Some Literary Figures from Windsor's Past:
Deborah How Cottnam ("Portia"), Griselda Tonge & Sir Charles G.D. Roberts

I want to thank the West Hants Historical Society for inviting me to speak about "**Some Literary Figures from Windsor's Past**". Your President has added the adjective "**extraordinary**" to my topic. I will leave that to your good judgment, but certainly, I think that there are extraordinary things about what we might call Windsor's literary past, things which in many ways we have forgotten and have forgotten at our peril.

The last time that I spoke to the Historical Society was about "**Alden Nowlan, the Forgotten Poet of Stanley**"[1]. In passing, I happened to comment that not only was there a strange and curious silence in the literary world about his place of birth and upbringing, but that there was also no memorial to him in the very place of his birth, Stanley, Nova Scotia. Now without claiming any sort of causal connection, I was very pleased to learn that a monument to Alden Nowlan was subsequently erected in Stanley to his honour and memory! Such is the suggestive power, perhaps, of the West Hants Historical Society in being a cattle prod to the doing of things which remind our communities of their cultural, literary and historical legacies.

I must warn you from the outset that the literary figures that I am going to speak about tonight also have no visible memorial or monument to them. But monuments or not, what remains are their literary accomplishments, literary accomplishments that have in some sense or other to do with place, the place of Windsor in the literary imagination.

Jane Jacobs in her book **Dark Age Ahead** comments on a basic characteristic of the decline and fall of cultures and civilizations[2]. Her comment is about a community's forgetfulness of its past, what we might call, **cultural amnesia**. The collective as well as the individual forms of forgetfulness deprive the community of its history and so, too, of its connection to the vital forms of its intellectual life, the self-conscious life without which cultures and civilizations dwindle and die like withered leaves. A feature of that cultural amnesia is the loss of connection to a wider world of letters, of ideas and energy.

The literary figures that I wish to comment upon were wonderfully aware of the connection to a wider world of letters and ideas and their labours illustrate an extraordinary energy born out of the sense of connection and commitment to that wider world. To put it rather bluntly, and I hope not too painfully, there was a time when the distance between Windsor and London, Windsor and New York, Windsor and Toronto, Windsor and even Halifax, despite the 101, was in many ways much

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[1] David Curry, *Alden Nowlan: The Forgotten Poet of Stanley*, An address to the West Hants Historical Society, Brooklyn Fire Hall, Brooklyn, Nova Scotia, February 8th, 2003.
[2] Jane Jacobs, *Dark Age Ahead*, (Vintage Canada, Random House, Canada, Toronto, 2004), pp. 2-26.

less than what it is today, a time when Wolfville was, well, Mud-Creek, and Windsor, not Halifax, was a place of some prominence on the cultural and intellectual map of Canada and beyond, in part through the literary personalities of Windsor. Thomas Chandler Haliburton, for instance, achieved literary fame in England first, not here. And later, it would be a matter of comment that Charles G.D. Roberts was a recognized figure in the world of letters in England and America by such **literati** as Matthew Arnold, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Rudyard Kipling.

All this may seem extraordinarily paradoxical and it is but such is the measure of our forgetfulness in relation to their larger vision. We can talk all we want about the connectivity of contemporary society vis-à-vis the Internet, the cell-phone and the ubiquitous automobile but what it means for our communities can equally be a loss of connection not only to one another but to the common past of the places in which we live, especially an intellectual and literary past. There may be lots of lines of connection, after all, but to what end if we really have nothing to say? The darkness of the abyss of memory all too easily eclipses the light.

The American poet and farmer, Wendell Berry, in an essay called **Poetry and Place** comments on the organic and intrinsic relation between the literary effort and the places in which we live[3]. We live on the land and the land in turn feeds, not only our bodies through our physical labours, but our minds through our intellectual and imaginative labours. The land is an outstanding source of the imagination for Canadian literature and art. One has only to think of the Group of Seven or the many novels that reflect in a great variety of ways upon the theme of the survival of nature rather than the conquest of nature or the domestication of nature, the American and the English approaches respectively.

But to locate the characteristics of a distinctively Canadian literature simply in that way overlooks the context in which the force of the landscape and seascape of Canada plays on the imagination. The context, inescapably it seems to me, is a feature of the larger world of empire and history, the larger world of literary and cultural institutions which gives shape to things still present. Canadian literature in its history and development is caught in a vast and unforgiving land, a kind of no-man's land, as it were, between two imperial worlds, the European and the American.

