

Arthur Symons' Reviews of Bliss Carman

Introduced by Tracy Ware

In the summer of 1890, Arthur Symons wrote Bliss Carman his appreciation of the latter's poems: "There is something delightfully fresh in them—a lyric April. I hope you will soon collect them into a book, & give one the opportunity of reading more of you." Later that year, Symons repeated his praise: "When are you going to publish a volume? I want the pleasure of reviewing it."¹ Symons not only reviewed Carman's first volume, *Low Tide on Grand Pré: A Book of Lyrics*, after it appeared in 1893, but he also reviewed Carman's next three books: *Songs from Vagabondia* (1894, with Richard Hovey), *Behind the Arras: A Book of the Unseen* (1895), and *More Songs from Vagabondia* (1896, with Hovey).² All of these reviews appeared unsigned in the *Athenaeum*, which Hugo McPherson calls "Carman's most faithful British follower."³ In reality, Symons was Carman's most faithful British follower. When he was replaced, the journal was no longer sympathetic to Carman. But when, in David Perkins' words, "At the criticism of a London journal, literary America could quake,"⁴ Symons played a key role in the growth of Carman's reputation. In addition to his reviews, Symons published Carman in *The Savoy*; meanwhile Carman published two of Symons' poems in the *Independent*.⁵

Symons followed Carman's early career with interest and increasing ambivalence. His measured praise of *Low Tide on Grand Pré* should have been pleasing to Carman, who had asked George Pierce Baker in 1889, "where *can* one get any sound and careful criticism?"⁶ Avoiding the extremes of uncritical admiration and harsh censure that mar some early reviews of Carman, Symons commends Carman's "comradeship with nature" and "genuine lyric note"; he then adds this reservation: "The only question is whether he does not sometimes allow himself to use words too loosely, for the sake of their suggestive quality, which, after all, is not always a matter to be relied upon." Because

Symons tries to combine his sincere approval with a suggestion for improvement, this is one of the most thoughtful reviews that Carman ever received. It concludes with a provocative remark on Carman's place in contemporary North American poetry. When Symons writes that "inspiration" "would be less ridiculous if applied to Mr. Carman than to any other American verse-writer," he provides one reason for Carman's extraordinary international fame; through the negative construction of his faint praise, Symons also anticipates Ezra Pound's later notorious remark that "Bliss Carman is about the only living American poet who would not improve by drowning."⁷

Symons is surprisingly appreciative of *Songs from Vagabondia*, given that book's unenthusiastic reception among eminent Canadian critics. Although he notes that the versification is "sometimes too careless," Symons welcomes the exuberance of these poems: "The mood is an unusual one, especially in verse, but welcome, if only as a change, after the desperate melancholy, the heart-sickness and life-weariness, of the average verse-writer." This defense of "cheerful verse," especially when it is given "firm, dignified, satisfying form," is far removed both from Symons' famous theories of decadence and from E.K. Brown's influential dismissal of *Vagabondia*: "The word for that movement and manner is jaunty; and it is scarcely possible to be poetic and jaunty. The jaunty manner is an impure manner."⁸ Would Brown have been so harsh if he had been aware that Symons' delight in *Songs from Vagabondia* was shared by other English critics, including C. Lewis Hind and Francis Thompson?⁹

With *Behind the Arras*, Symons has to balance his admiration for Carman's determination to develop with his unease at some of the forms that development takes. Symons' response is to argue that Carman "is trying to express more than he at present knows how to express," while hoping that the book constitutes "a step forward, if into the darkness." Unfortunately, Carman's career is hard to assess in these terms, for reasons that Symons recognizes when he comes to review *More Songs from Vagabondia*: "Mr. Bliss Carman is writing too much." Symons adds that "The same sensation, rendered over and over again, begins at last to seem as hackneyed as those other sensations—once so fresh, new, and unspoilt—which have got to seem so familiar to us in the more commonplace kind of verse." And so Symons, who began by urging Carman to collect his poems in a book, now urges Carman to publish less.

