

Michael O. NOWLAN (ed.), *Michael Whelan: Folk Poet of Renous River* (Fredericton, New Brunswick, New Ireland Press, 1990, pp. xvi+150, ISBN 0-920483-45-3).

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The writer is to be congratulated for his hard work and courage in presenting such a comprehensive and diverse subject in a nutshell. I do not think he meant it to be scholarly. *Echoes from Old China* is an over-generalized book aimed for the general public.

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Folk poetry, as distinct from folk song, has only begun to receive the attention it merits, for its intrinsic worth as well as its often considerable significance within communities. Predictably, the masculine verse of Black American culture, the dozens and toasting, was the first to gain notice and a sort of approval within the modern academy. Roger de V. Renwick's *English Folk Poetry: Structure and Meaning* (1980) and Pauline Greenhill's *True Poetry: Traditional And Popular Verse in Ontario* (1989), following a special edition of *Southern Folklore Quarterly* (1976), were the first to take seriously the more sentimental varieties of vernacular verse in European-origin cultures. A public beyond the academy appears much more willing to take an interest in such poetry; witness the attention given to the cowboy poets in the media. Actually, this public never ceased to read and circulate poetry. The two volumes considered here, each a collection from a single writer, one Maritime, one Prairie, are aimed primarily at them, whom Renwick called "lovers of folk poetry" (1980, ix).

Except for brief periods as a schoolteacher and bookkeeper, Michael Whelan, born 1858 in the Miramichi, lived that rare occupation, professional poet. It was neither an easy nor an abundant existence; after a lifetime of door-to-door bookselling, Whelan died in the county home in 1937 and was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave. Thirty-odd years later, when a monument to the poet was conceived by members of the community,

no record of the location existed. Nevertheless, a number of donors contributed to a stone which was erected in the cemetery in 1981. This story indexes the ambivalent situation of poets in our society; passionately respected by a few, but remembered by the multitude only on occasions which need the assistance of heightened language. Still, during his career, Whelan was able to write and have printed eighteen books — twenty, if you count each of two “distinctly differently editions” (p. xi) of two of them — between 1895 and 1932, an achievement that attests to some degree of consistent support from his community, even if, as Farrell McCarthy acknowledges in his Foreword, “his little volumes would be read by some interested folk and quickly thrown into a closet or destroyed” (p. vii). Even if most copies of *Folk Poet of Renous* suffer the fate McCarthy ascribes to the “little volumes,” the book nevertheless makes an admirable living memorial, because “some interested folk” (p. vii) will surely continue to read and be touched by Whelan’s poems.

From what he estimates to be a two hundred and fifty poem *oeuvre*, Nowlan has selected one hundred and fifteen and arranged them thematically; *Irish Exiles*; *The Queen of the North* (Whelan’s term for Canada); *Majestic Miramichi*; *War*; *The Sacred Silence*; and *The City of God* (religious poems) are Nowlan’s section titles. Nowlan does not explain how he chose these, saying only that “a selection rather than a collection was in order” (p. xi). We have only to trust that he has given us “a representative sample of Michael Whelan’s work” (p. xi); certainly the contents of the anthology are extensive and varied.

*The Sacred Silence* has sixteen memorial poems; acknowledges that this category accounts for “roughly one-third of *Poems and Songs*, all of ‘*In Memoriam*’: *Men and Women of Miramichi*, *New Brunswick*, and “many” (p. xi) from three other original publications. This verse form was obviously a significant concern for Whelan, quite possibly as a means of confirming to himself and others his place in the community, despite his marginal economic role.

As Nowlan’s categories suggest, Whelan wrote on public themes almost exclusively. W. D. Hamilton points out in an Appendix reprinted from his *Miramichi Papers* (1987), nowhere does Whelan refer to the premature death of the sweetheart of his youth nor to his apparently consequent alcoholism. The few love lyrics offered here function more to reinforce social concepts of romance, especially to locate that emotion within “Nature”, than to detail the particulars of anyone’s experience:

Then she heard the old sweet story  
As she gazed upon the glory

Of the meadow and the woodland and the stream,  
Heaven's blessed bells were ringing,  
All our souls were sweetly singing  
As we wandered in that dear, delicious dream!  
(“My Queen” p. 125).

According to Hamilton, Whelan had childhood ambitions to be a teacher, but was frustrated by his lack of education. His verse bespeaks a regional man looking beyond his own community, who accepted with delight much of the cultural baggage of classes and communities beyond his own. Relatively few of Whelan's verses offer “local color”, and except for some few dialect poems, all are in the register of a man who takes himself seriously and owns a dictionary. None of this should be surprising; one who frequently wrote verse for newspapers undoubtedly read them and considered his own community's life within a large framework.

