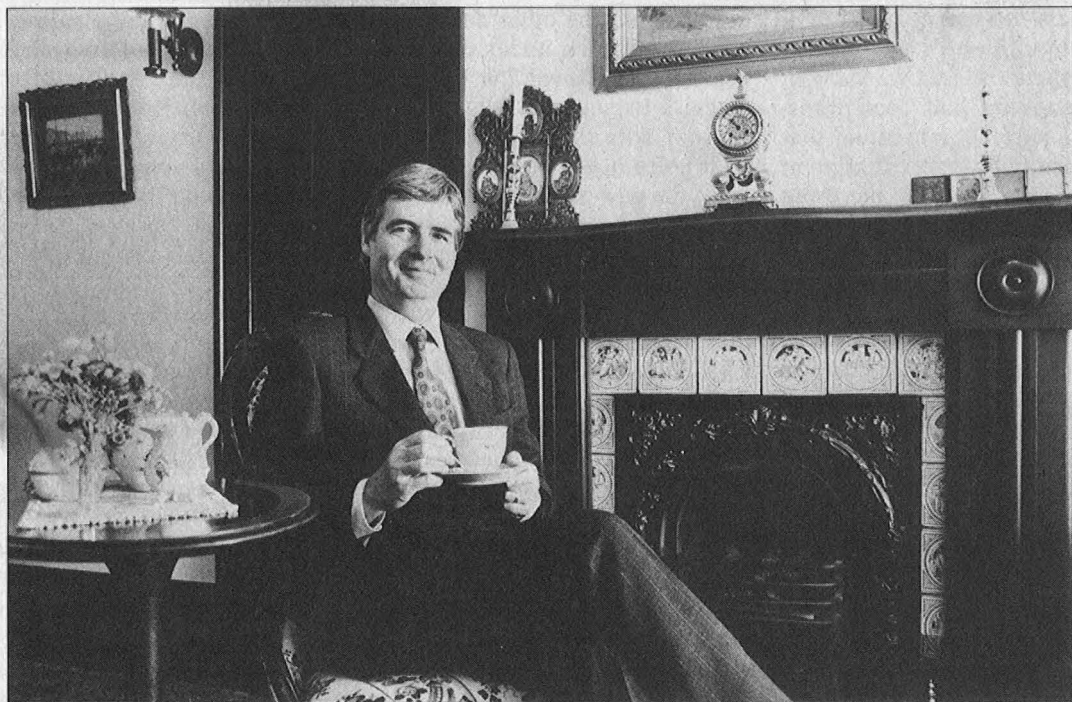


SEEKING REFUGE IN THE PAST

The romanticism of Victorian poets offers solace in a troubled world / By Peter Desbarats



The only thing we haven't rescued from our past is our Victorian literature: Peter Desbarats.

In the midst of the smoke and grime of the Industrial Revolution, our Victorian ancestors expressed Truth and Beauty in a kind of romantic poetry, prose, painting and music that has long been unfashionable. I don't know whether I'm simply growing mellow as I get older, but it seems to me that many of us are beginning to seek the same refuge in the computerized nuclear age.

In a Toronto bookstore, looking for something to read on the train to London, I bought a remaindered copy of P.B. Waite's *Macdonald, His Life and World* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Toronto, 1975) instead of the usual Elmore Leonard thriller (if you don't know who Elmore Leonard is, find out, quickly). Why? Because my son Jonathan had been writing a school essay on Macdonald and had rekindled my fascination with that brilliant political scalliwag, because the Halifax historian P.B. Waite always writes with knowledge and style, and because I can't resist a hardcover book for under \$5. Almost at the end of the book, waiting improbably within a section on patronage and the Canadian Post Office, were 14 breath-taking lines of Victorian Canadian poetry:

*"Broad shadows fall. On all the mountain side
The scythe-swept fields are silent. Slowly home
By the long beach the high-piled hay-carts come
Splashing the pale salt shadows..."*

Waite called the sonnet by Archibald Lampman "one of

the most splendid in our literature." (Lampman was the poet of the Post Office in the days when patronage was used occasionally to provide sinecures for writers.) Sitting on the Toronto-London train, the name transported me back to a cramped desk in a Montreal grade school, a dark winter afternoon, and a teacher reading Canadian poetry in the yellow incandescent light: Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, Wilfred Campbell and, above all, the man whose name actually sounded like poetry, Bliss Carman. I hadn't really thought about them for years.

