

# The Politics and Poetics of Old Houses

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(This is the fourth in a series of prefaces on collective memory in Canada. "Monumentalités," "Historied Trees," and "Parading Past" appeared in *Canadian Poetry* 32, 34, and 36.)

*[A]nd yet I fancied something wanting: it was the mellow touching of that great artist Time:—every thing wears too much the gloss of newness. Here are no memorials of the past, for the whole country is of to-day; five, ten, or at the utmost, twenty years ago, where are now corn-fields, towns and villages, was one mass of forest . . . . Imagination folds her wing over such a history, and we feel with Moore,*

*No bright remembrance o'er the fancy plays;  
No classic dream, no star of other days . . . .*

—Francis Hall, *Travels in Canada, and the United States, in 1816 and 1818* (192-93)<sup>1</sup>

*On many city blocks and village streets in Canada it is possible to find groups of buildings that may span one hundred years of construction methods and styles. Yet they visually support and enhance each other, and in addition they provide examples of our culture and our development. They may be as young as thirty or forty years (or even less), but if they 'fit,' if they are good structures, if they have any possible contemporary use, they are also parts of the past that we should be striving to maintain.*

—Ann Falkner, *Without Our Past?* (10)

Most of the buildings that attracted the attention of travellers and residents in Canada between the Conquest and Confederation were new rather than old. Some writers, like J. Mackay, lamented the absence of "lofty tow'rs . . . / Or cities built some thousand years ago" (1:43-44) in even the most Europeanized parts of the country, but the majority felt that ample compensation for the paucity of old buildings lay in the architectural evidences of agricultural and commercial development—in the stone mansion that Simon McTavish began to build on the slopes of Mount Royal in 1803 (see Bayley 283-85), for example, and in the large churches, union halls, and other "stately edifices" which, two years later, the Rev.

Andrew Spark regarded as evidence of "the rapid progress of colonial Improvement" in the Canadas. In 1878, S. Hollingsworth found the houses of Quebec City "devoid of that symmetry and convenience which distinguishes the new buildings of London and Edinburgh" (201) and in 1818 Adam Hood Burwell dreamed of "succeeding years" when the "stately mansion, and the costly hall" would grace the landscape of southwestern Ontario (548, 575). "We still see . . . an apt illustration of the progress of agriculture . . . within the last fifty years" in Nova Scotia, wrote Captain W. Moorsom in 1830; "[a] hut formed of rough logs . . . has now become the gable-end, or . . . the 'washhouse,' to a neatly boarded cottage; a little farther on is seen a wooden frame house of two or three stories . . . full of windows" (174-75). A little over twenty years later, an anonymous editorial in the inaugural issue of *The Anglo-American Magazine* (1852) celebrates a similar progression in Ontario:

Dwelling in a city [Toronto], whose every brick has been placed in its present position under the eye . . . of some who have seen the lonely wigwam of the Missasauga give place to the log-house of the earlier settler, and this in turn disappear, to be replaced by the substantial and elegant structures of modern art—we feel . . . justified in yielding to the pardonable, if vain, desire of telling the wondrous metamorphosis of forty years. It is meet that we should rejoice over the triumph of civilization, the onward progress of our race . . . . ("Cities" 1)

Such "progressional" (Hall 216) or progressive ideas did not, of course, disappear with Confederation, but by the eighteen eighties they were being contested by a growing unease about "onward progress," its social consequences, and its architectural manifestations. No less in the Maritimes than in Ontario, the "structures of modern art" and life had begun to generate a nostalgia for the older forms and ways that they seemed to be replacing.

In the December 20, 1883 issue of *The Week*, the Toronto periodical that he had moved from New Brunswick to edit less than two months earlier, Charles G.D. Roberts published "Westmorland [later, Tantramar] Revisited," an elegiac meditation on "chance and change," "remembrance" and endurance (*Collected Poems* 78) which, as David Jackel has astutely recognized, contains both a personal and a cultural component (53-54). Not only was Roberts leaving behind the landscape of his youth when he moved to Toronto in 1883, but he was doing so at a time when, in his own words, an "awaking" "national feeling" was involving Canadians in heated debates about political change and continuity (*Collected Letters* 34). Did Canada's future lie in "Imperialism" or "Independence," in an affirmation of British connections or in an assertion of national self-determination? In 1883 Roberts was a "devoted" advocate of independence who sought in the historied landscape and predictable life of the Maritimes the bed-rock of stability that would support personal and political change. As William Strong has observed, the willed focus of attention in "Tantramar Revisited" is not the most famous aspect of the Tantramar River

delta—the dramatic changes brought about by tidal variations in the Bay of Fundy—but a series of natural and human forms that suggest stasis and permanence in the life of the individual and "the country" (35).

