THE LEFT ATRIUM

Room for a view

Atteindre la centaine: William Henry Drummond

The centenary of a poet's death is a fit occasion for a reconsideration of his poetry and achievements. William Henry Drummond (né William Henry Drumm) was born 13 April 1854, in County Leitrim, Ireland, and died 6 April 1907 in the mining community of Cobalt, Ont.

With his parents, George Drumm and Elizabeth Morris Soden, he immigrated to Canada in 1864 and settled in Montréal. After the death of his father in 1866, Drummond dropped out of school to support his mother. He worked as a telegraphist in the winters in Montréal, and in the summers he worked in the lumber town of Bord-à-Plouffe, Que., where he first witnessed the habitants and voyageurs who were to become the subjects and narrators of his poems. Eventually, he completed his schooling at the High School of Montreal and attended McGill College and Bishop's College in Montréal, graduating with an MD in 1884. He spent the next 23 years in his medical practice, notably completing his internship as a surgeon at the Western Hospital in Montréal and practising as a private physician at Stornoway and at Knowlton in the Eastern Townships and as a medical professor and the Chair of Medical Jurisprudence at Bishop's College in Montréal.

Drumm changed his name to Drummond in 1875 after learning it was his ancestral name. He started writing poetry in the late 1870s, to amuse himself, his friends and, after he married May Isobel Harvey in 1894, his family. With his wife's encouragement, he started to collect, collate and publish his verse. With the publishing

Ernest Sawford-Dye. Private collection of G.O. Taylor.

Watercolour of Dr. William Henry Drummond's house at Kerr Lake. When William Henry Drummond first arrived in Cobalt, Ont., in 1904, it was a "tent city" in the middle of the forest. Rather than live in a tent, he built a 2-storey log house overlooking Kerr Lake, the site of his mining claim. He hand-picked its chimney stones and built porches where he could sit and hear his miners sing (it is said that he only hired miners who could sing). It was here that he wrote *The Voyageur and Other Poems*. Destroyed by fire in the 1930s, the fireplace stones were recovered and reconstructed in the town of Cobalt with a commemorative plaque.

The painter Ernest Sawford-Dye (1873–1965) was born in northern Ontario. He is known for his northern Ontario landscapes, farm scenes and wildlife studies.

house G.P. Putnam's Sons in New York and London, he issued 4 books of verse in his lifetime: *The Habitant and Other French-Canadian Poems* (1897), *Phil-o-Rum's Canoe, Madeleine Verchères* (1898), *Johnnie Courteau and Other Poems* (1901) and *The Voyageur and Other Poems* (1905). Two posthumous volumes followed, both published by Putnam's: *The Great Fight: Poems and Sketches* (1908, edited by May Harvey Drummond) and *The Po-* *etical Works of William Henry Drummond.* The latter volume was compiled by Louis Fréchette (1839–1908), a québecois poet and politician who was the first to recognize Drummond's poetic achievement.

Drummond wrote dialect poetry in the persona of a French-Canadian implied poet, who narrates the poems in French-Canadian patois English, an invented vernacular. The opening stanza of "Phil-o-Rum Juneau," from *The*

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Habitant, shows his phonemic transcription of French-Canadian dialect and his emphasis on characterization:

He sit on de corner mos' every night, ole
Phil-o-Rum Juneau,
Spik wit' hese'f an' shake de head, an'
smoke on de pipe also-
Very hard job it 's for wake him up, no matter de loud we call
W'en he 's feex hese'f on de beeg arm-chair,
back on de kitchen wall.[61][1]

Given that Drummond based the character of Phil-o-Rum and all other characters and speakers in his poems on the habitants and voyageurs he had encountered in his youth in Bord-à-Plouffe, his poetry is understandably nostalgic and sentimental and his characterizations are cultural stereotypes. It is important to remember that Drummond was not trying to mimic any received pronunciation of French-Canadian English. His was an invented vernacular through which he tested the capacity of popular verse to depict francophone English in phonetic symbols, not to depict how he thought francophones sounded speaking English and not to caricature French-Canadians.