All quotations are preserved as they are printed in Symons' reviews. Any inaccuracies are identified in the notes following the text. I am grateful to Karl Beckson, Joanne Craig, Anthony Davidson, G. Di Lullo, Len Early, Diana P. and Brian Read, and to the Publications Committee, Bishop's University. The reviews are published by permission of the literary executor of Arthur Symons.

Notes

1. I edited these letters, which date from July 4 and December 5, in "Two Unpublished Letters from Arthur Symons to Bliss Carman," *English Language Notes* 28 (1991): 42-46. [\[back\]](#)
2. In a letter of April 25, 1991, Karl Beckson informed me of these reviews and of the bibliography that he compiled with Ian Fletcher, Laurence W. Market, and John Stokes: see *Arthur Symons: A Bibliography* (Greensboro, N.C.: ETL P, 1990), pp. 150, 156, 165, 169. The first three reviews are on Carman only. In the last, Carman is one of several poets reviewed in an article on "Recent Verse." I reprint only the section on Carman from the opening of the article. The authors of the Symons *Bibliography* note that Symons' authorship of all the reviews in that article is "problematic" (169), but Symons' authorship of the Carman section is clear. [\[back\]](#)
3. "The Literary Reputation of Bliss Carman: A Study in the Development of Canadian Taste in Poetry," M.A. Thesis Western Ontario 1950, p. 37. The change in the *Athenaeum's* attitude is noted in Mary B. McGillivray, "The Popular and Critical Reputation and Reception of Bliss Carman," *Bliss Carman: A Reappraisal*, ed. Gerald Lynch (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1990), p. 18, note 17. Writing before the publication of the Symons *Bibliography*, neither McPherson nor McGillivray could have known that Symons wrote the earlier reviews. I am

generally indebted to both McPherson and McGillivray.
[\[back\]](#)

4. *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode* (Cambridge, Ma: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1976), p. 92.[\[back\]](#)
5. Carman's "In Scituate" appeared in *The Savoy* 5 (1896): 70-72. Carman's publication of Symons' poems in the *Independent* is noted in my "Two Unpublished Letters" (see note 1).[\[back\]](#)
6. May 8 1889, Letter 32, *Letters of Bliss Carman*, ed. H. Pearson Gundy (Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1981), p.28.[\[back\]](#)
7. Cited in Noel Stock, *The Life of Ezra Pound: An Expanded Edition* (San Francisco: North Point P, 1982), p. 81. I am indebted to McGillivray, pp. 7, 17 note 2. McGillivray also notes (p. 17, note 5) that Carman called this *Athenaeum* review "ruinous, ruinous in its praise." See "To Gertrude Barton," 20 August 1894, Letter 109, *Letters of Carman*, p. 74.[\[back\]](#)
8. *On Canadian Poetry* (1943; rev. ed. 1944; Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1973), p. 55. Brown is discussing "Spring Song," which he regards as typical of Carman's "familiar, rather shrill vein." For a similar response, see Northrop Frye, "Haunted by Lack of Ghosts: Some Patterns in the Imagery of Canadian Poetry," *The Canadian Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard UP, 1977), pp. 32-33.[\[back\]](#)
9. Hind, *More Authors and I* (1992; Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries P, 1969), p. 67; Thompson, "A Partnership in Song," *Literary Criticisms, Newly Discovered and Collected*, ed. Rev. Terence L. Connolly (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1948), p. 292.[\[back\]](#)

**Review of *Low Tide on Grand Pré: A Book of Lyrics*
(from *Athenaeum*, April 14, 1894)**

Mr. Bliss Carman is a young Canadian poet whose work has been more or less known, both in America and here, for some time past, but only in a scattered form. This little book of 120 pages (issued, we regret to say, with a caprice of folding which renders its pages both uncomfortable to the hand and hideous to the eye) is the first book which he has published, and he has exercised a wise restraint in "bringing together between the same covers only those pieces of work which happened to be in the same key, rather than publishing a larger book of more uncertain aim."¹ The whole book is an expression of passionate delight in the beauty of the outward world, in the joy of life, the joy and wonder of earth. It is intensely human because it deals with certain vague ardours, vivid longings after the indefinite in nature, which are among the fancies which humanity at large cherishes most keenly. In the beautiful poem called "Afoot" take these lines:-

So another year shall pass,
Till some noon the gardener Sun
Wanders forth to lay his finger
On the peach-buds one by one.