In the middle sections of the poem Roberts allows his eye to travel west and east of the Tantramar Marshes to "green-rampired Cumberland Point" (Dorchester) and the Novascotia village of Minudie (*Collected Poems* 78-79). Before doing this, however, he discovers on the slopes below his childhood home of Westcock, New Brunswick the first signs of the stability for which he yearns:

Only in these green hills, aslant to the sea, no change!  
Here where the road that has climbed from the  
inland valleys and woodlands,  
Dips from the hill-tops down, straight to the base of the  
hills,—  
Here, from my vantage-ground, I can see the scattering  
houses,  
Stained with time, set warm in orchards, meadows, and  
wheat,  
Dotting the broad bright slopes outspread to southward and  
eastward,  
Wind-swept all day long, blown by the south-east wind.  
(*Collected Poems* 78)

The "scattering"—that is, scattered—houses appear to be immune to "chance and change," not despite, but because they are "stained with time," marked by many years of exposure to the elemental forces of sea and wind that work continuously on the Tantramar landscape. "[A]gedness in the midst of active life . . . blends the old and the new into harmony"<sup>2</sup> writes John Ruskin in a definition of the picturesque that may well have been in Roberts's mind in 1883 as a result of his work at that time on the New Brunswick chapter of George Monro Grant's *Picturesque Canada; the Country as It Was and Is* (1882-84)(and see *Collected Letters* 31, 34). As he described the "houses, / Stained with time" in "Tantramar Revisited," Roberts may also have had in mind Ruskin's observation in "The Lamp of Memory" that the agedness of buildings "connects forgotten and following ages with each other, and half constitutes the identity, as it concentrates the sympathy, of nations; it is in that golden stain of time, that we look for the real light, and color, and preciousness of architecture . . ." (*Seven Lamps* 155).

Urging the reader to dwell upon the "agedness" of the houses below Westcock as their salient quality are the landscape elements that immediately surround them: "meadows, . . . wheat," and, closest of all, "orchards." Both productive and ornamental, orchards are almost synonymous in pre-Confederation writing with long-established settlement, an earlier example being "[t]he immense pear trees in the orchards" of Sandwich (Windsor), Ontario, which seemed to W.H. Smith in

*Canada: Past, Present, and Future* (1851) to "give sufficient evidence of [the town's] antiquity (for a new country)" (1:22). With "Tantrammar Revisited," old houses and orchards suffused with the warmth of personal and communal memory enter Canadian literature as a *topos* of cultural agedness, a recognizable and reusable combination of built and planted elements that signify the picturesque and vital presence of a past in which the human and the natural seem to have been in balance and harmony.

A quarter of a century after the initial publication of "Tantrammar Revisited" and three years before she herself moved permanently from the Maritimes to Ontario, Lucy Maud Montgomery published her first description of the most famous house in Canadian literature. Situated at a point of balance between the human and the natural realms, Anne Shirley's future home is a classic instance of the *topos* of agedness:

[T]he big, rambling, orchard-embowered house where the Cuthberts lived was a scant quarter of a mile up the road from Lynde's Hollow. . . . Matthew Cuthbert's father, as shy and silent as his son after him, had got as far away as he possibly could from his fellow men without actually retreating into the woods when he founded his homestead. Green Gables was built at the furthest edge of his cleared land and there it was to this day, barely visible from the main road along which all the other Avonlea houses were so sociably situated. (3-4)

The gables of the Cuthbert house are green, not merely to reflect its association with the nearby trees and woods (and, hence, with the actuating spirit that Montgomery, like Wordsworth, believed to inhabit all living things), but also because it represents a past that is as vital as it is enduring. "[T]here it was to this day."

Very obviously, the "great patriarchal"—and funereal—"willows" (4) that run along one side of the "[v]ery green and neat and precise" yard behind Green Gables are emblematic of both Matthew's father and Matthew himself (who will die before the conclusion of the novel). They are also reminiscent of the "great elm-tree" that Nathaniel Hawthorne places beside "the old Pyncheon-house" (5) in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). As well as being a transgenerational embodiment of the Pyncheon patriarchy ("[i]t had been planted by a great-grandson of the first Pyncheon"), the Pyncheon elm contributes to the attractiveness of the Pyncheon house by "overtopping the seven gables, and sweeping the whole black roof with its pendent foliage. It gave beauty to the old edifice, and seemed to make it a part of nature" (27). Whether in Hawthorne's New England, Roberts's New Brunswick, or Montgomery's Prince Edward Island, part of the charm of old houses resides in their naturalization, their assimilation to nature through the extended action of the elements (Ruskin's "weather-staining" [*Seven Lamps* 160]) or through the vertical growth of the trees planted in an adjacent yard or orchard. Only when the action of the elements has written "the record of its

years . . . visibly" on its façade (Ruskin, *Modern Painters* 4:2) and the trees planted in the vicinity have risen to about twice the height of its roof will a house have the "look" of oldness<sup>3</sup>— appear sufficiently aged and naturalized to warrant the designation "old house."

Another literary house that easily meets these criteria is "the Plummer Place" in Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist* (1904), a novel set in a fictionalized Brantford, Ontario at the height of the movement to strengthen Canada's imperial ties with Britain. Sold to John Murchison at "a dramatic sacrifice" after the financial failure of the grandiose English emigrants whose "large ideas" it embodied, the Plummer Place was

a dignified old affair, built of wood and painted white, with wide green verandahs compassing the four sides of it, as they often did in days when the builder had only to turn his hand to the forest. It stood on the very edge of town; wheatfields in the summer billowed up to its fences . . . . The plank sidewalk finished there; after that you took the road, or, if you were so inclined, the river, into which you could throw a stone from the orchard . . . .

(22)

Liminally<sup>4</sup> located "on the very edge of the town" of Elgin, the Plummer Place stands apart from both urban and rural Ontario— indeed, from its Canadian environment: the product of "a different tradition," it is "in Elgin, but not of it," and when the "wheatfields" that billow sea-like up to its fences in the summer become "cornstacks" in the fall they resemble the tents of a "besieging army" (22). The "plaster Triton" that sits in "the middle of the lawn" exuding a "frayed air of exile from some garden of Italy sloping to the sea" emphasizes the disjunction between the Plummer Place and its Canadian environment, as do the house's "French windows . . . cut-glass chandelier, . . . Italian marble fireplace," and "old fashioned French [wall]paper" (23,24). A "dignified" and anomalous relic of an earlier and alien mentality, the Plummer Place evidently needs to be naturalized, adapted to its time and place in a manner that respects both its character and its surroundings.