The appropriation of a voice, appearance or identity from another language and culture was typical of the arts from the 1890s to 1930s. For example, Herschel Henlere (1890–1968), a Canadian novelty pianist from Galt, Ont., who flourished in British music hall and variety in the 1920s–1940s, adopted a French-Canadian persona for all his stage shows and gramophone recordings. Compare Drummond's use of patois in verse to Henlere's in this transcription from his performance film *Piccadilly Theatre of Varieties* (Pathétone 929, 23 January 1936):

HENLERE: Ce soir, j'y reste bien. Vous aimerez l'orchestre. You are feeling good, no-oo?
AUDIENCE: No!
HENLERE: Alors, j'y reste bien. Ce soir, j'ai la chance à faire la musique pour vous. It is the third time I am playing here in this beautiful Piccadilly-lilly theatre. You are glad to see me, no-oo?
AUDIENCE: No!

HENLERE: Très bien! [St. Pierre's transcription][2]

Similarly, in the 1940s and 1950s, the Jamaican poet and performance artist Louise Bennett (1919–2006) wrote vernacular poetry in Jamaican Patois or Creole, which set a foundation for Jamaican literature after independence. Consider this excerpt from "Dead Men" from her book *Jamaica Labrish* (1966) and its parallel with Drummond's verse:

Memba dem days wen big fraid
Hole we every wey we tun?
Ef dem hear a car back-fire
People sey a Rhygin gun![61][3]

Like Bennett in Jamaica, Drummond helped to establish a foundation for an independent Canadian literature, in which writers could write in their own vernaculars, in the languages and dialects of the people, as opposed to the vernacular with which they had been colonized. Similarly, the Nigerian novelist Amos Tutuola (1920–1997) in his ground-breaking works *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), the Ogoni novelist Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941–1995) in *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1985) and the Scottish novelist Irvine Welsh (1958–) in *Trainspotting* (1993), all helped establish national or cultural literatures by writing in invented vernacular, yet all have taken criticism for what are seen as their excesses in mimicry, for misrepresenting people, languages, nations and cultures. In these regards, Drummond was not an anomaly in Canadian literary history but a pioneer of modern Canadian literature; he was a Canadian pioneer in the medical profession. His honorifics "Poet of the habitant" and "Habitant Drummond" were much deserved, because they were acknowledgements less that he had appropriated or had otherwise come to represent another culture than that he had demonstrated the necessity for Canadian poets and writers to be able to write in local vernacular. That he made this point while adopting the voice of the Other is an irony that Drummond has not been able to live

down, particularly in a phase of political correctness, dating from the 1970s, when his poetry disappeared from Canadian poetry and literary anthologies, literary criticism journals, school and university curricula, book store shelves and books-in-print.

Drummond is an innovative Canadian poet of enduring merit. His poetry has an original authenticity as period, regional, occasional and dialect verse and some of his poems are classics of Canadian literature. Consider "The corduroy road" from *Johnnie Courteau* (1901), as a children's poem and a sound poem:

De corduroy road go bompety bomp,
De corduroy road go jompety jomp,
An' he 's takin' beeg chances upset hees load
De horse dat 'll trot on de corduroy road.[7][4]

The Voyageur (1905) is as distinctive in its prosody and narrative line as the poems of the Scottish-born Canadian poet Robert Service (1874–1958) and arguably as canonical:

Dere 's somet'ing stirrin' ma blood tonight,
On de night of de young new year,
W'ile de camp is warm an' de fire is bright,
An' de bottle is close at han'-
Out on de reever de nort' win' blow,
Down on de valley is pile de snow,
But w'at do we care so long we know
We 're safe on de log cabane?[1][5]

William Henry Drummond, an original, and arguably a great, Canadian poet survives "safe on de log cabane." He 's jus' waitin' for Canadians to come an' open de door.

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