Since many of Whelan's poems are set to existing airs, their forms are predetermined by the melodies, which as often as not were popular songs of the day. Whelan predictably demonstrates his familiarity with the Burns and ballad stanzas, as well as more with elaborate forms favoured in the late Nineteenth Century. “The Dunganvaron Whooper” at least entered the famous Miramichi song tradition.

*Folk Poet of Renous River* is directed to the New Brunswick market, primarily the Irish community of the Miramichi. Thus the presentation of the poems by themes, though Nowlan scrupulously gives publication details, as well as a bibliography of Whelan's chapbooks, but not of his newspaper publications. Thus, also, the volume's Irish green print, which is acceptable to this reader's middle aged eyes, but under marginal lighting only just so. Not to say that there is anything garish or tasteless about this volume; in appearance and presentation, in form and format, the book is thoroughly appropriate to the demeanour of Whelan's poetic persona.

The poems are largely offered without explanatory notes, an editorial decision which may have affected the selection. “Big Business — A Burlesque”, which is included in W. D. Hamilton's appended essay, is so topical as to be meaningless to outsiders, though it seems to have been so controversial in the Miramichi of its day that Whelan felt compelled to write another poem from an alternative point of view to make amends for his outrageousness. Not all of us are convinced that extensive annotations need to present a commercial kiss of death. If a significant number of such poems were excluded because they'd be more incomprehensible than intriguing without some gloss, then the decision to avoid annotation was unfortunate. What Nowlan offers will suit well the general readership, which could extend beyond the Maritime market. Specialists will need to go to the origi-

nal chapbooks in any case. It will also be a useful summary for folklorists, Canadianists, and enlightened members of English departments, who may not specialize in either New Brunswick lore or folk poetry, but wish to scan the horizon. Some of the latter might also read these poems for pleasure.

Hamilton's essay will be of greater use to general readers than to specialists, serving both to confirm and to explain the value of Whelan's poetry. Hamilton gives the poet's history as far as it's now known, and sets the themes of the works in their social and personal contexts. This reader wishes Hamilton had not felt compelled, as he closed his essay, to deny gratuitously that Whelan was "a true poet at all", since "his verses were all imitative" and "one would search in vain through his work for an organized idea or insight" (p. 143). Neither attribute can any longer be considered definitive of poetry, and without joining the postmodern bandwagon, it seems to me that such assertions cause confusion and self-doubt among but the most self-confident of nonacademic readers. If it is valuable to distinguish between folk poets and other kinds of bards, and I think it often is, then surely there are ways to do so that do not imply that the distinction is one of quality.

One hopes to see a more complete and analytical study of the community context in which Whelan wrote, as well as more extensive biography of the poet himself, if possible, and the present volume is just the sort of offering that might stimulate such work. In the meantime, and for most of us, it's a good read, which Whelan undoubtedly hoped to provide.

I do not wish for honor,  
 I do not seek renown,  
 False fame, I frown upon her,  
 I ask the poet's crown  
 ("Desires" p. 125).

*Ballads of the Badlands* brings together poems by "Loco", the pseudonym of Arthur Peake, an English immigrant to southern Alberta in 1885, in an attractive, slim volume that should reach a wide provincial audience and perhaps beyond. Editor Cyndi Smith seems less aware of scholarly audiences than Nowlan, and *Ballads of the Badlands* contains neither explanatory notes nor bibliography, although there is a brief preface and Smith's useful portrait of Peake, which first appeared in *Western People*, a weekly insert in the venerable tabloid, *The Western Producer*.

In most cases, the poems need no glossing, though both outsiders and new Albertans will likely not find much significance in the mere naming of "Grant" in "CFCN": W. W. Grant, the founder of the station, being revered in the province in the early days as an electronics wizard. Smith does not appear to have selected poems for their accessibility; in fact, it's not clear whether this is a selection or is Peake's entire extant output. Some

readers would have preferred some degree of explanation.

Peake's career was more typical of local poets than Whelan's; he likely never thought of attempting to become a professional writer and seems never to have attempted to publish his poetry. It's not difficult to suppose that he wrote poems fairly casually, giving them away to those neighbours who would appreciate or who figured in them. Smith, a native of Peake's Red Deer River Valley region, does not offer her sources for these poems, but she notes that she was acquainted from childhood with Hazel B. Roen's *The Grass Roots of Dorothy* (1971), in which many of these poems appeared, and also that "many of Arthur's poems" (p. 5) are housed in the Archives of the Glenbow-Alberta Institute in Calgary.