To the extent that he "supplement[s] the idiosyncrasies" of the Plummer Place with "a few good engravings" and a "bookcase . . . filled with English classics" (24), John Murchison, himself an immigrant from Britain, sustains and even increases the house's alienation from its environment. But this is not all that he does. A selection of Canadian and American books, periodicals, and newspapers accompanies "the English classics" through the weighty hall door of the Plummer Place (10-11, 25), and, as the Murchison "fortunes" improve, "the old house" is sensitively and sensibly adapted and improved by "a new roof . . . , slate replacing shingles, . . . [a] bathroom . . . [and] electric light" (26). Neither narrowly British

nor financially inept, Murchison oversees the transformation of the Plummer Place from an alien "folly" that his young children invest with the qualities of a gothic castle ("a romantic past... a hollow chamber... a passage in which fear dwelt" [25]) into a very "presentable" and habitable family home. Aspects of the Plummer Place that the Murchisons lack the will or the wherewithal to maintain or adapt inevitably fall into disuse and decline. None of the "bells in the kitchen that connect with every room in the house . . . [is] in order" and the barn in which they "kept a cow, till a succession of 'girls' left on account of the milking" lies "definitely outside the radius of possible amelioration—it passed gradually, visibly, into decrepitude, and Mrs. Murchison often wished she could afford to pull it down" (22-23). That the Murchisons' selective interventions and neglect have not altered the character of the Plummer Place is confirmed by the novel's narrator: "one felt, when stepping into it, under influences of less expediency and more dignity, wider scope and more leisured intention [than in other houses in Elgin]; its shabby spaces had a redundancy the pleasanter and its yellow plaster cornices a charm the greater for the numerous close-set examples of contemporary taste in red brick" in the more fashionable west end of the town (24). It scarcely needs to be added that the "big horse-chestnut" trees that shade and beautify the Murchison house stand in pleasant and predictable contrast to the "geranium beds" that surround Elgin's "contemporary" houses (22, 24).<sup>5</sup>

## I

At no point in her description of the Plummer Place does Duncan ignore the fact that the viability, perhaps even the very existence, of such properties depends on the hard work, good will, and prosperity of their owners. But what happens when an old house and its grounds are simply too big or too costly to be maintained by a single family? Three options are possible, each with very different results and ramifications:

1. It may be allowed to deteriorate to the point at which it becomes unsafe, uninhabitable, or both and must be demolished. This is a variation on the fate of the Murchisons' barn.
2. It may be adapted for use as other than a single-family dwelling—a lodging house, for example, or a lawyer's office. This was the fate of Duncan's model for the Plummer Place, her parents' house at 96, West Street in Brantford, which is "at present the Thorpe Brothers funeral home" (Thomas E. Tausky 322).
3. It may be acquired by a municipal, provincial, or federal government and either adapted for office use or preserved as a monument. This was the fate of Montgomery's model for Green Gables, her maternal grandparents' farmhouse in Cavendish, which is now run as a museum by the P.E.I. Department of Finance and Tourism.

One of the most extensive literary treatments of the first and least acceptable of

these alternatives appears in the chapter on "The Duke of Kent's Lodge" with which Thomas Chandler Haliburton begins the third series of *The Clockmaker* (1840). The lodge in question—an ornate structure on Bedford Basin near Halifax that came to be known as the Prince's Lodge—was not "owne[d]" by the Duke of Kent, as Haliburton asserts (285), but "leased" to him by Lieutenant Governor Sir John Wentworth (MacNutt 297), and it was not merely "the scene of [the Duke's] munificent hospitalities" (284), but the residence that he shared with Thérèse-Bernadine Montegnet (Madam de Saint-Laurent), his beloved companion for twenty-seven years prior to his marriage in 1818 to Victoria Mary Louisa, the mother of Queen Victoria. A Burkean Tory bent on strengthening the ties between Britain and Nova Scotia, Haliburton both elides the scandalous history of the Prince's Lodge and emphasizes its royal associations. It is "the only ruin of any extent in Nova Scotia, and the only spot either associated with royalty, or set apart and consecrated to solitude and decay" (287). By virtue of "the long and close connection . . . between them and her illustrious parent," Novascotians "feel a . . . lively interest in, and a . . . devoted attachment to," Queen Victoria and "flatter themselves [that] her Majesty . . . will condescend to regard them as '*the Queen's own*'" (288).

Since the Prince's Lodge is a visible sign of "the bonds of affection" between Nova Scotia and Britain, its rapid "decay" can only be for Haliburton a dismaying sign of the disintegration of the imperial relationship. This is not stated explicitly in "The Duke of Kent's Lodge" but it is clearly evident in the elegiac tone of the sketch. Everything about the ruin, from its "tottering fence" to its "silence and desolation," "bespeak a rapid and premature decay . . . and tell of . . . the transitory nature of all earthly things" (284-85). "[M]ost depressing" is the speed with which the wooden lodge had decayed. Unlike the "massive" brick and stone ruins of European "antiquity," which "exhibit the remains of great strength, and though injured and defaced by the slow and almost imperceptible agency of time, promise to continue thus mutilated for ages to come," "a wooden ruin shows rank and rapid decay, concentrates its interest on one family, or one man, and resembles a mangled corpse rather than the monument that covers it. It has no historical importance, no ancestral record. It awakens not the imagination" (285). Of course, Haliburton's own imaginative response to the "historical" and "ancestral" implications of the Prince's Lodge have already belied these assertions. Wooden it may be, but in *The Clockmaker* "the only ruin . . . in Nova Scotia . . . associated with royalty" becomes a bleak *memento mori*, a resonant symbol of the mutability and demise of all earthy things, including "the first and fairest empire in the world" (287).

