**SISTER MUSES IN THE CANADIAN WEST:
CLIO, EUTERPE, MELPOMENE, AND THALIA**

In *The Devil's Dictionary* Ambrose Bierce defines a lecturer as "One with his hand in your pocket, his tongue in your ear, and his faith in your patience". About your ears and your patience, and my tongue and my faith, I can only let you draw your own conclusions, but at the outset I do want to assure you of one thing, and that is that this evening my hand will not be reaching out into your pockets, nor into the coffers of the Bibliographic Society of Canada. I would like to speak to you about some muses still active in the Canadian West.

There are of course, as all of us know, nine muses in Greek mythology, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne. They are Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, Euterpe, the muse of lyric poetry, Erato, the muse of erotic poetry, Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, Thalia, the muse of comedy, Polyhymnia, the muse of sacred hymns, Terpsichore, choral song and the dance, Urania, the muse of astronomy and of course Clio, the muse of history. A tenth muse, a younger sister, appears on the classical scene somewhat later; Arethusa, the muse of pastoral poetry.

For some mysterious reason, which may be worth serious investigation, Clio is the only Greek muse of which we hear very much today. Historians are forever involving her, making reference to her and publishing book titles including her name; for example — *Clio and Other Essays* by G.M. Trevelyan; *Clio: A Child of Fate*, by Ella M. Powell; *Clio and Mr. Croce*, by Allan R. Benham; and *Clio's Servant: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin*. All these titles are currently in print.

Why? Have historians since the beginning of recorded time found that they cannot write without inspiration at least semi-divine? Have they since classical times needed reassurance that the gods have been especially interested in their peculiar form of literary expression?

Certainly it seems evident to me that for some considerable time the practitioners of no art (except dancing) and no branch of literature have felt the slightest need to invoke a muse. Terpsichore we do hear from time to time in the columns written by ballet journalists and reviewers, but she is the only sister occasionally still out and on the prowl. Hymn writers never acknowledge Polyhymnia, the burgeoning numbers of erotic poets never pay tribute to Erato, and astronomers are completely unaware that Urania presides over their studies. Yet Clio's pedestal is regularly surrounded by high piles of tributes.

Tonight I hope to prove that in Canada, and particularly in the Canadian West, Clio has been actively supported by at least three of her sister muses,

although their assistance has usually gone unnoticed. Those helpful sisters are Euterpe, the muse of lyric poetry, whose symbol is the double flute; Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, who carries the tragic mask and the ivy wreath, and most outstandingly by Thalia, the muse of comedy, who is ornamented by a comic mask and another of those ubiquitous ivy wreaths.

I am motivated to make this attempt, at least in part, by the lasting influence of a symposium I attended a good many years ago at Vancouver when two distinguished Canadian historians, George Brown and Arthur M. Lower, were awarded honorary degrees by the University of British Columbia. As I recall Dr. Lower began speaking by asking the question, "What's wrong with Canadian history?", and answering himself, "It isn't bloody enough!"

I would like to repeat that question, "What's wrong with Canadian history?" but answer it differently, "It isn't funny enough."

My motivation is also supported by two quotations I discovered in the address Gordon Elliott delivered to this Society in 1971.

"The battle for our (Canadian) cultural identity will be won or lost not in university libraries but in local drug stores and dirty bookshops."

and "What is more, Canadian titles breathe sin and seriousness, work and welfare, but seldom fun and games."

Also I should acknowledge debts to Dr. Paul Heibert of Carman, Manitoba, whose ineffable volumes, *Sara Binks* and *Willows Revisited*, first opened my eyes to rich veins of cultural ore apparently ignored by everyone else, and to William Arthur Deacon, whose *Four James*, recently reprinted, proved the reality underlying Dr. Heibert's fictional creations.

My primary objective tonight is to persuade you that the works of Canadian writers who have never yet found themselves anthologized in books of Canadian verse, or been referred to in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature*, still do deserve some attention from bibliographers and historians.

Clio has recently been led down the pathways of quantitative analysis. We have seen the development of a branch of history called "Cliometrics" and seen a new variety of historian called a "Cliometrician" or Cliometricienne" come to prominence. Perhaps, therefore, bibliographers should turn some attention to the books and verses most people read — to the most popular and the most typical — not to "the best" literature judged by the most sophisticated standards of literary excellence. This is, I suppose, making a case for the historical significance, in our own times, of Edgar Guest compared to Ezra Pound, or Arthur Hailey's novels compared to those of John Updike. I do not — believe me! — advocate the literary superiority of the widely popular publications. I am only suggesting that such works are too frequently ignored by historians, sociologists and others, that they do occasionally deserve some serious consideration, and that they have not been overly cultivated by Canadian bibliographers.