At the risk of being provocative, the picture hasn't really changed all that much from Voltaire's descriptive comment in his satirical and geopolitical **tour de force**, **Candide**, where in his imaginative and profoundly critical circumnavigation of the world he speaks of Canada as the place where two nations, the French and the English, "**are at war over a few acres of snow**" and "**that they are spending on that fine war much more than all of Canada is worth.**" Like Jonathan Swift, Voltaire was only too well

[3] Wendell Berry, *Standing By Words*, (Shoemaker & Hoard, Avalon Publishing Group, USA, first paperback edition, 2005, copyright 1983), *Poetry and Place*, pp. 106-213.

aware of the kind of paralysis of the mind that arises out of an over-confident complacency, on the one hand, "**this is the best of all possible worlds**", and a pessimistic fatalism, on the other hand, "**this is the worst of all actual worlds**". The technological exuberance of our culture, in equal parts ignorance and arrogance, it seems to me, speaks to the first; the deep fearfulness and fatalistic anxieties in our culture, speak to the second, as indicated as well in Margaret Visser's 2002 Massey Lectures, **Beyond Fate** [4].

Swift and Voltaire knew that such paralyses undermine and vitiate the forms of charity, the forms of responsible and moral, albeit limited, action required in the moment of need and in the places where we find ourselves; like the rich man, Dives, in the parable, we step over Lazarus at our feet as if he were not there. Canada, as the much vaunted "**best country to live in the world**", is betrayed by the statism of our current political situation and the metastasis of corruption that is its necessary corollary, the statism that renders us static, unable to act in a culture of dependency.

The struggle to adapt the formative features of those larger imperial worlds and ambitions to the implacable realities of the Canadian wilderness remains a strong and vital concern and one which is profoundly affected by the loss of rural vitality except as a place to escape from the increasingly unlivable realities of urban and suburban culture and as a romantic and nostalgic retreat to what has actually long disappeared.

What is longed for is quite significant. It is a longing for a sense of connection to the land with respect for honest labour and for the peoples who in the struggle of their lives and in the histories of their communities exemplify that world, a world of being rooted, intellectually, morally and spiritually. Paradoxically, that sense of rootedness allows for a greater degree of exchange and connection. The exciting mobility of contemporary culture carries with it the dangers of an endless flight from anything determinate and definite. It is all future, no past, and often results in an all-too-empty present.

The activities of historical societies throughout the land are a necessary check on this mindless flight into an illusory future, a future which may still be in some sense human or, at least, humanoid, Neanderthal, if you like, but hardly humanistic, hardly livable, hardly civilisation. As Robert Bringhurst in a lovely little book, **The Solid Form of Language**, published in the exquisite fashion of Gaspereau Press, suggests, there is language where there is no writing, to be sure, but little in the way of a continuing culture without writing as "**the solid form of language**"[5], without literature, I would say. It is not too strong to say that in the forgetfulness of our literary past we quickly lose the cultural qualities of **humanitas**, the things that at

[4] Margaret Visser, *Beyond Fate*, (CBC Massey Lecture Series, Anansi Press, Toronto, ON, 2002).
[5] Robert Bringhurst, *The Solid Form of Language*, (Gaspereau Press, Kentville, NS, MMIV), p. 9

once root us in the land and connect us in a living and vital way to a larger world of ideas.

We have, of course, Canadian writers who remind us of the dynamic of grace and redemption, of sacrifice and love at work in the rural realities of Canada: Alistair MacLeod's short stories and novel, No Great Mischief, recalling the dynamic of what remains and continues through the paradox of literature of the highland traditions of Cape Breton even in the passing away of traditional ways of life; David Adams Richards' exploration of the power of grace at work in the darkness and despair of lives lived along the Miramachi; Donna Morrissey's wonderful lyrical novel Sylvanus Now about love and dignity in the collapse of the Newfoundland fishery and the disappearance of out port communities. We need these writers. We have had writers, too, who were alive and alert to the conversation of literature and to the interplay of literary ideas, writers like Timothy Findley and Margaret Laurence. But we need as well to remember the literary figures from our own past that are part and parcel of the tapestry of literature belonging to our communities.