"The Duke of Kent's Lodge" begins with the hopeful assertion that "[t]he communication by steam between Nova Scotia and England will form a new era in colonial history" (283), but the present and projected condition of the Prince's Lodge tells a different story. Not only has the "vegetable decomposition" of its wood made it "deformed, gross, and repulsive," but "[t]he forest is . . . reclaiming its own" so fast that in a "few years . . . all trace of it will have disappeared for

ever" (285). Already in 1828, less than ten years after the Duke of Kent's death, the eaves of the lodge are full of "luxuriant clover" and "coarse grasses," and its wooden "portico . . . present[s] a mass of vegetable matter, from which ha[s] sprung up a young and vigorous birch-tree, whose strength and freshness seem . . . to mock the helpless weakness that nourishe[s] it" (285-86). The near bathetic pathos of these statements and an accompanying note stating that between 1828 and 1840 both "porch and tree . . . disappeared" (286n.) indicates the depth of Haliburton's distress at the "relaps[e] into a state of nature" (285) that he found at Prince's Lodge. What future could there be for the British presence and the imperial connection "in a climate where the living wood grows so rapidly, and the dead decays so soon," where the residence of the "commander-in-chief of the [British] forces in th[e] colony" could so quickly have become the "mouldering" abode of "the ill-omened bat" (286, 184, 287)? Small wonder that in 1856 Haliburton emigrated to England and, as a Tory parliamentarian and pamphleteer, continued to argue "for the development of a colonial empire with an improved communication system" (Cogswell 355). It is a testament to the political implications of old houses that Haliburton's imperialist attitudes are as evident in his meditation on the Prince's Lodge as they are in his addresses to the British Parliament.

During the present century numerous Canadian writers have meditated on the appearance and significance of old houses, none at greater length than Philip Child and none more memorably than Al Purdy. First published in Toronto in 1951 and twice prescribed as a text for Grade 13 students in Ontario (Bieman 16), Child's *The Victorian House* is described on its dust-jacket as "the poet's *in memoriam* to an age that is past and gone" (qtd. in Bieman 16). A Prefatory Note by Child guardedly concedes the element of personal reminiscence in the poem: "[t]he characters and episodes of *The Victorian House* are invented, not reported from recollection. It is true, however, that the convention of poetry requires an author to dip his pen in the blood of at least one or two slain reticences and to reveal more of himself than, in the prose of life, he would ordinarily disclose" ([x]). As Child's Note intimates, a recurring theme of *The Victorian House* is the contrast between poetry and prose. Set against the poetry of the narrator, his mother, his father, and a dying friend who possesses a saintly quality of "'whole-ness'" (30) is the prosaic way of talking and thinking that characterizes the poem's other principal character, a real-estate developer called "Mr. Hammer" whose "mathematical" interest in the house that he plans to destroy (2, 36) makes him a typical representative of modern materialism—one of the "robot-men with mechanistic souls" who recognize "*no thing but things*" (16-17) and assess the past only for its commercial potential. "'Who built this house? And what's its history?'" Mr. Hammer asks between recording its total number of rooms and explaining his crass reason for wanting to know: "'In my prospectus of a lot this size / I always write a note on former owners; / Folks like to think that a lot they buy was owned / By solid people and has its little story'" (2). While the narrator makes his way through the house that his father built in 1888 (2), recalling the personal and historical associations of its



various rooms ("I sometimes think the walls remember" [5]), Mr. Hammer keeps up a running commentary on the house's deficiencies that prepares the ground for his final offer:

"I'll give  
You Fifteen Thousand for the house and grounds.  
The house has got too old; I'll have to tear  
It down, of course. But I can use some bricks  
And some of the trim, perhaps, to build a new one."  
(36)

Anyone who has disposed of their parents' house through a callous real-estate agent will be especially inclined to dislike Mr. Hammer.

But this would be a simplistic response, for as Desmond Pacey and others have recognized (Pacey 214-17; Duffy; Bieman), Child was a Christian humanist who believed that Divine and human love and forgiveness did and should extend to all sinners, even to Judas and his heirs. "Christ has gone down to search the earth / Where Judas' bones lie low" (54), begins the final stanza of the last poem in *The Victorian House, and Other Poems*, and in the penultimate section of *The Victorian House* itself the narrator affirms that Jesus "summoned Judas" as well as "Peter and John to enter" the "Kingdom of Heaven . . . and bade us all / Whose homes must be a strew of bricks some day, / To come from this our otherness to it" (36). The mercenary companion of a narrator who feels that he is being betrayed and crucified ("[m]y Hammer has come back to nail me down" [20]), Mr. Hammer is also "on his way . . . / To the Kingdom of Heaven" (36), a fellow pilgrim who must be forgiven and loved by anyone who would truly imitate Christ. That is why at the conclusion of the poem the narrator, though deeply saddened by the loss of his family house and earthly "home" does not condemn Mr. Hammer but, rather, leaves open the possibility that his "new house" will be a manifestation of spiritual renewal—a "new style. . . of architecture" that incorporates elements of the old house but nevertheless represents "a change of heart" (Auden 7). It is also why the narrator imagines the "limbs" of the old "apple tree" that he played on as a child to be "[s]tripped for [their] winter sleep" (1, 36). Whether it reawakens in the spring as the narrator's metaphor implies or yields to the axe as Mr. Hammer's plans suggest<sup>6</sup>, the apple tree must pass through death to rebirth if it is to fulfil its function as a symbol or embodiment of original sin. Almost invariably a condenser for Edenic associations, the *topos* of the old house and apple tree is assimilated in *The Victorian House* to a typological scheme in which the painful displacement of the old by the new points towards the redemption of the fallen world.