Already I have referred to W. A. Deacon's *Four James*. One of the James on whom he returned the literary spotlight was James McIntyre, "Canada's Cheese Poet", whose verses from time to time draw their subject matter from

the prairies, in his hey-day so recently acquired by the new Dominion. McIntyre is chiefly and rightly known for his celebrations of the Ontario dairy industry:

“We have seen thee queen of cheese
Gently fanned by evening breeze.”

But his comments on the settlement of the West and its agricultural potential illustrate how aware he was of the economic realities of his day —

“Ontario cannot compete
With the Northwest in raising wheat,
For cheaper there they it can grow,
So price in future may be low.

He was also aware of the spiritual challenges of the frontier and the way Canadian denominations were rising to meet them.

“And they’ll plant churches in the North-West,
Where they can serve the Lord the best.”

James McIntyre was not only a poet but a father. He had at least one daughter; a daughter who, I have been delighted to discover, inherited her father’s literary talents and who, moreover, devoted those talents to commenting occasionally on the Manitoba scene. That daughter was Kate McIntyre Ruttan.

Kate McIntyre Ruttan left her parental home at Ingersoll, Ontario and spent most of her married life near Rainy River at the town of La Vallee. Indeed she was famed in her day as “*The La Vallee Poet*.” Her reputation remains fresh because of a volume of her collected verse published in 1926 under the title *Rhymes Right or Wrong of Rainy River*.¹ Said F.H. McCrea in his preface to this now rare volume;

“Now Ella Wheeler Wilcox she swang a wicked fist — compared with our La Vallee poet, why Ella don’t exist. That Mrs. Barrett Browning, she used a lot of ink — the great La Vallee songstress has put her on the blink.”

He felt that too many poets only received praise after they were dead and that Mrs. Kate Ruttan deserved better treatment from her compatriots. “We have a poet here with us, so let us make a fuss and pass her out a few bouquets. Her ballads and her roundelays have lightened oft a dreary day . . .”

It is heart-warming to note how Kate Ruttan herself had rushed to the poetic defense of her dead father.

Poet McIntyre’s Daughter Kate Writes in her Daddy’s Defence

Let him rest, a worthy Briton,
Why should you his poor corpse sit on,

¹ Kate McIntyre Ruttan, *Rhymes Right or Wrong of Rainy River*, The Times Printing Co., Orillia, 1926.

Why should you discharge your wit on
His true tetrameter?

He had a sparrrrrk o' nature's fires,
Which scottish poets all desire,
Poetic license ruled his lyre,
And heart's diameter.

Was she anticipating Miss Norah Story's passing comment on *The Four James*,
"... four Canadian bards whose atrocious verses were actually published."?"²

How correct was her estimate of his enduring fame when she dedicated
more verses to her late father – "To James McIntyre"

A man of mighty mark,
Who crossed the ocean dark,
To win some glory;
Resolved to carve his name
High in Canadian fame,
And live in story.

And this methinks will be,
For friend and foe agree
Rare is his talent;
And as much diversified
As our old world is wide,
Hail Scotia's gallant.

Before she settled at remote La Vallee, Ontario, literary evidence indicates
that Kate McIntyre Ruttan lived for some time in the province of Manitoba.
Certainly she was a critical observer of the political scene in this province
about the turn of the century and her verses deserve a place in any anthology
of Manitoba political literature.

Her splendid summary of the career of Sir Hugh John Macdonald illustrates
her lively, wide-horizoned interest in public affairs, her perception of human
virtues and abilities, and her literary skill.

Sir Hugh John McDonald (*sic*)

Righ (*sic*) Hon. Hugh John
The leader of the new ton,
A chip off the old block,
If I ever knew one;
The pet of the Tories,
Reviving their glories
In song and in stories,
Our great gattling gun.

²Norah Story, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature*, Toronto, Oxford
University Press, 1967, p. 205.

Beloved e'en by foemen,
By archers and bowmen,
By lawyers and yeomen,
Our old Chieftain' son:
Was he praised or upbraided,
Felt he fresh or felt faded,
He never has traded
On what Daddy had done.

McDonald Temperance Act
The booze bills badly cracked,
And this is sure some fact
Well known in Manitoba:
Hugh's bill for education
Was sure high legislation,
His police magistration
Brought honor to his robe.