Where do we begin? We begin and end with recollection, with the necessity of remembering.

> What Recollection is – Oh! wouldst thou know?
> 'Tis the soul's highest privilege below:
> A kind indulgence, by our Maker given –
> The mind's perfection, and the stamp of Heaven;
> In this, alone, the strength of reason lies –
> It makes us happy, and it makes us wise. [6]

So begins Deborah How Cottnam's poem On Being Asked What Recollection Was. Written some time in the 1780's, the poem signals something of a moral and an intellectual outlook that undergirds an educational programme and enterprise. Recollection is "this faculty divine" without which "mortals could no more/ Review the past, explore the future hour". "'Tis this alone", she says, "bids virtuous hopes arise, / And makes the awakening penitent grow wise"; "'Tis this bids the tyrannizing passion cool - / Calms and resigns the mind to reason's rule"; "This guards the heart 'gainst treachery and surprise, /And teaches to bestow on worth the prize." The classical allusions in the poem to the Platonic, Stoic and Augustinian themes of the interplay between reason and memory, of hope and virtue, of the passionate and the rational parts of the soul, suggest something of the qualities of her own education and intellectual interests that perhaps carried over into the schools for girls which she established in Halifax and Saint John in the 1780s and 1790s before retiring to Windsor where she died in 1806. I don't need to remind you that this was long before Edgehill School for Girls

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[6] Deborah How Cottnam in *Canadian Poetry: From the Beginnings Through the First World War*, ed. Carole Gerson and Gwendolyn Davies, (McClelland & Stewart, Ltd., Toronto, 1994), *'On Being Asked What Recollection Was'*, p. 32.

was conceived and established. But it does make her a near contemporary of Bishop Charles Inglis who established a school and a college here in Windsor, King's Collegiate School and the University of King's College.

A remarkable woman, as the poem itself attests, her life was even more remarkable. It reads like a thriller and illustrates something of the dynamic of lives lived in remote places that were involved in some of the great events on the world stage. Born in 1728 on Grassy Island off Canso, where she was raised and educated – home schooled, no doubt – she settled in Salem, Massachusetts with her military husband after having been a civilian prisoner of war at Louisburg in 1744. In other words, captured by the French who razed Canso and Grassy Island in 1744 and incarcerated in Louisburg, she was freed by the American expeditionary force initiated by Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts and lead by William Pepperell in 1745.

Three years later, much to the disgust of the New Englanders, Louisburg was returned by the English to the French by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle as part of the negotiations belonging to the end of the war of the Austrian succession. That would, of course, be one of the precipitating factors that ultimately led to the American Revolution. It also led to the founding of Halifax in 1749 as the military response to the rebuilding of Louisburg by the French and, subsequently, to General James Wolfe's campaign of 1758 to retake Louisburg on his way to Quebec and the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759, where, by the way, he wrote to Colonel Rickson before the battle that it would be "no great mischief if they fall" referring to the role of the Highlanders, particularly the clan MacDonald, in the forthcoming battle at which both Montcalm and Wolfe would lose their lives.

On a personal note, that battle was watched from the battlements of the walled city of Quebec by one of my ancestors, Marie Payzant and her children, particularly John Payzant, who would later become associated with Henry Alline and the New Light Movement. John would ultimately separate from Alline over the forms of baptism, in part because of having acquired a smattering of Greek and Hebrew, courtesy of the Jesuits, in Quebec that allowed him to point out to Henry Alline that the Greek, εν υδατι, suggested more the instrumental use of the dative, with water, rather than the locative use of the dative, in water, thereby obviating the necessity of baptism by immersion, though, as the old joke goes, it has altogether to do with water on the head. There is, I wish to emphasise, a monument to Henry Alline in Falmouth! But as Deborah How Cottnam was freed by the Americans, so the English forces under Wolfe freed the Payzants who had been captured in Mahone Bay and sold by the Indians to the French. Consequently, Marie and her descendents were given land in Falmouth and now live to plague you with their words and thoughts, and, no doubt, in other ways.