Many of Purdy's best-known poems reveal the interest in old houses and related structures that became a notable feature of his work in the early 'sixties, not long after he had settled at Roblin Lake near Ameliasburg on the richly historied north shore of Lake Ontario. In "Remains of an Indian Village" (1962), "the tutelary

gods of decay" have ensured that "only great trees" occupy the sites of "the villages of the brown people," whose ghostly presence can nevertheless be conjured by the historical imagination (36-38). In "The Country North of Belleville" (1965), the same forces have caused farms to revert to forest, leaving "old fences . . . among the trees" and "a pile of moss-covered stones," which "has lost meaning under a meaningless sky" (61-62). And in "Roblin Mills (II)" (1968), the space occupied by the mill is "empty / even stones are gone where hands were shaken / and walls enclosed laughter" but, like a "black crystal," the nearby millpond provides access to the "manner[s] and custom[s]" of the men, women, and children who "had their being once / and left a place to stand on" (132-33). As the uncharacteristically fantastic figure of the "black crystal" in the most recent of these poems suggests, the disappearance of the material evidences of previous cultures makes it extremely difficult even for those gifted with a powerful historical imagination to generate vivid and meaningful memories of earlier cultures. Where there are at least "dusty roads and old houses," as in Purdy's Ameliasburg, it is possible to become a woman or man "from another time / walking thru [a] 19th-century village / with a kind of jubilation" (202-03).

A corollary to Purdy's faith in the historical imagination as a means of reclaiming effaced cultures is his perception of ruined houses and old plantations as the residue of the individual and collective characteristics of their creators. The "small bitter apples" "gone wild and wormy" on the "old apple tree" beside the "ruined stone house" in "Detail" (1968) are more than the remnants of a failed farm and a lost Eden. Tenacious to the degree that in winter they sometimes wear "caps of snow / [and] little golden bells" that associate them with medieval court jesters, they are exquisite and memorable emblems of the stubborn and foolish but joyful and independent people who settled beside "the road / to Trenton" in southeastern Ontario (113-14). Purdy claims to "make no parable of them," but then proceeds to do precisely that:

For some reason I . . . remember  
and think of the leafless tree  
and its fermented fruit  
one week in late January  
when wind blew down the sun  
and earth shook like a cold room  
no one could live in  
with zero weather  
soundless golden bells  
alone in the storm.

(113-14)

Solitary and mute until befriended and articulated by the poet, the "ruined stone house," the "old apple tree," and the "small bitter apples" are emblematic of a vanishing and almost forgotten Canadian culture. As a celebratory elegy, "Detail" gives grounds for both optimism and pessimism about the survival of that culture:

on the one hand, its remaining "fruit" is affectionately noticed, imaginatively "fermented," and appreciatively ingested by Purdy and his readers; on the other hand, "even children know better" than to eat the apples in summer, and, in winter, "perhaps none of the other travellers" on the roads to Trenton "looked th[eir] way."

To judge by their publications, Canadian writers have not been much interested in the adaptation of single-family dwellings to alternative uses. Perhaps this is to be expected, since the process of gutting, stripping, remodelling, refacing, and extending an old house to make it suitable for a firm of lawyers, doctors, accountants, or undertakers is scarcely one that, in Haliburton's terms, "awakens . . . the imagination." Yet as the list of gerunds just used to describe it suggests, the process of adapting an old house to a new purpose is not without its metaphorical and metaphysical implications. Since at least the time of the Roman architect Vitruvius, buildings have been conceived as bodies, an organic analogy now rarely cited as a prescription for ideal architectural proportions, but still residually present in metaphors that ascribe human characteristics to houses and *vice versa*. "[T]o communicate the vital values of the spirit," "[a]rchitecture . . . must appear organic like the body," observes Geoffrey Scott in *The Architecture of Humanism* (1914); "*we . . . transcribe . . . ourselves into terms of architecture*" and "*architecture into terms of ourselves*" (213). Thus people shut each other out, houses face the street, stairs have feet, towers lean. And, like people, houses may be loved or hated, cherished or demolished, restored or defaced. Almost inevitably, these extremes come into vigorous play during the conversion of an old house to a new purpose, for the process of adaptive transformation usually involves a combination of destruction and construction that touches every aspect of the building, from its bowels to its skin. A critical question, then, becomes what features of the old house will be retained and what parts removed? Will its original character remain, or will it be replaced by a new identity?