The highest heights he scaled,
Tory leader he was hailed,
His sun has never paled,
As Premier he has reigned:
Whose night he turned to dawn,
The prince of brain and brawn,
Our idol never failed,
His star has never waned.

Although internal evidence indicates that Kate McIntyre Ruttan may have been a Conservative in political sympathies, (a conclusion supported by poems entitled "Sir John A. MacDonald", "Lord Strathcona", "Colonel Sam Hughes", and "Reciprocity", as well as by "Sir Hugh John McDonald") she was no narrow partisan. She could see the other side of the political coin, and no better example of her freedom from the blinkers of one political viewpoint exists than her survey of the frequently controversial premiership of Sir Rodmond Palen Roblin. Her comments on the late, but now revered, Robert Fletcher indicate a precocious awareness of the problems of bureaucracy, and most particularly of pioneer bureaucrats.

The Conservative Government

From the Grit Farmer's Standpoint

Government's rotten to the bone,
And they have many grafters:
This Colin H.³ he makes us groan
'Neath loads of beef and brawn and bone,

³Hon. Colin H. Campbell: born 25 Dec. 1859, Burlington, Canada West; Died Winnipeg 24 Oct. 1914. Lawyer, Attorney General of Manitoba, 1900-1911; Minister of Education 1911-19; Minister of Public Works 1913.

And every cow sends up a moan
That reaches to the rafters.

A flag we have to hoist in style,
(My eye and Betty Martin),
And if we don't we're Fenians vile,
Our own kids' morals we would spoil,
It truly makes my blood to bile,
It do for sure and sartin.

Another one who needs the stick
Is our chief clerk, R. Fletcher:
We dassent lay a chimney brick
But he ups with a vigorous kick
And threatens all trustees to lick,
Does our chief clerk, R. Fletcher.

And if we want an out-house built,
We've got to kneel and grovel,
While he towers high up on a stilt,
And 'neath his heel we squirm and wilt.
He jabs his knife in to the hilt,
And dubs our house a hovel.

And yet he is the goodliest youth
That ever served the devil:
A proper man were he a grit,
And held up by a Liberal bit,
As Premier he might make a hit
And raise us 'bove sea level.

And R. P. Roblin he's accused,
He makes our beeves to bellow,
He built the grain and lumber trusts,
For farmers' gold he has a lust,
And we must try his ranks to bust,
This elevator fellow.

He took away our female vote
One year to help the booze,
Likewise he made the liquor float
On residential streets of note,
He sold teetotallers for a groat,
And they Ed. Brown must choose.

And if R. P. gets there after all,
As he is like to do,
Us honest men will all be spurned
By rogues that surely should be durned:
Had they their rights, they'd each be burned:
But we can all skidoo.

Mrs. Ruttan had a sharp eye for ability and virtue, especially when both those qualities were to be found in one man. She remained loyal to her contemporary heroes through thick and thin, as can be seen in her tribute to Sir Sam Hughes, Minister of Militia and Defence in Sir Robert Borden's government from 1911 to 1916.

Colonel Sam Hughes

Militia's minister,
In spite of foes sinister,
Your brains won the war:
Victorians all love you,
Like the good God above you,
For vice you abhor.

Your mind is a mint,
With God's golden glint,
Men's minds to illumine:
Their darkness to lighten,
Their bare lives to brighten,
And raise brutes to human.

* * *

Foes call you a tarter,
We deem you a martyr,
A bright shining light:
And we'll rally to order,
To support your dear Warder,
And fight for the right.

You're master of the Orange Order,
The truest son that crossed the border,
Likewise you made the Lindsay Warder,
And are the king of hearts:
For thirteen hundred votes you scored,
Majority — you are adored:
We think you never will be floored,
Thou man of mighty parts.

Only a relatively small number of Mrs. Ruttan's verses treat Manitoba subjects, for she was after all "The" La Vallee Poet and mostly wrote about life and affairs in Rainy River area. However brief her residence on the prairies may have been it was obviously long enough for her to acquire an intimate first hand knowledge of the experiences of that average pioneer, the Homesteader. I leave it to you to judge which muses inspired her when she wrote these couplets.

The Homesteader

Buried up to his ears in debt,
Fighting the heat, the cold, the wet,

His chances worse than an even bet —
You'll find the homesteader.

Eyes burned out in the summer sun,
Skin like a beefsteak underdone:
You'd think him fifty — he's thirty-one
But then, he's a homesteader.