And the Mother there once more
Will rewhisper her dark word,
That my brothers all may wonder,
Hearing then as once I heard.

There will come the whitethroat's cry,
That far lonely silver strain,
Piercing, like a sweet desire,
The seclusion of the rain.

And though I be far away,
When the early violets come
Smiling at the door with April,
Say "The vagabonds are come!"

Mr. Carman has learnt the true vagabond's secret, and he can render it in verse: a singularly rare combination, for by far the greater part of those who feel the one have neither power nor

desire to achieve the other. The mere joy of walking, of being afoot, of following unknown paths, without too definite a goal—this he has expressed with intimate sympathy; and in the admirable poem called "The Vagabonds" he has developed the theme with a fine breadth of treatment:-

It is a country of the sun,
Full of forgotten yesterdays,
When time takes Summer in
his care,
And fills the distance of her
gaze.

It stretches from the open sea
To the blue mountains and
beyond;
The world is Vagabondia
To him who is a vagabond.

In the beginning God made
man
Out of the wandering dust,
men say;
And in the end his life shall be
A wandering wind blown
away.

* * *

There is a tavern, I have heard,
Not far, and frugal, kept by
One
Who knows the children of
the Word,
And welcomes each when
day is done.

Some say the house is lonely
set
In Northern night, and
snowdrifts keep
The silent door; the hearth is
cold,
And all my fellows gone to
sleep.

Had I my will! I hear the sea
 Thunder a welcome on the
 shore;
 I know where lies the hostelry
 And who should open me
 the door.

The sense of comradeship with nature, a joyous companionship in little homely things, with, at the same time, a delicate consciousness of the mystery which lies about the deeper reaches of such communion, is the very key-note of Mr. Carman's work. There is, in many of these poems a grave rapture in the life of all natural things, especially spring (with a constant recurrence of the beautiful word April), spring and the wind upon the hills. And there are touches of seashore, such as only an attentive lover of the sea could write; this, for instance:-

When day puts out to sea,
 And night makes in for land,²

which is not merely a good phrase, but an absolutely exact impression. Mr. Carman is, in general, subtle in the expression of fine shades, though his phraseology—rich, coloured, suggestive at its best, and with an elusive touch in it of natural magic—does sometimes become a mere coloured mist. He can express fine shades, but it is doubtful if he can express anything else; and the luminous cobweb of his design seems, at times, to be on the point of falling to pieces, or floating imperceptibly away. That is the danger, at all events, of an artist who works, as it is essential that an artist should, with such a calculated slightness of touch, in order to get his atmosphere. A poem without atmosphere is as blank as a picture without atmosphere; and Mr. Carman is certainly right in his endeavour to fill his canvas with light. The only question is whether he does not sometimes allow himself to use words too loosely, for the sake of their suggestive quality, which, after all, is not always a matter to be relied upon. If you paint for atmosphere, you must at all events remember that atmosphere implies form; that without form atmosphere is a nullity; and a luminous mist on a canvas will not be a picture.

The characteristics just now of American verse-writers, from men like Mr. Aldrich³ down to the youngest masquerader in fancy dress, is [sic] an attempt, not generally quite successful, at ornate

finish—an attempt generally made with the utmost deliberation. The word "inspiration" has, perhaps, become a little old-fashioned; but it is certainly not a word that any one, with good or bad intention, could apply to the typical "American" verse of the period. It is a word, however, that would be less ridiculous if applied to Mr. Carman than to any other American verse-writer. He has the genuine lyric note, and he writes because a lyrical impulse bids him write. Nor is he less artistic, in the most restricted sense of the word, because he is more spontaneous. On the contrary, his form, with its fluctuating line, is much finer than the rigid angles and too careful decoration of the others, who seem always to write with difficulty, and with a heavy sense of responsibility. Mr. Carman writes blithely, and with the ease of the true artist.

