

An Early "Specimen of Canadian Poetry"

by D.M.R. Bentley

An "Elegy to the Memory of Doctor Jones," published in *The Montreal Gazette* on January 13, 1806, is the first poem in English to be described on publication as "Canadian Poetry." As its title indicates, it is a commemoration of Dr. Robert Jones, who died in Montreal on December 15, 1805 "after a lingering illness, that was borne with fortitude and resignation" and was buried in the Protestant Burying Ground on December 17 "attended by a numerous and respectable concourse of friends and fellow citizens."¹ Jones's obituary in *The Montreal Gazette* goes on to describe him as a "benefactor" to the "poor" and as a man of letters and professional abilities. . . [whose] reputation was unques tionable. . . ." His one known publication, a pamphlet entitled *Remarks on the Distemper Generally Known by the Name of the Molbay Disease* (Montreal: Fleury Mesplet, 1786) suggests that Jones had a special interest in venereal diseases. He was also the father of Helen Eliza Jones, who on May 18, 1806 married Cornwall Bayley,² the author of *Canada. A Descriptive Poem, written at Quebec, 1805. With Satires — Imitations — and Sonnets* (Quebec: John Neilson, [1806]). Bayley's elegy on the man who would have been his father in-law, "Stanzas Occasioned by the Death of Dr. R. Jones, of Montreal" was published in *The Quebec Mercury* on December 30, 1805.

Since the word "Canadian" was used "almost exclusively of the French in Canada" until "[a]fter the passing of the Canada Act in 1791" and "continued to be so used until well into the 19th century,"³ its application to a poem in English in 1806 is a literary event of some importance that justifies a reprinting of the "Elegy to the Memory of Doctor Jones," under its historic headnote:

It is with pleasure we offer to our readers the following specimen of Canadian Poetry.

ELEGY

To the Memory of DOCTOR JONES

A tribute grateful to thy parted Shade,
The Friends *of* merit and thy Friends have paid,
Whose heartfelt sorrows, more than words supply.
Shed the fond tear, and breathe the mournful sigh;
Vainly would verse, to thy remembrance dear,
Adorn thy grave with offerings more sincere. 5
Yet here no stranger pours a bidden strain,
Nor venal mourner strives to grieve in vain,
No tranquil muse a feign'd complaint essays
Nor hides indifference in the meed of praise.
Come then with Myrtle let me strew the dead, 10
And circle laurel round a Poet's head:
Thee, for their votary chose the tuneful Nine
Liv'd in thy soul and pour'd the flame divine.
They gave thee wit which flow'd with easy birth,
And charm'd the hearers to convivial mirth. 15
Nor were thy thoughts confin'd to these alone;

For other labors have thy virtues known,
 To cheer the sick, th' assaults of death withstand,
 And raise up weakness with a helping hand. 20
 From thee no meek-ey'd sufferer learnt with dread
 The price of succour would deprive of bread,
 Nor in returning health found cause to grieve,
 Restor'd to life when robb'd of means to live;
 But still thy bounty to distress supplied 25
 The kind relief which penury denied.
 In thee, the wretched lost a parent's care,
 In thee, the poor, a refuge from despair,
 In thee, the weak, a patron to defend,
 The learn'd a Scholar, and the good a friend. 30
 Oft too, when modest worth neglected pin'd;
 Or when prosperity in want declined,
 Saw former friends to domes more favor'd fly,
 Transient as colours on an evening sky,
 Not fortune's follower, nor opinion's slave 35
 Thy favor taught them others' scorn to brave.
 What tho' at times some venial faults appear
 (For who is form'd to reach perfection here?)
 Yet when thy life, impartial, we review,
 Thy virtues many, thy defects were few. 40
 And last, — ere parted from its tomb of clay
 Thy Spirit trod th' irremeable way,
 Thy patient suffering earn'd the promis'd grace,
 Where all thy sorrows now repose in peace. 45
 Oh! ere my feeble pulse shall cease to play,
 When sick'ning Nature feels the last decay,
 Let me, while slow the lamp of life expires,
 And mortal anguish, heavenly hope inspires,
 From fear, from passion, guilt and interest free 50
 In Death endeavor to resemble thee.

S.G.

In the original, the letters "S.G." are in a bold English (Gothic) typeface which, in conjunction with the line numbers, adds to the formality of the "Elegy."

Although addressed by one poet to another, "Elegy to the Memory of Doctor Jones" does not follow the elaborate conventions of the pastoral elegy; rather, it is a straightforward and rather low-key working through of the traditional elegiac pattern of grief, praise, and consolation. Reminiscent in tone and, at times, in diction of the "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard" (particularly of Gray's celebration of "useful toil,!.. . homely joys, and destiny obscure" in generalizing adjective-noun combinations),⁴ it is nevertheless thoroughly Popean in form and manner. Balance characterizes many of its lines, and there is little *enjambement* between its couplets. Some of its phrasing is borrowed directly from Pope, an example being "trod th' irre meable way" (42), which comes from Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, XIX, 312. Indeed, the poem's possible point of departure is the portion of the "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" in which Pope addresses the lady as an "ever-injur'd shade" and regrets that she was "By strangers honour'd, and by strangers mourn'd!"⁵ Where "Elegy to the Memory of Doctor Jones" appears most authentic is in its catalogue of the doctor's qualities as a physician and humanitarian. Here its conventional and derivative elements are the vehicle for information and respect that come from personal knowledge of Robert Jones, and indicate that he was a man worthy of admiration and commemoration. Also touching is the poem's concluding depiction of Jones as an exemplary figure in his own "patient

suffering" (43).