Winter comes and his note is due,
(Summer was dry and nothing grew),
So he sells his gun and a cow or two,
And hopes, does the homesteader.

Rough and Broken his acres lie,
Half of them white with alkali:
But they mean that thing he couldn't buy —
A home — to the homesteader.

One part hero, and three parts fool,
All of him bulldog grit, as a rule,
He's slow to learn, but he stays in school,
"Here's how," Mister homesteader.

Another poet who wrote under the aegis of several muses and who thereby made a remarkable contribution to posterity's understanding of the beginnings of the Province of Manitoba is that almost forgotten bard, William Gerrond.

Tragically the greater portion of William Gerrond's opus was burned in a fire and the septagenarian poet was unable to recall them. Fortunately his friends and admirers gathered together the texts which survived and published *Poems of a Pioneer* in order to preserve in the memory a "kind and genial writer" who wrote of many early scenes and struggles of pioneer life.⁴

Gerrond taught school for more than 53 years. Starting his career in Ontario at some undetermined date he migrated to the postage-stamp Province of Manitoba early in the 1870's and lived for many years at High Bluff on the Assiniboine River between Portage la Prairie and Winnipeg. For unknown reasons late in a hale and hearty old age he took up residence a few miles from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan.

In his day his works were well known and frequently quoted in Manitoba. He was bard of the St. Andrew's Society of Portage la Prairie and was always ready with a poem to read on St. Andrew's Day.

So well esteemed were his poetic expressions of the ideas of the old settlers and of the old and new order of things on the western plains that he was frequently quoted by contemporaries. For example his poem "What was and is an old settlers' idea" was read to the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba in 1893 and printed as *Transaction* Number 44 of the Society's publications. However it is for his verses inspired by political and public events in Manitoba that he will be principally respected and remembered by the devotees of Clio. To this audience the title of one rare surviving elegy may be

⁴William Gerrond, *Poems of a Pioneer*, Register Print, Neepawa, n.d. 31pp.

of particular interest; "On Being Jeered at for Wasting Time on the Muses."
I quote the last of its four verses:

And ye who mock and jeer at the muse,
And worship Mammon's store,
Ye little know what joy ye lose,
Supplied to the flowing o'er,
Jeer on, jeer on, ye may scorn and scoff,
There's a charm in the muse ye know not of.

Long before Mrs. Ruttan metaphorically swung her "wicked fist" William Gerrond found poetic inspiration in the public life of the infant province of Manitoba. In fact to him goes the honour of composing what I believe to be Manitoba's first political poem. It is simply and directly titled "First Election In Manitoba" and sheds an interesting light on contemporary electoral practices and on the relationships between the "founding races" in the province at that time.

First Election in Manitoba

If there is in all the land,
A wight that's able to command,
Warlocks and witches in a band,
That man is Robbie Cunningham.⁵

O father, father, he did cry!
O father, help me or I die!
My voters all before me fly,
O help, cried Robbie Cunningham.

The old goodman in petticoats,
Said, "Fear not, fear not, man of oats,
For I'll get thee galore of votes,
Be not afraid, good Cunningham."

"Round all this land where frenchmen dwell,
(And how it's done no tongue may tell),
I'll cast a fearful, potent spell
In favor of thee, Cunningham,

"The new-born babe I'll make a man,
The maiden fair shall breeches don,
And Hunters from Saskatchewan,
Shall all be here for Cunningham.

"So Robbie, dear, be not afraid,
I'll make the grave give up its dead,
And every patient sick in bed
Shall rise, and vote for Cunningham."

⁵Robert Cunningham, 1836-1874, Journalist and Politician. Founder and Editor of the *Manitoban*, 1870. Elected M.P. for Marquette, 1872; Re-elected 1874.

"But father, dear, hear me, I pray,
To-morrow is the polling day,
Saskatchewan's a long, long way,
I doubt, I doubt" said Cunningham.

"Doubt not, o man, doubt not my power!
I tell thee that within this hour
My witches on the plains shall scour
Saskatchewan for Cunningham."

Sights were seen on White-horse Plain,⁶
Such sights will ne'er be seen again,
New-born babes turned into men,
To vote for Robbie Cunningham!

Old wrinkled wives turned young again,
And maidens changed to bearded men,
And dead folks left their lonely den
To vote for Robbie Cunningham!

It was a fearful, potent spell,
Bedridden carles all got well,
'Tis even said some came from hell!
To vote for Robbie Cunningham.