**Review of *Songs from Vagabondia*
(from *Athenaeum*, April 6, 1895)**

In a charming little book called *Low Tide on Grand Pré*, which we reviewed not long since, Mr. Bliss Carman sang of the joys of wandering, and affirmed heartily:-

The world is Vagabondia,
To him who is a vagabond.⁴

Now, with a friend, himself a writer of accomplished and interesting verse, Mr. Richard Hovey, he comes forward with a whole book of *Songs from Vagabondia*, a book full of the rapture of the open air and the open road, of the wayside tavern bench, the April weather, and the "manly love of comrades":-

Petrels of sea-drift!
Swallows of the lea!
Arabs of the whole wide girth
Of the wind-encircled earth!
In all climes we pitch our tents,
Cronies of the elements,
With the secret lords of birth
Intimate and free.⁵

That is how these lyric vagabonds describe themselves, and the charm and interest of the book consist in the real, frank jollity of

mood and manner, the gipsy freedom, the intimate natural happiness, of these marching, drinking, fighting, and loving songs. They proclaim a blithe, sane, and hearty Bohemianism in the opening lines, with their careless (sometimes too careless) lilt:

Off with the fetters
That chafe and restrain!
Off with the chain!
Here Art and Letters,
Music and wine,
And Myrtle and Wanda,
The winsome witches,
Blithely combine.
Here are true riches,
Here is Golconda,
Here are the Indies,
Here we are free—
Free as the wind is,
Free as the sea,
Free!⁶

The mood is an unusual one, especially in verse, but welcome, if only as a change, after the desperate melancholy, the heart-sickness and life-weariness, of the average verse-writer. Nor is such writing, when it is as well done as, for the most part, it is in this volume, at all easy, or by any means within the capacity of the average melancholy verse-writer. To write cheerful verse, and to keep it within the bounds of seemly order and poetic distinction, is a far harder task than to obtain a certain measure of success in slow metres and to mournful airs. Here you have to invent your own material, before inventing your own form; you have to make poetry out of what most poets have either never felt, or else passed over as too trivial for poetic expression. Yet what firm, dignified, satisfying form can be given to these wandering and wayward moods, born of the sun and wind and "the joy of earth," we may see in the poem (undoubtedly Mr. Carman's) called "The Mendicants":

We are as mendicants who
wait
Along the roadside in the
sun.
Tatters of yesterday and
shreds
Of morrow clothe us every

one.

And some are dotards, who
believe
And glory in the days of old;
While some are dreamers,
harping still
Upon an unknown age of
gold.

Hopeless or witless! Not one
heeds,
As lavish Time comes down
the way
And tosses in the suppliant
hat
One great new-minted gold
To-day.

* * *

But there be others, happier
far,⁷
The vagabondish sons of
God,
Who know the by-ways and
the flowers,
And care not how the world
may plod.

They idle down the traffic
lands,
And loiter through the woods
with spring;
To them the glory of the
earth
Is but to hear a bluebird sing.

They too receive each one his
Day;
But their wise heart knows
many things
Beyond the sating of desire,
Above the dignity of kings.

One I remember kept his
coin,
And laughing flipped it in the
air;
But when two strolling pipe-
players
Came by, he tossed it to the
pair.