Who, then, was the author of this "specimen of Canadian Poetry"? Un fortunately, the answer can only be speculative, for the identity of "S.G." remains obscure even after extensive research. In 1805, a few poems over the letters "S.G." appeared in *The Port Folio*, the decidedly conservative periodical from Philadelphia in which Bayley published several pieces (signed "C.B.") in 1806, as did John Strachan (signing himself "N.N.") in 1806-7. One of "S.G.'s" poems in *The Port Folio*, "On a Young Lady Requesting the Author to Write Some Verses for Her," elicited an enthusiastic comment from the editor (Joseph Dennie): " 'S.G.' in his compliment to Beauty and Merit, has blended the delicate flattery of a courtier, with the poet's grace. This gentleman is a favourite with the Editor, because we respect his *principles*, and relish his poetry."⁶ In response to this "flattering reception,"⁷ "S.G." honoured *The Port Folio* with three more chivalric poems, one supplemented by a footnote explaining a reference to an established but declining "custom in Canada, where. . . [the poem] was written."⁸

While it is likely that the letters "S.G." are the poet's initials, this need not necessarily be the case, as witness Strachan's "N.N." (the final letters of his names). Assuming that they are the poet's initials, however, and that, like Jones, "S.G." was a Montreal resident of British origins, some likely candi dates present themselves:

(1) Samuel Gerrard (1767-1857). A prominent merchant, with military, legal, and political connections, Gerrard was born in Ireland in 1767 and died in Montreal in 1857. Married in 1792 in Montreal to Ann Grant, he was "a confirmed monarchist, an anti-democrat, and a defender of imperial ties."⁹ One of "S.G.'s" poems refers to "fairest Anna," but it is entitled "To Miss *****On her Saying that She Would Never Marry an Officer."¹⁰ Gerrard's candidacy is not supported by evidence of other literary activities.

(2) Samuel Gale (1747-1826). The author of *An Essay on the Nature and Principles of Public Credit* (1784) and other economic and legal works, Gale was a British-born loyalist who moved to Canada in 1791. As private secretary to Governor Robert Prescott, Gale spent three years in England in 1799-1802, and moved thereafter to Farnham in the eastern townships, where he "played the country squire, accumu lat[ed] a fine library"¹¹ and died in 1826, followed shortly by his wife Rebecca.

(3) Samuel Gale (1783-1865). The son of the previous Samuel Gale, this last and most likely candidate was born in Florida and moved with his parents to Lower Canada in 1791. [Elducated at Quebec" while his father was Prescott's secretary, he "came to study law at Montreal under... Chief Justice Sewell in 1802"¹² and was called to the bar in the same city in 1807.¹³ A "staunch conservative and defender of [the] British connection and British supremacy," he published, among other things, *Nerva* (Montreal: William Gray, 1814), a *Collection of Papers* which had appeared during the previous year in *The Montreal Herald*, at that time "the organ of the stoutest conservatism." Like "To Miss *****," *Nerva* is graced by a Latin epigraph. It also contains a lengthy quotation from a poem in a note. Learned and literary, Samuel Gale Jr. is reputed to have fought a duel.¹⁴ He did not marry, and died in Montreal in 1865.

That Samuel Gale Jr was in the right place (Montreal) at the right time (1802 f.) to have known Robert Jones is certain; that he was capable of writing the poems signed "S.G." in *The Port Folio* and *The Montreal Gazette* in 1805-6 seems likely; that he was "S.G." must,

Notes

I am grateful to E.J. Devereux and R.M. Stingle for sharing with me their thoughts on the "Elegy to the Memory of Doctor Jones."

1. *The Montreal Gazette*, December 23, 1805. [\[back\]](#)
2. See *The Quebec Gazette*, May 22, 1806 and *The Montreal Gazette*, May 26, 1806. [\[back\]](#)
3. "Canadian," *A Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles* (Toronto: W.J. Gage, 1967). [\[back\]](#)
4. Gray and Collins: Poetical Works, ed. Austin Lane Poole, 3rd. ed. (1937; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 92. Examples in the Canadian "Elegy" are "convivial mirth" (16) and "modest worth" (31). [\[back\]](#)
5. *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt, (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 263. [\[back\]](#)
6. *The Port Folio*, V (June 22, 1805), 191. [\[back\]](#)
7. *The Port Folio*, V (September 21, 1805), 296. [\[back\]](#)
8. *The Port Folio*, V (November 26, 1805), 360. [\[back\]](#)
9. This quotation and the preceding biographical details are taken from the entry on Gerrard by Peter Deslaurier in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1985), Vifi. [\[back\]](#)
10. *The Port Folio*, V (September 21, 1805), 296. [\[back\]](#)
11. Quotation and biographical details from the entry by J.I. Little, *DCB*, VI. [\[back\]](#)
12. Thia and subsequent quotations are from Gale's obituary in *The Montreal Gazette*, April 17, 1865. [\[back\]](#)
13. The obituary has 1808, but this date is taken from the entry on Gale by Jean-Charles Bonenfant in *DCB* IX. [\[back\]](#)
14. Obituary, *The Montreal Gazette*, April 17, 1865. [\[back\]](#)