Hedged about as it is by metaphorical and metaphysical implications, the metamorphosis of a family home into a business venue is, above all, a political act. If this is not immediately obvious, it may be because neoconservative politicians and thinkers have recently been so successful in disseminating their spurious identification of business and family values. The transformation of an actual house into a place of business is as consistent as the fax machine and the cellular telephone with the philosophy that would place a computer—indeed, an office—in every home. Those less sanguine than neoconservatives about housejacking must assess every proposed or completed home-to-business conversion both on its individual merits and in its wider context. When the number of such conversions is very small, attention may safely be focused primarily on their external appearance, and the business and architects involved assessed on their success or failure in retaining the character of the house while also enhancing its usage, efficiency, and appearance with such things as improved paint, windows, lighting, mechanical systems, and sympathetic additions.

In this restricted context, such architects as John Nicholson of Maholtra Nicholson in London, Ontario may well earn high ratings for the balance that they try to achieve between "historical character and technical advances" (Nicholson). A successful home-to-business conversion that was done over several years by a series of architects, including Maholtra Nicholson, is the building that now contains the offices of Thomson, Fisher, and Bossy Consultants at 477 Waterloo Street in London:



Built in 1876 for Nathaniel Reid, an emigrant from Manchester who had made his fortune as an importer and retailer of glass and china (Nancy Z. Tausky 86), 477 Waterloo Street was and is a fine example of a Regency-style cottage. Its modest exterior and lavish interior have been carefully conserved and, where necessary, restored by its present and previous owners, and its efficiency and utility have been enhanced in various ways, most notably by a large modern extension. Consistent with Nicholson's sound and long-standing principle that additions should not attempt to disguise themselves as part of the original, this extension is faced with a mixture of reclaimed yellow and pink bricks that is both compatible with and distinct from the weathered yellow bricks of Reid's cottage. Thanks to a combination of enlightened architects and businesses, 477 Waterloo Street has made a successful transition from family home to office space. Much the same could be said about various other old houses in London's nineteenth-century core, several of them in the commercially popular area around the Reid cottage.

It is the existence, expansion, and proliferation of just such areas in cities like London that raises large social and political issues, for when more than a very few family homes disappear in a particular neighbourhood so, too, do schools, libraries, and other local amenities. Commercial adaptation can conserve individual houses and resuscitate entire areas, but it can also drive the communal life out of neighbourhoods and leave in its place the kind of environment in which, especially at night and on weekends, violent crime against persons and property can thrive. The recent increase throughout Canada of neighbourhood associations, many of them created in the first instance to resist a specific commercial development, attests to the growing recognition that house-conversions can no longer be viewed in isolation but must be seen as part of a domino-effect that can have a devastating effect on a community. Whether priority in the solution of these problems will be given to individual rights or community values will, of course, depend on the political disposition, tenacity, and, ultimately, power of the people

involved. It can only be hoped that in the future each and every decision about the fate of an old house will be made in full awareness of its wider implications. With houses and neighbourhoods and cities, as with natural ecosystems, no change should ever be made without regard to its effect on the entire environment.

Despite differences arising from public rather than private ownership, the same aesthetic, political, and ultimately environmental considerations must be brought to bear on houses destined for conversion to government offices. Will the conversion balance history and usage? Will it adversely affect the ecological stability of the community? Some additional considerations will arise, however, when the matter at hand is the selection and treatment of old houses as museums or monuments. Which houses should be chosen for these purposes and how should their conversion be handled? The second of these questions is easier to answer, because the choice of an old house as a museum or monument entails its restoration and preservation as a period piece with only such modifications as are necessary to the fulfilment of this function. Two cases in point are Montgomery's grandparents' house in Cavendish (Green Gables) and Haliburton's house in Windsor, Nova Scotia (Clifton): both have been designated as historic sites, restored to pristine condition, and outfitted with original or period furnishings. Similar treatment has been accorded to the houses of distinguished people elsewhere in Canada—to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's summer home on Campobello Island, New Brunswick<sup>7</sup>, for example, and to Emily Carr's childhood home in Victoria, B.C.—as well as to houses that fall into the oldest-existing-residence category—the Eldon House in London, for example, and Seven Oaks House in Winnipeg, a building that derives some of its significance from having been built on the site of the 1816 skirmish between the Hudson's Bay and Northwest companies that became known as the Battle of Seven Oaks.

Less easy to answer is the question of which houses should be chosen for restoration and preservation as museums and monuments. As the examples just given illustrate, the tendency in the past has been to choose houses that are distinguished by their association with famous people and historical events. Few houses in which Sir John A. Macdonald laid his head or otherwise comported himself have escaped preservation orders or, at least, historical plaques, and the Riel House in Winnipeg has been restored as a monument and museum to Louis Riel because, although he never lived there, his body lay in state for two days in its front room after his execution in November, 1885. But not everyone agrees that the famous-men-and-decisive-battle view of history should dictate which old houses are preserved and restored, or even that such decisions should be made by the aesthetic and historical criteria that made museums and monuments of Eldon House and Seven Oaks House. In "Fort Rodd Hill National Historic Park" (1975), the B.C. poet Tom Wayman quietly inveighs against the view of history that makes monuments of imperial fortresses like Fort Rodd outside Victoria while ignoring the houses of Vancouver Island's working people. The poem begins with a deliberately prosaic account of the Fort's permutations between its inception in

1878 "during the Russo-Turkish war" and its designation in 1956 as a capital-H "Historic" site (27, 28). It then expresses its central reservations about this process, playing as it does so on the fact that the word "strange" carries the dual meaning of "odd" (or interestingly unusual) and "alien" (or from elsewhere):

Strange to think that on this distant coast  
they would erect so clumsy a part of Europe  
and Europe's wars, and that we would honour and preserve  
it.

