoba College had been marked by a number of public debates regarding Canada's future, in particular its relationship with the United States. In 1891, Smith published *Canada and the Canadian Question* advocating a union of Anglo-Saxon people, which would result in the annexation of Canada by the United States.

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