A loyalist, Deborah How Cottnam became a refugee yet again, returning from Massachusetts to the Maritimes in 1775, the year of Paul Revere's famous ride, the

year of the Battle of Lexington and Concord, "the shot heard round the world", and the year of the Battle of Bunker Hill. These events – Louisburg, the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, the Boston Tea Party and the subsequent forms of revolutionary foment - were all part of her life in very direct ways. And yet, she was a poet and an educator in and through the turbulence of these world historic events, displaying, I think, a deep conviction about ideas and literature and about history and education, "the strength of reason…/ It makes us happy, and it makes us wise"[7].

Her poems were circulated privately under the classical pseudonym of "Portia", a name that recalls Shakespeare's Portia in The Merchant of Venice, there likened "to Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia"[8], and regarded in the classical tradition as an exemplar of intelligence and loyalty, qualities that would seem to describe the character of this remarkable woman whose poems and life would inspire others especially her great grand-daughter, Griselda Tonge of Windsor.

"Portia", as I think we should call her, intelligent and loyal par excellence, ends her poem on a note that reveals at once the heights and the limits of literary expression and suggests the lessons of Providence garnered through an extraordinary life lived in extraordinary times. The poem is a literary response to an "Eliza", whether invented or not, who has asked "what Recollection was". Portia concludes humbly and profoundly, it seems to me.

> Hark! Recollection whispers while I write –
> Condemns the rash attempt, the adventurous flight,
> To paint those beauties – or that Power define
> Which loudly speaks our origin divine;
> To explain what baffles all descriptive arts –
> The Deity implanted in our hearts;
> Struck and convinced, I drop the onequal [sic] task,
> Nor further dare though my Eliza ask.[9]

Her legacy was taken up directly by her great-granddaughter Griselda Tonge, who was born in 1803 or so in Windsor where she was raised and educated. She would be recognized more publicly for her literary efforts than her great-grandmother, even though her life was remarkably short-lived. She died in 1825 in Demerara, formally part of Dutch East Guyana which had become an English colony by force in 1803 and formally ratified by the Treaty of Paris in 1815 as an English dependency, British Guiana. A sugar plantation, it was also the scene of the emancipation of slaves through a difficult process officially sealed in 1833, though not without various struggles and uprisings, including the death of the "Demerara martyr", the

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[7] Deborah How Cottnam, "Recollection", p. 32
[8] Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, (Applause Books, New York, 2001), Act 1, Scene 1, l. 167
[9] Deborah How Cottnam, *"Recollection"*, p. 33.

Rev'd John Smith in 1823, two years before Griselda arrived to visit her father and her brother.

The poems written during her remarkably short life were published in newspapers and circulated as independent broadsheets[10]. They brought her fame and renown in her own time, in part for her handling of the Spenserian stanza - a nine-line stanza with a challenging rhyme scheme (ababbcbcC) where the last line is hexameter or Alexandrine rather than pentameter, thus giving strength and emphasis to the concluding line, it takes its name from Edmund Spenser's epic poem The Fairy Queen – and in part, perhaps, because her poems spoke to an awakened interest in provincial literary achievements that complemented new political ambitions. Joseph Howe, the great orator, politician, and advocate of responsible government for Nova Scotia apostrophized her as "the highly gifted songstress of Acadia", the geographical reference already rich with the resonance of the themes of British oppression, albeit of the Acadian French, but perhaps signaling the restiveness of a colony now wanting its own rights of political determination, decades before the darkening clouds of Confederation would descend.

Griselda's poem "To My Dear Grandmother: On her 80th birthday" written in 1824 or 1825 is a paean of praise to the poetic inspiration of her great grandmother, Deborah How Cottnam, signified in the poem as "Portia"[11]. Her great-grandmother died in 1806 at the age of 78. Griselda was probably born in and around 1803. The poem is a fictional and imaginary encomium of a young poet, not as a five-year old but as a young lady in her early twenties, to the memory of her dead great grandmother's poetry which expresses the hope of her guiding influence on the fledgling poet's own poetic endeavours and life; "dwelling on her sweet descriptive lay" in the hope, too, that "thy precepts and example… will my pathway light when thou art gone", and even more asking, "If it may be, wilt thou on me look down,/And watch my faultering footsteps while along,/This busy maze I pass, and warn me still from wrong?" The poem begins:

How oft from honoured Portia's polished lyre
In tones harmonious this loved theme has flowed;
Each strain, while breathing all the poet's fire,
The feeling heart and fertile fancy showed;
Oftimes in childhood my young mind has glowed
While dwelling on her sweet descriptive lay –
Oh, that on me the power had been bestowed!
A tribute fitting me for the theme to pay,