The theme of western discontent with Ottawa policies respecting the west
also provoked Gerrond's eloquent pen;

To the Guardians of Manitoba at Ottawa

Three million acres given awa'
Noo Gudesake only hear!
Thae guardian chiels at Ottawa
Would gar a quaker swear.
Sir John & Co., it isna fair
To keep the youngest bairn so bare.

When Manitoba first drew breath,
A wee provincial bairn,
Baith you and yours then swore an oath
You'd keep the waen frae harm,
And o'her tocher tak gude care,
And as her sisters she would fare.

Her sisters soon got claes and shoon,
And gloves and wrappers braw,
And in the bank had mony a pound,
And woods and lands, and a';
While Manitoba was made happy
Wi' Petticoats o'Shag-a-nappy.

⁶An area 18 miles west of Winnipeg along the Assiniboine River, first settled by Cuthbert Grant, Warden of the Plains, in 1824.

And when from Nelson River's shore,
She sends her ocean fleets,
When ambassadors from every power
Shall daily walk her streets:
Sir John & Co may rue right sair
They kept the youngest bairn so bare.

For Manitoba grows apace,
And cries wi' a' her might:
She cares na' wha's in power or place,
She only asks for right.
She asks no favor at your hands,
Ye reaving loons: Gi'e back her lands.

And when the bairn a lassie grew,
And asked for a new frock,
You grinn'd and smiled, and shook yer paw,
And very kindly spoke,
And didna' gi'e a single rap,
But eke'd the auld wi' shag-a-nap.

Ontario and a' the rest,
You've busket up fu' braw,
While Manitoba's sairly press'd,
And's got maist nocht ava!
You've tied her feet, you've tied her hands,
And robbed her o' her woods and lands.

The Time may come, nay, come it will,
When she will have the power,
And the dominion capital
Will be within her bower:
The federal centre she will stand,
The greatest power in the land.

Kate McIntyre Ruttan remarked that her father had “. . . a sparrrrrk o' nature's fire, which scottish poets all desire”. William Gerrond probably never knew his contemporary James McIntyre, but the heritage of Caledonia seems to have influenced his style of expression even more than it did that of the Dominion's Cheese Poet. Gerrond may have written about Manitoba and the problem of the west, but more often than not he wrote in Scottish dialect. No better example of this combination of subject matter and ethnic heritage survives than “*Wee Manitoba*”.

Auld Britain has routh o'Colonial bairns,
Some grown up to manhood, some yet in her arms,
But the latest, and fairest, and best o'them a'
Is bonny, young, winsome, wee Manitoba.

Poor thing, when a waen she was scantily fed,
On pemmican snaps, and as scantily clad,

Shaganapy on Sundays and week days an' a'
Aye buskit the beauty o' Manitoba.

But this hamely maid had a tocher the best,
O' a' the young lasses that won in the west,
Her furs and her forests, and prairies so braw,
Brought mony fond wooers to Manitoba.

She's been dauted, and flattered, and wrangly advised,
She's been cheated, land bartered, and monopolized,
She's been feasted, and hungered, grasshoppered and a'
And yet she's oor healthy, wee Manitoba.

She's been reilled, the poor lassie, and sadly dismayed,
Archibalded and Tachied, as weel's Hudson Bayed,
Ritchotted, Mc Dougalled, McDonaled and a',
Still dauntless and happy is Manitoba.

These trials are past noo, give thanks to the day,
That sent us a Morris, the sceptre to sway,
When wooded wi' justice and cornished wi'law,
We may yet get the tocher for Manitoba.

I wish I had the time and you had the patience to listen to more of William Gerrond's verses tonight, but I do think that the three I have just quoted indicate just how grave a loss to Canadian literature we suffered when the greater portion of his poems were consumed by fire in the late nineteenth century. Does a better example exist of the support Euterpe, Melpomene and Thalia were rendering to their sister Cleo?

Of all the western poets whose works I have been considering Isaac S. White was certainly the most prolific, and the most successful in publishing his verse in hard-bound editions. His most enduring physical monument is *Manitoba Muses or Gentle Joseph and other Poems*. Composed in the solitude of the backwoods of Manitoba, copyrighted by himself, it was probably published by himself in 1912, but printed by the Bryant Press Limited of Toronto. It is a volume which, when it can be found, commands a surprisingly high price on second-hand book markets.