Though Peake was more cosmopolitan than Whelan, his poetic concerns are narrower. He exhibits some awareness of the world outside the Drumheller Valley, but shows no interest in representing his own within that larger context. His vocabulary and syntax are notably smaller, if less forced, than Whelan's, and if he had anything to prove in his verse, it was only rarely his sensitivity. As with Whelan, a more systematic biography of Peake might offer insight into vernacular aesthetic processes and context.

Peake was born into an educated family in Gloucestershire, but did not as a boy take to the expected professional milieu. "Being a lover of nature and the outdoor life", Smith tells us, "Arthur instead left his family home at the age of 16 to join a brother who practiced law in Manitoba" (p. 8). In 1885 Peake and his brother operated a ranch southwest of Calgary, relocating east to the Drumheller area in 1897. Smith's biography indicates clearly the difficulties of agriculture in the southeastern portion of Alberta, an essential theme throughout Peake's poetry.

Interestingly, though he was a rancher and most clearly and certainly supports the pastoral group over agriculturalists in the debate over land use, he maintained at least enough ambivalence to pen verses such as:

Some talk about the grazing land and say that Manitou  
 Created it for the cattleman-that crops would never do-  
 But we plowed the land and harrowed, and raised I'm proud to say  
 The golden wheat that's hard to beat  
 You bet we're here to stay  
 ("Golden Wheat").

It's not certain that he actually intended the persona to represent his own point of view in this case. Nevertheless, in a province which has been so often represented as having but one individualistic and reactionary voice, it's important that the dialogic expression of earlier inhabitants be made available to succeeding generations.

Like Nowlan, Smith has chosen to group Peake's poems thematically; indeed, she makes no attempt to date or otherwise to locate the items in Peake's *oeuvre*. Her categories are *Cowboy Songs*, *The Settlement*, *The Remittance Man's Letter*, and *Red Deer River Valley*. Peake, Smith tells us, played autoharp and harmonica, and was known for the dances hosted at his house. His verse offers some evidence of an older tradition: "Red Deer River Valley" is a parody of "Red River Valley", and "Bullpound Roundup" echoes "Casey Jones" in its opening phrase and can be sung to that tune. *The Settlement* deals with the encroaching farmers, usually in acerbic language:

Or if when moving cattle  
 You see some genius run  
 Into the middle of the bunch  
 You wish you had a gun.

He only wants a milk cow  
 He lost a year ago  
 With a piece of rope around its horns  
 Or perhaps a frozen toe  
 ("The Settlement" p. 31)

The contrary view of "Golden Wheat" has already been cited, and in "Cactus Ridge" Peake offers some measure of sympathy for the nesters, pointing out that government duplicity got the homesteaders there and kept them going with false promises.

*The Remittance Man's Letter* is a miscellaneous container, featuring such various matters as the rascally behaviour of the eponymous non-hero, Calgary radio station CFCN, and advice to schoolchildren. *Red Deer River Valley* presents five poems which proffer sentimental homage to the poet's home, though at the time he wrote "Adieu", Peake was considering a move to British Columbia, doubting seriously that either farming or ranching could do well in this region:

The stockmen on the old Red Deer  
 Has got no business to be here...  
 The settlers here have proved its curse;  
 It yearly goes from bad to worse.  
 But if the seasons do turn wet  
 Perhaps they'll make a living yet.  
 So here's good luck to those that stay  
 And may dry seasons keep away,  
 But let me out is now my cry,  
 Oh let me out before I die (p. 62).

One feature of the current cowboy poetry revival is a willingness by the poets to include poems by past masters in their recitations. Even in Canada, this generally means the American past masters: Bruce Kiskaddon, S. Omar Barker, and the like. *Ballads of the Badlands* demonstrates that there is also a Canadian tradition of cowboy versifying. It will be interesting to see whether or not some of the fine performers from Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia will take the hint.

"Collectors, analysts, and lovers of folk poetry" (Renwick 1980, ix) will welcome both of these volumes. While Peake's western *Ballads* fit a more clearly identified commercial niche, my reading of the vernacular poetry of Alberta suggests to me that an audience for Whelan's more sensitive verse might exist far inland from the Miramichi, if it can be found.

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Robert B. KLYMASZ (ed.), «The Ukrainians in Canada 1891-1991», *Material History Bulletin* 29 (spring 1989) (Ottawa/Hull, Canadian Museum of Civilization and the National Museum of Science and Technology, pp. 118).

Of the many publications that have been dedicated to the 1991 centenary of Ukrainian settlement in Canada, one of the earliest is a thematic edition of the *Material History Bulletin*, produced by guest editor Robert B.