[10] Griselda Tonge in *Canadian Poetry: From the Beginnings Through the First World War*, ed. Carole Gerson and Gwendolyn Davies, (McClelland & Stewart, Ltd., Toronto, 1994), *"To My Dear Grandmother: On her 80th birthday"*, p. 51.
[11] Griselda Tonge, *"To My Dear Grandmother"*, p.51

With joy I'd touch each string to welcome in this day.[12]

Like Plato's Symposium, the endeavour here is to provide a fitting eulogy, in this case, not to Love itself, but to the poetry of Portia, invoking the muse to empower her to make a fitting tribute. It is the poetry of her great grandmother that she celebrates; the likelihood of much in the way of personal reminiscences is quite remote. What is expressed is the sense of a growing appreciation of the formative influence that her great grandmother's poetry has had on her, whose muse "has reared my mind, even as an opening flower, /Watching with anxious love each new expanding power". The last line of this second stanza, "watching with anxious love each new expanding power", is a good example of the Alexandrine meter ending the Spenserian stanza and concluding the argument of the stanza.

Portia is addressed as the profound and definitive influence on the poet's growth and development and in ways that suggest the complementariety of form and content, the virtue of both poet and poem, of Portia and her poetry.

Oh! more than parent! Friend unequalled! How
Can I my love for thee express! Or say
With what a fervent, what a hallowed glow,
I hail thy mental beauty through decay![13]

That "mental beauty" is contrasted with the ravages of time in which "eighty lengthened years have scatter'd snow/Upon thy honoured head". But "I thy venerable form survey" and see beyond the "scatter'd snows", beyond the "sorrow's seal …stamped with heavy pressure on thy brow," something more. "Thine", she says of Portia, "is an angel's mind" and in the power of her imaginative appreciation of her great grandmother she says, "and oh! I feel/ It gives an angel's look, which age can never steal!", again the Alexandrine line acting as an effective conclusion to the stanza. The lasting influences of Portia have altogether to do with her mental qualities expressed through the rhythms of her poetry.

The fourth stanza carries the conceit of the eulogy to Portia through to the courts of heaven. "Thy soul has long been ripening for its God", it begins. Griselda imagines the grief at losing her great grandmother - "I know no tears will faster fall than mine: /I know the bitter anguish that will twine/Around my heart strings:" - but only to turn the threnodies of grief into a commitment to the poetic endeavour which her great grandmother has inspired. For though "the thought is pain,/I will not think that I must soon resign/What I can never find on earth again –" and so then she concludes "Oh, that blessed prize has not been lent in vain!"[14]

[12] Griselda Tonge, *"To My Dear Grandmother"*, p. 51.
[13] Griselda Tonge, *"To My Dear Grandmother"*, p. 52.
[14] Griselda Tonge, *"To My Dear Grandmother"*, p. 52.

The last stanza looks to heaven for the influence of Portia, as a kind of guardian angel, upon her life and poetry. "And when before thy Father's mercy throne/Thou join'st with myriads in the holy song, /If it may be, wilt thou on me look down, /And watch my faultering footsteps while along, /This busy maze I pass, and warn me still from wrong?"[15] Griselda Tonge would not tread very long upon the "busy maze" before she would be stricken with a fever and die in Demerara, far from the shores of Avon, but joined, too, we may pray, with "with myriads in the holy song" on another shore, among whom is Portia, at least as she envisioned.

Through the conceit of a fairly conventional form, the poet has produced a poem of quiet and compelling beauty and sincere conviction, free from the cloying clutter of commonplace and cliché, free from the annoying tropes of effusive sentiment. It achieves what it intends, the honouring of a poet by a poem, in the hope, like Dante in the opening of the Purgatorio, that "now from the grave wake poetry again"[16]. Such a hope for the revitalizing influences of literature remains perennial, it seems to me.