Was Isaac S. White aware of the influence upon him of the muses? Yes he was. But the Christian God was obviously his principal inspiration. In the "Preface" he wrote on January 12th 1912 White down-played classical measurements of achievement and categorically denied any pretences of having scaled Parnassus or drunk at the fountains of Helicon. He only claimed that his poems were "pleasant reading — neither lofty in tone, nor vulgar in expression."⁷ He hoped they would be found interesting, amusing and instructive:

"Diffusing bright sunshine wheresoever they go;
And multiply friends, without making a foe."

⁷ Isaac S. White, *Manitoba Muses*, p. iv.

The first poem in *Manitoba Muses* is "A Prologue":

Go forth, my bookie go!
Thy humble mission fill;
Teach, while this land is full of woe,
There's joys within it still;
Joys that will bring us peace and rest,
And make us feel that we are blest,
Through doing of God's will.

Isaac S. White's magnum opus is unquestionably his poetic version of the Old Testament, 183 pages of verses covering the dreams of Gentle Joseph, the Children of Israel in Egypt, 14 books on Afflicted Job, and a verse Addenda, "containing inferences, deduced from statements in the narrative, which occurred to the Author when writing the poem. They are intended to bring some truths more prominently into view, and induce a few practical thoughts from theorem."

However it is not White's religious poetry but his incidental verse which is of interest to us this evening. He mirrors his times and many of his poems preserve the attitudes and opinions of his era in the way that amber preserves the prehistoric insects of the Baltic. Often his poetry illustrates what historians, those devotees of Clio, have periodically concluded; that very little in this world, including the Canadian West, is completely new. And that in itself is a reassuring thought in these troubled times — the realization that some human being has been here before us, and that if things have not been worse they certainly have been at least equally bad.

Isaac S. White's biography remains to be written and very little has so far been discovered about his career. He tells us himself that he was born in Scotland, apparently in the 1840's, and that he farmed and wrote at Violet Grove, Manitoba, south of Riding Mountain. He was a contributor to the *Neepawa Register*, a contributor of verse.

(One is tempted to speculate on whether or not he may have had some influence on Neepawa's most famous author, Margaret Laurence, posthumously if not directly.)

Until 1912 he continued to live in the country but by 1914 he was no longer a "backwoods poet"; for he had moved to Winnipeg. First he resided at 361 Pritchard Street and later at 453 Flora Street, Henderson's Directories describe him only as "poet."

Sadly he seems to have dwelt in somewhat financially strained circumstances during World War I. For example in the preface to his *Five War Poems* he wrote:

"Are you charitable? Would you
A friendly act to the aged do?
They buy this book and show that you art kind
Ere it doth pass out of thy mind:
And help the man behind the pen,
Who borders on three score and ten.

The note of mendacity fortunately fades in this little book of poems as White hits his stride and the subject matter forces the problem of sales to the back of his mind. The five poems are "The German Emperor", "War and Greed", "When Will War Cease?", "War and Fame" and the unforgettable climax, "The German Tiger's Mad Jump", which seems to have been his last poem. Isaac S. White disappears from the city directories before the armistice of 1918 and *Five War Poems* is his last known publication.

The date and circumstances of White's death are unknown but we can only hope that he died in this city, or any city. His many years of farming experience at Violet Grove, Manitoba, seem to have somewhat disillusioned him with rural life. In contrast to the contemporary enthusiasm for a return to smaller communities, the land, and a more simple earth-bound way of life, his "Country Life in North-Western Manitoba" makes startling reading.

Country Life in North-Western Manitoba

I once did in a city live,
The streets were paved with stone;
The traffic such a noise did give,
I longed to be alone
Upon some mountain wild and grand,
Or even in some foreign land.

I might not handle so much gold,
Or make so great a name;
But health is happiness untold,
And better far than fame;
For fame is just an empty bubble
That often brings a lot of trouble.

To Manitoba I did come,
For it was called the best;
I settled down to make a home —
A quiet place to rest.
Some years have passed, I now know well
I left a heaven for a hell.

You till the soil, you sow the seed,
And then your crop will grow,
But ere it gets the golden shade
The hail may lay it low.
'Tis true indeed: "There's many a slip,"
In Manitoba, "Twixt cup and lip."

Your place may be burned up with fire,
Your crop be spoiled by frost;
So diverse are the elements' ire,
Through which your hopes are lost.
There is no other place I'm sure,
In which you'll get so quickly poor.

This country's folk have pleasant grace,
Let them be friend or foe,
They all speak smoothly to your face;
Your friends you do not know.
Some greet you kindly as they pass,
Who backbite you, and call you "Ass".