Behind these guns, north through the bush  
the Island coalminers lived another kind of history:  
everyday  
food prices, getting hired, days off and  
days on, the work that made the Island worth protecting.  
These entered history too, not out of their daily tasks  
but only when they stood together against death:  
coal gas in the pits, digging at the coal face knee deep in  
water  
buying and storing their own powder  
and the robbery of crooked weigh-scales, company stores  
and company housing. They enter history in the great  
strikes  
when the army moved against them. They took the only  
shots  
fired in anger at white men on this Island.

(28-29)

The numerous repetitions and parallels in these lines reflect Wayman's determination to make poetic and memorable a social group whose grim lives and consequent actions brought them into conflict with the Canadian authorities during the First World War and placed them outside the pale of official history and architectural commemoration:

Unlike the house of Fort Rodd's Master Gunner  
the house of an Island coalminer  
will not be preserved: his alarm clock, calendar, washpail,  
bed,  
his clothes, what he had to eat and what he looked like.  
No one will detail what he did in his life  
or who were his family. Less than a hundred years of work  
burned out these men and women so that they vanished  
like coal, like coast defense. Nothing is their monument.  
Now they are gone they do not mean a single thing:  
like you, like me.

(29-30)

The poem's final line is perhaps trite, but it has the merit of making explicit Wayman's desire to bring himself and the reader into sympathetic communion with the ordinary and nameless men and women whose very absence from the official record can serve both as their memorial ("*Nothing* is their monument") and as a reminder of their collective and multiple meaning ("Now they are gone they do not mean *a single* thing"). To the extent that it succeeds in commemorating the lives of Vancouver Island's coalminers and their families despite—indeed, because of—the absence of one of their houses, "Fort Rodd Hill Historic Park" belies Ruskin's assertion that "we cannot remember without [architecture]" but confirms his conviction that "Poetry and Architecture" are the "two strong conquerors of the forgetfulness" (*Seven Lamps* 147-48). Sometimes the pen is as mighty as the trowel.

## II

It is worth returning by way of conclusion to the observation that houses look old when they are "stained with time" and shadowed with trees in order to appreciate the shortcomings of two related aspects of contemporary architectural practice—namely, the reconstruction with new materials of houses that have been demolished, and the construction in new suburbs of estate (or "monster") houses with period features. About a kilometre as the crow flies from 477, Waterloo Street in London is a grandiose condominium development that takes its name from a house built by a London entrepreneur named Ellis Hyman and subsequently purchased and briefly inhabited by one of the fathers of Ontario Hydro, Sir Adam Beck. To elicit permission to build the Sir Adam Beck Condominiums on land partly occupied by Elliston (as it was originally called), the developers agreed to reconstruct the house elsewhere on the site, a condition that they fulfilled using, not the bricks and woodwork of the original structure, but modern bricks and new wood. The result is a grotesque paradox: an ostensibly old house without the "stain of time," an unnatural excrescence that has less historical character and authenticity than any of the surrounding buildings, including the condominium development itself and its two most conspicuous neighbours—the James A. Harris Funeral Home and the St. Joseph's Hospital parking garage, the former a clinical adaptation of a late Victorian-style house and the latter a lurid example of nineteen-sixties Modernism.

A couple of kilometres north of the Sir Adam Beck Condominiums lie some of London's most elevated and exalted examples of the labyrinthine suburbs that burgeoned around Canada's towns and cities in the 'seventies and 'eighties. With a building-to-lot ratio that reflects both the greed of the developers and the aspirations of their clientele—which is merely to say, the mushrooming neoconservative ethos of the decades in which they were built—the houses of these suburbs appear monstrous, not just because of their size, but because they are set too close to each other and to the street. Exaggerated upwards and outwards like body builders, they violate the human scale. Bedecked with expensive gadgets and accessories like the cars and children in front of their two- and three-car

garages, they proclaim their owners' material wealth and social success. Distinct from one another in similar ways like hamburger outlets, Benetton shops, and most other manifestations of multinationalism, they attempt to cater simultaneously to a longing for difference and a desire for homogeneity. Ruskin's gloomy analysis of the suburbs of Victorian England in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* can be applied with very little modification to the suburbs of neoconservative Canada:

I look upon those pitiful concretions . . . which spring up . . . out of the kneaded fields about our capital . . . upon those gloomy rows . . . alike without difference and without fellowship, as solitary as similar . . . not merely with sorrow for a desecrated landscape, but with a painful foreboding that the roots of our national greatness may be deeply cankered when they are thus loosely struck in their native ground; . . . that they mark the time when every man's aim is to be in some more elevated sphere . . . , and every man's past life is his habitual scorn.

(149)<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps time will pardon at least those Canadian planners, developers, and builders who have worked not "loosely" and with an eye on the demands of "one generation only" (*Seven Lamps* 148), but carefully and with a consciousness of the environment and the future. Certainly time will eventually stain and shade even the most monstrous houses, and probably make the best of them as productive of historical affection and careful conservation as their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century counterparts.

In the meantime, the focus of affection and conservation must continue to fall on those houses and areas of urban and rural Canada that are already recognizable as the country's architectural heritage. Which particular houses and areas will vary from place to place, but the choices will always be informed by a version of William Morris's answer to the question of what makes "a building . . . worth protecting" in the inaugural statement of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (1877): "anything which can be looked on as artistic, picturesque, historical, antique, or substantial: any work, in short, over which educated, artistic people would think it worth while to argue at all" (7). In many parts of Canada, not least in Ontario, the houses and areas slated for conservation will surely include the small towns that inspired Leacock's *Mariposa*: "[y]ou may find them all the way from Lake Superior to the sea, with the same square streets and the same maple trees and the same churches and hotels, and everywhere the sunshine of a land of hope" (xvi).