It is a vastly different world that we enter with the consideration of the next poet of Windsor's literary past, the great dean of the Confederation Poets, Charles G.D. Roberts, who deserves really much more consideration in his own right, though I hasten to add, that my remarks on both Deborah How Cottnam, "Portia", and Griselda Tonge are hardly conclusive, comprehensive or adequate; they, too, I think, require our greater commitment to their memory and significance. But with Charles G.D. Roberts, we move directly into the lime-light of a poetic brilliance and significance which was universally celebrated. How can we claim him for Windsor? Because he spent ten years here from 1885 to 1895 as Professor of English, French and Economics at the University of King's College and because of his awareness that a Canadian literature must be about Canada and especially about the land while at the same time be fed and nurtured from the larger traditions of literature. He was aware of the dangers of what he called "the possible peril of falling into a narrow provincialism, both of subject and treatment"[17]; at the same time, he wanted to encourage a literature born out of an appreciation for the land.

As he put it in "The Outlook for Literature: Acadia's Field for Poetry, History and Romance", published in the New Year's Supplement of the Halifax Morning Herald, January 1st, 1886:

> In our landscape, earth and sea and sky conspire to make an imaginative people. These stern coasts, now thundered against by Atlantic storms, now wrapped in noiseless fogs, these overwhelming tides, these vast channels emptied of their streams, these weird reaches of flat and marsh and dyke, should create a habit of openness to nature, and by contrast put a reproach upon the commonplace and the gross. Our climate with its swift

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[15] Griselda Tonge, *"To My Dear Grandmother"*, p. 52.
[16] Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, *Purgatorio*, Canto I
[17] Charles G.D. Roberts, from *"Review of Literature"* in *The Dominion Annual Register and Review for the Seventeenth Year of the Canadian Union, 1883*, 1884.

extremes is eager and waking, and we should expect a sort of dry sparkle in our page, with a transparent and tonic quality in our thought. If environment is anything, our work can hardly prove tame.[18]

His own poetry expresses this "openness to nature". His poems, in particular, are powerful evocations of the landscape and seascape of the Maritimes, powerful and beautiful 'nature' poems that reflect as well a spiritual sensitivity, insight and maturity. He is a poet who is very much in control of his material, both as a poet and as a literary critic.

He called the poetry of nature, following Keats "the poetry of the earth", and argued that it took two forms, one that deals "with pure description", the other "that which treats of nature in some one of its many relations with humanity"[19]. Both aspects are often present in his own poetry. Though somewhat restrained with respect to what Ruskin had called the "pathetic fallacy", the attribution to nature of human emotions, so often overblown by the romantic poets, Charles G.D, Roberts nonetheless remains very much within their orbit, arguing that what we find in nature is really something of ourselves. As he puts it in an essay entitled The Poetry of Nature written in 1897:

Man, looking upon external nature, projects himself into her workings. His own wrath he apprehends in the violence of the storm; his own joy in the loveliness of opening blossoms, his own mirth in the light waves running in the sun; his own gloom in the heaviness of rain and wind. In all nature he finds but phenomena of himself.[20]

In The Winter Fields, written in 1890, he displays a confident mastery of the sonnet form, particularly the Petrarchan, as well as evoking a feeling for the harsh realities of winter which yet hide "the germ of ecstasy - the sum of life" within "the iron fields", perhaps, the fields and farmlands of the Windsor area.

Winds here, and sleet, and frost that bites like steel.
The low bleak hill rounds under the low sky.
Naked of flock and fold the fallows lie,
Thin streaked with meager drift. The gusts reveal
By fits the dim grey snakes of fence, that steal
Through the white dusk. The hill-foot poplars sigh,
While storm and death with winter trample by,
And the iron fields ring sharp, and blind lights reel.
Yet in the lonely ridges, wrenched with pain,
Harsh solitary hillocks, bound and dumb,

[18] Charles G.D. Roberts, "*The Outlook for Literature: Acadia's Field for Poetry, History, and Romance"* in the New Year's Supplement of the Halifax Morning Herald, January 1st, 1886.
[19] Charles G.D. Roberts, *The Poetry of Nature*, Forum 24.4 (New York) December 1897, 442-45
[20] Charles G.D. Roberts, *The Poetry of Nature*.