The city's noise is great: — But say,
Its truth you cannot doubt:
Its strife is in a business way,
And friends are friends throughout;
They shake your hand, look kind with eyes,
The city doth folk civilize.

This country's noise is just as great
With croaking of the frogs;
Sounds fill the ear early and late,
The land is full of bogs;
The birds may chatter on the wing,
But not a single bird can sing.

One half the year, the winter last,
The snow is snow I wot;
I could tell tales about the frost,
Perhaps I'd better not;
'Tis then the poultry lost their toes,
And cats their ears: — by getting froze.

Those who in Manitoba live,
Know well what flies can do;
They know what burning bites they give,
And how they inflame too;
Folk cannot sleep away fatigue,
For flies are Manitoba's plague.

That is, if there was only one,
But there are many more;
Of Egypt's plagues, one half do come,
And others inflict sore: —
But if you do this country scan,
The greatest plague you'll find is man.

Yes, man is Manitoba's pest,
When sheltered by the bush;
He's worse by far than all the rest,
To give a down-hill push;
If you offend him in the least,
He'll take revenge upon your beast.
And when his mind is full of ire,
He'll pilfer all he may;
In meadows he will start a fire,
That it may burn your hay;

He'll break down fence around your crop,
And drive cows in, to eat it up.

One half that the man plague will do,
Here record we could not;
'Twould take of pages not a few,
And more time than we've got.
And rulers here encourage much,
That they may dollars make by such.

For crime — no punishment is there
The criminal needs to fear;
A city's crime, you can't compare
With crimes committed here:
The city's crime is brought to light,
But country crime is hid from sight.

The author of "The Course of Time."
This land must had in view,
When he declared: "The people's dime,
The devil's work would do."
For people's money much abused,
To do the devil's work is used.

I once did say: "The air is pure."
But then I did not know
The stinging pests mosquitoes were,
And that they filled it so
No soul could tranquil walk abroad,
To hold sweet commune with his God.

O give me back my city life!
Though sickness be my lot;
'Tis better far than with the strife
That some folk here have got;
There solemn thoughts can fill the breast,
And lead the soul to heavenly rest!

White may look like a bearded agrarian Victoria patriarch in the frontispiece of *Manitoba Muses or Gentle Joseph and Other Poems* but in intellect and subject matter he was a remarkably forward-looking person in many respects. He saluted the technological innovations of his old age with enthusiasm and physical courage. Take for example his brief verse:

The Aeroplane

'Tis nice up there,
To float on air,
Danger! Not much with Aeroplane:
Should ought go wrong,
You don't take long,
To come back down to earth again.

Yet somewhat paradoxically he retained a profound suspicion of medical science to the end of his days. He harboured an abiding scepticism towards vaccination, especially compulsory vaccination, which he expressed in a poem of five verses entitled "Medical Freedom: A Plea for the Children". I quote only verses two and five.

A ruthless, callous-hearted band,
Called "Boards of Health," — how false the name
Just spread disease throughout the land,
Doctors to help to wealth and fame.
O Freedom! Wilt thou come again,
And children save from "Health-board" men?

* * *

Vaccine and Anti-toxin are
The worst diseases you can find;
Not only do they make a scar,-
They leave a bad disease behind:
Vile Toxin is a blighting curse,
Compulsion makes "Pure Vaccine" worse.

White's fears of doctors are even more forcibly expressed in "Appendicitis".

Appendicitis

When Robert Reid was taken ill,
His groans would rouse a nation;
The puzzled doctors wise did look,
Then held a consultation.

"We'll have to operate." said one,
"To find out what's the trouble."
"We'll call it Appendicitis,
And then our fees we'll double."

They told the patient his disease,
With faces grave and hazy;
"Dear doctors, you are wrong," he said,
"You surely must be crazy."

"There's nought but an operation, sir,
Will save your precious life;
And we have the permission got,
From your dear, darling wife."

The Surgeon's knives were now brought out,
And they began to slash;
What care they for the patient's life,
They only want his cash.

"The Appendix seems to be all right."
One doc. was heard to say;
"We'll cut it out," the other said,
"It's no use any way."

"A successful operation,"
Was what the doctors said;
But ere they had their knives packed up,
Poor Robert Reid was dead.

A successful operation,
From Surgeon's point of view;
They make his wife a widow,
And take his money too.

Please do not think this overdrawn,
To get the doctors blame:
The story is, alas! too true!
But Reid is not the name.