They were put aside in some intellectual attic as I and other members of my generation reacted against the romanticism of the Victorians. The journalists among us all tried to write like Ernest Hemingway, terse, tough, he-man prose. Even poets tried to use four-letter words. We furnished our bleak apartments with Scandinavian cubes that matched the efficient office furniture in our sleek high-rises. It was a no-nonsense time when we laughed at the absurdities of the Victorians, swooning over daffodils on the wind-swept hills.

But people are incurably romantic, often in the most unexpected, even grotesque circumstances. Germans are supposed to be among the most practical people in the world; they are also gluttons for schmaltz. Canadians, at least on the anglophone side, think of themselves as dour and cold-hearted; in reality, our political life has been

filled with passion, religious, racial and linguistic. And in recent years, we have been enthusiastic participants in a return to romanticism that has affected all Western cultures but particularly the North American.

As far as I remember, it started in the kitchen, in the Sixties and Seventies, at the height of the "Scandinavian" era. Up to then, we had been defiantly steak-and-potatoes. Then it became fashionable to know how to make an omelette. Before we knew it, Canadian cooking had been transformed into an elaborate ritual that reached a kind of absurd perfection in "nouvelle cuisine," the art of preparing simple meals in the most complicated way imaginable.

From the kitchen, romanticism spread throughout the house. Furniture became more elaborate. Pictures began to cluster on walls. Even the "better living" pages of the New York Times featured rooms that actually looked cosy. All this touched off a scramble for Victorian homes, furniture, and accessories. The intricate knick-knacks that our grandparents collected, and that our parents hid away in embarrassment, were again bought and sold, looking like new and ten times

more expensive.

On a larger scale, cities began to treasure and refurbish pockets of Victorian architecture. Not content with rescuing the past, our architects now pander to our frustrated appetite for ornamentation by twisting their new buildings into elaborate shapes and encrusting them with modern concrete versions of "Victoriana."

In Ottawa the other day, I saw an apartment block under construction near the Queensway that had tried to disguise its squareness by decorating its roof with thin concrete triangles with holes in the centre. In the same vein, the new student residences near the UWO gates on Richmond have peaked tin roofs enclosing nothing but the architect's fancy. A happier example can be seen in Vancouver this summer where the Canadian pavilion for Expo 86, extending over the harbor, is designed to look like a modern cruise ship under a full load of canvas - a Victorian folly on a grand scale.

The only thing we haven't rescued from the past is our Victorian literature, although even that may be starting to happen. At an antiquarian book fair in Vancouver this spring, still under Lampman's spell, I paid \$14.50

for a leather-bound "*Golden Treasury of Canadian Verse*" that wouldn't have fetched 25 cents in a church basement sale a few years ago. Many of the poems were no better than much contemporary verse, but here and there were memorable phrases: Bliss Carman's "soft blue-shadowed aisles of snow," Marjorie Pickthall's Lac Sainte Irénée where "the morn lay rimmed with pine," and Pauline Johnson's "faded scarf of fragrance" drifting across the Pacific from Indian campfires. I don't imagine much of this has survived in the curriculums of Canadian schools, still desperately trying to be "modern" while the modern world strives to recapture and re-interpret the romanticism of an earlier time.

*"...the sun's last shaft beyond the
gray sea-floor
Still dreams upon the Kamouraska
shore,
And the long line of golden vil-
lages."*

In an era ruled by computers and terrified by nuclear weapons, we seem to be seeking refuge in the romanticism of the past, and the final lines of Lampman's sonnet glow with renewed intensity. ■