Grave glebes close-lipped beneath the scourge and chain,
Lurks hid the germ of ecstasy – the sum
Of life that waits on summer, till the rain
Whisper in April and the crocus come.[21]

Another 1890 poem, "The Flight of the Geese", conveys a feeling for the tide-washed world of the Avon Valley and a quiet confidence and hope for the future. The sound of the "confused and solemn voices" of the geese, as haunting as the cry of the wilderness loon, is "a boding of unknown, foreshadowed things", a boding not a foreboding. And certainly, in the grip of the bleak mid-winter, we might warm to such hopes ourselves, the hopes for April which for Roberts, it seems, was not "the cruelest month"[22]. The 1890s were the heyday of Windsor, culturally, intellectually and economically, as well as being a time of general confidence in the culture as a whole. The dark clouds of the First World War were as yet not seen on the horizon.

I hear the low wind wash the softening snow,
The low tide loiter down the shore. The night,
Full filled with April forecast, hath no light.
The salt wave on the sedge-flat pulses slow.
Through the hid furrows lisp in murmurous flow
The thaw's shy ministers; and hark! The height
Of heaven grows weird and loud with unseen flight
Of strong hosts prophesying as they go!
High through the drenched and hollow night their wings
Beat northward hard on Winter's trail. The sound
Of their confused and solemn voices, borne
Atwart the dark to their long Arctic morn,
Comes with a sanction and an awe profound,
A boding of unknown, foreshadowed things. [23]

This was the year, too, that he was elected Fellow of The Royal Society of Canada.

Born on January 10th, 1860 at Douglas, New Brunswick, the eldest of six children born to Emma Wetmore Bliss and George Goodridge Roberts, Charles George Douglas Roberts grew up first in Sackville, New Brunswick where his father was the Anglican Rector of St. Ann's Church, and then, beginning in 1873, at Fredericton when his father, now Canon Roberts became rector of Christ Church Parish Church (St. Anne's). Along with his cousin, Bliss Carmen, he attended the Collegiate School in Fredericton, before proceeding to studies at the University of New Brunswick where

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[21] Charles G.D. Roberts, *The Winter Fields* in *Canadian Poetry: From the Beginnings Through the First World War*, ed. Carole Gerson and Gwendolyn Davies, (McClelland & Stewart, Ltd., Toronto, 1994), p. 201

[22] T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland* in *The Complete Poems and Plays (1909-1950)* of T.S. Eliot, (Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1952), p. 37

[23] Charles G.D. Roberts, *The Flight of the Geese*, pp. 200-201.

he graduated in 1879 achieving "**honours in mental and moral science and political economy, a scholarship in Latin and Greek and a medal for Latin composition**"[24].

His first volume of poetry, **Orion and Other Poems**, was published in the Fall of 1879, the same year that he became headmaster of the grammar school in Chatham. Married in 1880 to Mary (May) Isabel Fenety, he passed up an opportunity to attend Oxford University. Received an M.A. from the University of New Brunswick in 1881, he returned to Fredericton to take the principalship of the York Street School, though not for very long. He spent a brief stint in Toronto as editor of **The Week** before being appointed Professor of English, French and Economics at the University of King's College, here in Windsor, in 1885.

His ten years here were among his most productive. Three volumes of poetry were published, **In Divers Tongues** (1887), **Poems of the Wild Life** (1888), **Songs of the Common Day** (1893), along with a book of prose, **History of Canada** (1897), three short novels, some nature stories and various articles and lectures on literary themes. He had, as I mentioned, been elected a Fellow of **The Royal Society of Canada** in 1890. In many ways, his time here in Windsor established him as a prominent literary figure in Canada and beyond. Resigning from King's in 1895, the next thirty-five years were spent in various enterprises, often away from Canada.

Leaving his family in 1897 he went to New York, working as an editor and freelancing, and then to Paris, Munich, and London, writing fiction, particularly animal stories, and some non-fiction. He served in the war with Canadian and British armies. Four more volumes of poetry were published during this period. **New York Nocturnes and Other Poems** in 1898, **Poems** in 1901, revised in 1907, **The Book of the Rose** in 1903 and New Poems in 1919. He returned to Toronto in 1925, where he promoted Canadian writers, serving as president of the Canadian Authors' Association and as editor of the **Canadian Who Was Who**. Recognised as the father of Canadian literature, he published four more substantial volumes of poetry: **The Vagrant of Time** (1927); **The Iceberg and Other Poems** (1934); **Selected Poems** (1936); and lastly, **Canada Speaks of Britain and Other Poems of the War** (1941). He was also the recipient of various awards and honours during his life: an honorary doctorate from the University of New Brunswick in 1906, the Lorne Pierce medal in 1926, and a knighthood in 1935 - **Sir** Charles G.D. Roberts.