Spendthrift of joy, his
childish heart
Danced to their wild
outlandish bars;
Then supperless he laid him
down
That night, and slept beneath
the stars.⁸

The restraint and felicity of this poem are not, indeed, always to be found in the more rollicking pieces which make up part of the volume, dealing at times trivially with the trivial. Nor will the reader be entirely satisfied with some of the slower, more elaborate, and more uncertain experiments, which we should be inclined to attribute to Mr. Hovey. Some of these poems in lines of varying length and varying cadence—"The Faun," for instance, and "At Sea"—are certainly curious, and also attractive, if not always entirely successful.⁹ The rhymeless poem "At Sea" shows a singular power of calling up a particular atmosphere, actual and mental:-

As a brave man faces the foe,
Alone against hundreds, and sees Death grin in
his teeth,
But, shutting his lips, fights on to the end
Without speech, without hope, without
flinching,—
So, silently, grimly, the steamer
Lurches ahead through the night.

For it is with such tangible and yet, in one's apprehension of them, intangible and capricious things, that the whole book is concerned: a book which is at once a tramp's diary and the dream of a poet. Both these young writers, at their best, possess the power of investing actualities with fancy, and leaving them none the less actual; of setting the march-music of the vagabond's feet

to words; of being comrades with nature, yet without presumption. And they have that charm, rare in writers of verse, of drawing the reader into the fellowship of their own zest and contentment.

**Review of *Behind the Arras: A Book of the Unseen*
(from *Athenaeum*, March 27, 1897)**

Mr. Carman calls his last book a book of the unseen, and thus at the outset emphasizes its contrast with his previous books, which were very definitely books of things seen, or at all events things apprehended by the senses. The year was always April to him; he was generally on foot upon a great highroad, or rowing on a Canadian river; and he was quite content that the world should still be seen under that aspect, with the sunlight on its dust or its flowing water. And so, in some of his vagabond lyrics, he was able to express, with a ringing simplicity, the joy of casual things, the philosophy of the gipsy. No one recently has written verses which give the reader an easier sense of happiness, of physical exhilaration, of the deliberate, irresponsible turning of one's back on care and the many bondages of the world. His new book, while it is still full of confidence in the possibilities of happy vigorous living, is overshadowed with a cloud which had not before crossed his sky. By certain rustlings of the painted arras on the walls of the house of life, he has realized that there may, after all, be something, of much moment to him, behind the arras; that, at all events, there is something.¹⁰ It is his disquietude which he translates to us in these poems. And, as usually happens when the artist in the things of the world suddenly opens his eyes upon what seems to him a vaguer horizon than the sky-line which has hitherto limited his vision, his style has become rougher, more uncertain, more tumultuous. He is trying to express more than he at present knows how to express; he is a little in the hands of his message; the mystery which he has so lately had eyes to see makes him stumble on his path through the "selva selvaggia."¹¹ Instead of welcoming the hours because they brought the sunlight, he busies himself with questioning those wandering messengers, asking them why, having brought it, they should also bear it away with them. He sets himself (perhaps not very seriously) to wrestle with problems, and especially with that insoluble problem of death. He inquires into the fates of men, into what is unseen, or

misconceived, in the dealings with us of destiny. And so he has become restless, troubled, anxious, and when he writes a lyric of what would have once been merely the passing of a familiar figure in the street, it becomes, as in this piece of "The Dustman," a symbol:-

"Dustman, dustman!"
Through the deserted square he cries,
And babies put their rosy fists
Into their eyes.

There's nothing out of No-man's-land
So drowsy since the world began,
As "Dustman, dustman,
"Dustman."

He goes his village round at dusk
From door to door, from day to day;
And when the children hear his step
They stop their play.

"Dustman, Dustman!"
Far up the street he is descried,
And soberly the twilight games
Are laid aside.

"Dustman, dustman!"
There, Drowsyhead, the old refrain,
"Dustman, dustman!"
It goes again.

Dustman, dustman,
Hurry by and let me sleep.
When most I wish for you to come,
You always creep.

"Dustman, dustman!"
He beckles down the echoing curb,
A step that neither hopes nor hates
Ever disturb.

"Dustman, dustman!"
He never varies from one pace,
And the monotony of time
Is in his face.

And some day, with more potent dust,
Brought from his home beyond the deep,
And gently scattered on our eyes,
We, too, shall sleep,—

Hearing the call we know so well
Fade softly out as it began,
"Dustman, dustman,
Dustman!"