Isaac S. White may have devoted his poetic talents chiefly to verse translations of the Gospels and to commenting upon the social scene of his day, but he also remained continually aware of the classical heritage which remained the foundation of the culture of western Europe. He even wrote a poem about the muses which reveals much of his poetic philosophy, as well as his own measure of literary indebtedness to Robbie Burns. I would like to leave Isaac S. White this evening by quoting in full that poem,

The Muses

Gray calls the Muses, "The Sad Nine."
But why he should, I do not know;
For don't they gladden with a mine
Of love and joy, and peace bestow.
Those Muses should not be called sad,
That makes an earth-born spirit glad.

A tragic poem will make one sad,
Or epic, when mournful scene depict;
But love and comedy, will make glad,
They do not sadden or afflict;
They come to us when full of care,
To drive hobgoblins off the stair.

"Man's inhumanity to man,
Makes countless thousands mourn!"
Was wrote by Burns, with spirits wan,
When soul was sick, and sad, and lorn;
Had Burns not seen inhuman men,
Those words would not have left his pen.

Did we not into conflict come,
And see so much inhuman ire;
The latent Muse might still be dumb,
For wrath at wrong, the pen inspire.
Inhuman acts, like love, oft do
Arouse, and bring the Muse to view.

But when Burns sang in lighter vein,
As when the work of Nature classes:
"Her 'prentice han' she tried on man,
An' then she made the lasses."
He gives the lovely lasses here,
A compliment without compeer.

And when we sing a lyric song,
That lifts the soul above the sky,
And raise the spirits up among
The hosts, who sing God's praise on high:
How should those Muses be called sad,
That maketh souls and spirits glad!

All the poems I have so far recited and discussed this evening were written fifty years ago or more, and that observation may understandably provoke you to wonder if the influence of the muses has vanished from the Canadian West during recent decades.

The answer to that question is an emphatic, unequivocal No. The muses are still active and no more notable example of their contemporary influence can be found than a poem read to the convocation of the University of Manitoba on the morning of Friday May 24th, 1974.

The distinguished and famed Manitoba scholar, Dr. Paul Heibert, in the course of a memorable convocation address, drew the attention of his audience to a notable recent poem from the pen of a living prairie poet who has not yet received the full measure of acclaim which he so richly deserves.

The poet is Peter Roseblossom, a product of the Winnipeg schools (which explains his weakness in history and geography). The poem is one which richly deserved to be selected "Poem of the Month" and awarded the prize given by the Kraft Cheese Corporation for the best Manitoba poem during the 1970 centennial year. It is entitled "The Buffalo".

The North American buffalo, or bison (*Bison bison*) has been the heraldic symbol of the province of Manitoba since 1870 and the ones which inspired this particular verse are the two life-size bronze statues which stand guard at the foot of the grand staircase in the Legislative Building, less than a mile from the hotel in which we are gathered tonight.

The Buffalo⁸

From Kenora east, to Assiniboine's strand,
From the forty-ninth to the Arctic sky,

⁸Dr. Heibert's permission to quote is hereby very gratefully acknowledged.

Proudly the province's buffalo stands
 With head erect and tail held high,
 Guarding the memory of our deceased,
 Against all — especially them bastards in the East.
 Proudly those heroes on Parliaments lawns,
 Stand, who have builded and builded well,
 Shevchenko, Victoria, done in Bronze,
 Bjarnasson, Burns and now Riel —
 Guard them, oh Buffalo on Parliament's porch,
 With tail aloft like freedom's torch.
 Stand guard, oh Buffalo, guard our age
 And hold in trust the things that we
 Hail from our ethnic heritage —
 Ukrainian, Mennonite, Pole, and Cree,
 English, Orkney, Jewish, Jap,
 Icelandic, Patagonian, Ibo, Lapp.

Commentary is superfluous and unnecessary. The poem says all that can be or needs to be said. Peter Roseblossom, a little short man who Dr. Heibert describes as “every half-inch a poet”, obviously has been inspired to the heights by the whole sisterhood of muses.

Those muses have been at work in the Canadian West for a long time — a very long time; they may have been our first cultural immigrants. Certainly they have been too frequently forgotten or ignored. Euterpe, Melpomene and Thalia, I have no doubt, are still as active as Clio in inspiring a rich and copious literature.

It is to be hoped that the creations inspired by all the immortal nine (or ten if you insist upon including Arethusa), not only the four I have been discussing tonight, will in future be paid a just attention by historians, and by bibliographers.

JOHN BOVEY