His wife May, from whom he had been separated since 1897, died in 1930. He married Joan Montgomery on October 26th, 1943. He died barely a month later on November 28th, 1943 in Toronto. He was buried in Fredericton.

With respect to his career as a teacher, Roberts considered that the purposes of teaching literature could be brought under three headings: first, the disciplining of

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[24] From the Charles G.D. Roberts Fonds, MG L10, Harriet Irving Library, Archives and Special Collections, UNB, on-line

the faculties of the mind, what he called "**mental calisthenics**"; secondly, "**the power of effective expression in spoken and written words**"; and thirdly, and I think most importantly, "**culture, intellectual and moral**" by which he meant "**a just perception of the relations of things, social insight, a capacity for wise patriotism, and a realization of the essential unity existing between beauty and rightness**". These aims he considered best able to be accomplished "**through persistent contact with the wisest that has been thought and said—that is, the best literature**"[25].

"Ave!", his ode written upon the centenary of Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1892, best conveys his own sense of indebtedness to the larger literary conversation, weaving together the great poets and philosophers: Homer, "**the benign Spirit of Plato; Job; and Judah's crowned Singer and seer divine**", that is to say, David; "**Omar**" of Khayyam; "**the Tuscan**", meaning Dante, already invoked several times in the ode; "**Milton, vast and strong**"; and finally, "**Shakespeare, the captain of the host of Song**"; weaving them together through the evocations of place, in this case, the Tantramar marshes of his youth. It is no "**far flight**", he suggests "**from Tantramar/and my still world of ecstasy, to thee, Shelley**"[26] whom he has turned to praise as the inspiring force of his own poetry, as Portia was for Griselda.

Heather Pyrcz acutely observes of the poetry of Charles G.D. Roberts that "**he is not seeing; rather he is remembering**"[27], but what he is remembering has very much to do with what he has seen both in the Maritime landscape and in the greater landscape of literature. For me, that activity of recollection that "**makes us happy**" and "**makes us wise**"[28] as Portia had put it, is signaled wonderfully in one of Charles G.D. Roberts' rather rare but profoundly moving religious poems published in 1903. And while it would be nice to go on to talk about one of his protégés here in Windsor, **Sophia Almon Hensley**, perhaps that can be left to another time and we will end with "**When Mary the Mother kissed the Child**"[29], a poem that reminds us of those greater unities of God and Nature, God and Man, and of the moral duties that arise from the Christian mystery of the Word made flesh, especially on this the Eve of the Epiphany.

When Mary the Mother kissed the Child
And night on the wintry hills grew mild,
And the strange star swung from the courts of air
To serve at a manger with kings in prayer,
Then did the day of the simple kin
And the unregarded folk begin.

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[25] Charles G.D. Roberts, *The Teaching of English* in the King's College Record, 1888.
[26] Charles G.D. Roberts, *Ave! (An Ode for the Shelley Centenary, 1892)* in *Canadian Poetry*, pp. 202-213.
[27] Heather Pyrcz, *A Digital History of Canadian Poetry*, www. youngpoets.ca
[28] Deborah How Cottnam, *"Recollection"*, p. 32.
[29] Charles G.D. Roberts, *The Book of the Rose*, 1903, from *The Canadian Poetry Press*, UWO Dept. of English, ed. D.M.R. Bentley, www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/confederation/roberts/

When Mary the Mother forgot the pain,
In the stable of rock began love's reign.
When that new light on their grave eyes broke
The oxen were glad and forgot their yoke;
And the huddled sheep in the far hill fold
Stirred in their sleep and felt no cold.

When Mary the Mother gave of her breast
To the poor inn's latest and lowliest guest,—
The God born out of the woman's side,—
The Babe of Heaven by Earth denied,—
Then did the hurt ones cease to moan,
And the long-supplanted came to their own.

When Mary the Mother felt faint hands
Beat at her bosom with life's demands,
And nought to her were the kneeling kings,
The serving star and the half-seen wings,
Then there was the little of earth made great,
And the man came back to the God's estate.

Perhaps, through these recollections of some of Windsor's literary past, we, too, like "the simple kin and the unregarded folk" may begin "to serve at the manger with kings in prayer".

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