## Notes



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1. Hall is commenting specifically on the area between Rochester and Lewiston in northern New York. Later he observes that "[t]he disposition of the ground, on the Canadian side of the St. Lawrence, is exactly similar, but has been less spoken of, because inhabited by a less inquisitive, and speculating race of people" (194). [\[back\]](#)
2. *Modern Painters* 4:3. Ruskin is describing "the old tower of Calais church" on the coast of France as a prime instance of the "sublimity [that], belonging in a parasitical manner to [a] building, renders it, in the usual sense of the word, 'picturesque'" (4:2-6). Some details of his description of the old tower and its seaside setting—"its stern wasteness and gloom, eaten away by the Channel winds, and overgrown with the bitter sea grasses. . . but useful still, going through its own daily work,—as some old fisherman beaten grey by storm, yet drawing his daily nets"(4:2-3)—have equivalents in "Tantrammar Revisited." [\[back\]](#)
3. This is the proportion for two and three storey houses; in the case of one storey houses, a similar effect is achieved when the trees are about three times the height of the roof. [\[back\]](#)
4. As defined by Victor Turner, "liminality" is a "realm of possibility" and "cultural creativity" between "ordered worlds" or "sociocultural states," a condition of being "betwixt and between" where cultural givens can be "deconstruct[ed]" and "reconstructed" into new units and combinations (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 13-14, 95; *On the Edge of the Bush* 159-60.) [\[back\]](#)
5. Similar in some ways to the Plummer Place is one of the best-known literary houses of the nineteen twenties and 'thirties, Mazo de la Roche's Jalna. Built by "[a] small army of men" in a setting like "an English park in the forest," Jalna was intended by Philip and Adeline Whiteoaks to "overshadow all others in the county. When completed, decorated, and furnished, it was the wonder of the countryside. It was a square house of dark red brick, with a wide stone porch, a deep basement where the kitchens and servants quarters were situated, a library (called so, but more properly a sitting-room, since few books lived there), a dining room, and a bedroom on the ground floor; and six large bedrooms on the floor above, topped by a long, low attic divided into two bedrooms. The wainscotting and doors were of walnut. From five fireplaces the smoke ascended through picturesque chimneys that rose above the treetops .... Under their clustering chimneys, in the midst of their unpretentious park with its short, curving drive, with all their thousand acres spread like a green mantle around them, the Whiteoaks were as happy as the

sons of man can be"(19-20). Intended to "*overshadow*" in an "*unpretentious*" way, Jalna embodies de la Roche's accurate and largely uncritical understanding of the Victorian upper-middle-class mentality. As Ronald Hambleton has demonstrated, it is based on Benares, a house built in 1854-58 in what became Clarkson(now a part of Mississauga), Ontario (14, 67, and see 151). Since 1969, Benares has been owned by the Ontario Heritage Foundation, which has now "completed more than \$2 million in restoration and capital work" on the property, principally on "museum planning, artifact registration and conservation, extensive archaeological research, historical and architectural research, complete restoration and retrofitting of the main house, stabilization and restoration of the outbuildings, and the construction of a 2,500-square-foot interpretation centre. The interior of the house. . . has been restored to reflect the way the [descendants of the original owner, Captain James Harris] lived in 1918." Benares is operated by the City of Mississauga as an historic house museum under an agreement with the [Ontario Heritage] Foundation" ("Benares"). [\[back\]](#)

6. "That apple tree would have to go, of course," he proclaims, "[b]ut a lot of oaks could stay. I want the place / To be select" (6). Mr. Hammer wants to change the name of the house from "Oakwood" to "Hammer Park" for rhetorical as well as egotistical reasons: "*Park* is good. It makes you think of trees, / And city folk like a tree or two by the house" (6). [\[back\]](#)
7. In his history of *Campobello*, Alden Nowlan notes that "not long after" the opening of the Roosevelt International Bridge between the Island and the American mainland in 1962, President John F. Kennedy suggested "the establishment of an international park at the Roosevelt summer home" as a further indication of the "'bond of friendship'" between Canada and the United States (117-18). The Roosevelt-Campobello International Park was duly established on January 22, 1964 "as an expression of the close relationship between Canada and the United States as well as a fitting memorial to the President of the United States who so strengthened that relationship" (joint statement by President Lyndon B. Johnson and Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, qtd. in Nowlan 119). [\[back\]](#)
8. In *Generation X*, Douglas Coupland gives some similarly caustic observations to Dag in his story of Otis: "Otis's comfort was short lived, for he soon . . . had a scary realization—a realization triggered by shopping malls, of all things. It happened this way: he was driving home to California on Interstate 10 and passing by a shopping mall outside of Phoenix. He was idly thinking about the vast, arrogant black forms of shopping mall architecture and how they make as little visual sense in the landscape as nuclear cooling towers. He then drove past a new yuppie housing development—one of those strange new developments with hundreds of blockish, equally senseless and enormous coral pink houses, all of them with an inch of space in between and located about three feet from the highway. And Otis got to thinking: 'Hey! these aren't houses at all—these are *malls in disguise*'" (71). [\[back\]](#)

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