The once confident poet sees every figure now on that rustling arras looking at him with new eyes; all these shapes have become symbols; but, seeing them for the first time, they are too strange to him for his mind to grasp more than certain hints of their meaning. And so, all through the book, marking as it does an intellectual advance, an advance in perception, we seem to see the writer at a somewhat hesitating step in his career, not yet quite the master of his new magic. It is a step forward, if into the darkness; and the next step (can we doubt?) will bring him again into the light, but into that light which is on the other side of the darkness.

**Review of *More Songs from Vagabondia*
(from *Athenaeum*, December 25, 1897)**

Mr. Bliss Carman is writing too much. It is not long since he published *Behind the Arras*, and now, with his former companion, Mr. Richard Hovey, he gives us *More Songs from Vagabondia* (Mathews). This second series is, indeed, in many ways as good as the first; but it is not better, and it seems to show here and there a slackening of poetic energy, with a consequent recourse to what is merely humorous or merely startling. The difficulty of writing colloquial verse which shall also be poetry is very great, and it cannot be said that these clever and spirited writers have always succeeded. Great, too, is the difficulty of continually sounding such a note as this:-

Over the shoulders and slopes of the dune
I saw the white daisies go down to the sea,
A host in the sunshine, an army in June,
The people God sends us to set our heart free.

The bobolinks rallied them up from the dell,
The orioles whistled them out of the wood;
And all of their singing was, "Earth, it is well!"
And all of the dancing was, "Life, thou art
good!"¹²

In this blithe little piece the sensation of natural happiness, of the fresh, instinctive joy of the open air, is rendered with an efficacy all the greater on account of its briefness. The same sensation, rendered over and over again, begins at last to seem as hackneyed as those other sensations—once so fresh, new, and unspoilt—which have got to seem so familiar to us in the more commonplace kind of verse. In *Behind the Arras* Mr. Carman seemed to have discovered for himself a new kind of subject-matter. Why, then, has he already deserted it? A good thing, once done, can rarely be repeated, and *Songs from Vagabondia* are less likely than most things to come twice to the same singer. But there are many secrets, besides those on which Mr. Carman has already lighted, to be found "behind the arras"; and we cannot but wish a more patient devotion on his part to an ideal of more serious dignity. Mr. Hovey too, if we are not mistaken, has done other work of his own well worth continuing. *Vagabondia* is, after all, a little kingdom, full of long and dusty roads leading only to barren moors or the sea's brink. If it has more of the stars and wind than most kingdoms, it has also less than most kingdoms of the thoughtfulness which can consider stars and wind at no more than their just value in the great spectacle at which we are all on-lookers.

Notes

1. Symons quotes from Carman's "Prefatory Note." [\[back\]](#)
2. From the sixth stanza of "A Northern Vigil." The phrase "natural magic," which Symons uses in his next sentence, was used by Matthew Arnold in his 1863 essay on "Maurice de Guerin." [\[back\]](#)
3. Thomas Bailey Aldrich (1836-1907), prominent American man of letters. [\[back\]](#)

4. From "The Vagabonds." [\[back\]](#)
5. From the second stanza of Hovey's "The Wander-Lovers." [\[back\]](#)
6. From the opening of Hovey's "Vagabondia." [\[back\]](#)
7. The original reads "happier few." [\[back\]](#)
8. The poem is indeed Carman's. Symons has to guess because the original edition did not indicate the authorship of specific poems. Subsequent editions add that information. [\[back\]](#)
9. Both poems are Hovey's. [\[back\]](#)
10. Here and elsewhere, Symons adapts the imagery of the title poem, "Behind the Arras." [\[back\]](#)
11. This Italian phrase, meaning "wild wood," is from 1.5 of Dante's *Inferno*. Allegorically, this is the "dark wood" of Error into which Dante wanders when he strays from his true path. [\[back\]](#)
12. Symons quotes Carman's "Daisies" in its entirety. [\[back\]](#)