

Rummagings 1: Charles Sangster

Anyone reading *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay* (1856) could be pardoned for thinking that Charles Sangster harboured nothing but the most innocuous feelings towards French Canada and French Canadians. True, Sangster describes the monument to General James Wolfe that was erected in 1849 on the Plains of Abraham as "dar[ing] the rebel's lust / For spoliation" (592-93), but the remainder of the poem contains numerous expressions of admiration and affection for the scenery and inhabitants of Canada East: Mount Royal is "A Royal Mount, indeed," a "group of dwellings" between Montreal and Quebec awakens thoughts of "felicity" and "repose," the "cheerful homes" of the "courteous, gentle" "Habitant[s]" downriver from Quebec elicit a blessing, and Quebec itself is likened in a characteristically aggrandizing and quirky simile to "a tanned giant on a solid throne!" (417, 493-94, 649-51, 596). "Ev'n on those uplands dwells / The faithful Habitant," writes Sangster of the area around "CAPE TORMENTE" on the Saguenay River; "and when he dies, / His children, jealous of the ancient family ties / Keep the old Homestead sacred" (715-18).

In the "Etchings by the Way" that Sangster wrote on the journey down the St. Lawrence and up the Saguenay that furnished the material for his poem a very different attitude can be glimpsed, however. Writing after a disturbed night in the sleeping compartment of the *Rowland Hill* "beneath the famous fortress of Quebec," he recalls that the "fortress" was "frequently the theatre" of French-English conflict until September 13, 1759, when "fell the two brave Commanders of the rival Armies" and "the proud spirit of ambitious France was forced to bend beneath the strong arm of Great Britain" (122). Apparently fired by this vivid personification of Britain's subjugation of France, Sangster proceeds to describe the reason for his disturbed night in a remarkable display of literary *sfumato* and sexual fantasy (his preliminary allusion is, of course, to "balmy sleep" as "Nature's sweet restorer" in the opening line of Edward Young's *The Complaint: Night Thoughts*):

I lay there . . . lay there through the lone long night, but sleep

was out of the question, and Nature's sweet restorer came not at my bidding. The cause was on this wise: opposite to my berth in the lower Cabin, occupying two different beds, one above the other, lay two French-Canadian damsels—heaven knows how they got there, or why they besieged the place. Morpheus was no [Page 5] companion of theirs, Muta had given them up long ago; they slept not, neither did they try to sleep, but kept up such a running fire of talk, talk, talk, gabble, gabble, gabble, from nine o'clock until two, that the mere thought of sleeping was an absurdity, and sleeping itself a downright impossibility at best. I opened the curtains and peeped out. Young la-Belle France, in the lower berth, was getting up in superbly-tempting dishabille—a kind of Nun's dress, (I suppose it was—I know nothing about these things) to snuff the candle. What brilliant eyes! what healthy cheeks! what well-turned ankles, and such a pretty foot! Oh, Lawrence Sterne! where would have been thy Tristram's philosophy had he been here where poor Pilgarlic lay, as quiet as an oyster in its shell? In his head—No! I thought of the evening when good harmless Corporal Trim was, with all the gallantry of an old soldier, explaining the mysteries of the fortifications to the fair Mistress Bridget—when the ramparts fell! I was fairly besieged. To attack and conquer young France with my British arms, would have been the work of a moment—but the Nun's dress popped into bed again, and the candle went out.—Why was the old she sentinel in that upper berth? I thought of what Richard III said to Lady Anne, and thinking I went to sleep. The consequence of all this was, that I awoke next morning with no joke of a headache, and not in the very liveliest of moods. (122-23)

The fact that this passage was published in 1853 in a Canadian newspaper (*The British Whig* [Kingston]) is only one of the remarkable things about it. Especially startling is its unabashed appreciation of the physical attributes of "Young la-Belle France" and much more so its unembarrassed expression of a desire to re-enact Britain's conquest of New France in terms suggestive of a sexual assault—a sexual assault that might actually have occurred, Sangster implies, but for the presence of "the old sentinel . . . in that upper berth." Almost certainly the passage was acceptable to the publisher and readers of *The British Whig* because it describes nothing more than a fantasy, but it was probably also saved from censure by its elaborate use of a military conceit and by its playfully self-dramatizing and self-deprecating allusions to classical mythology (Morpheus,

Muta)¹ and to a variety of literary texts, not least *Tristram Shandy*. Yet there is a darker side even to Sangster's playfulness, for the allusion to Shakespeare's *Richard III* in his second-to-last sentence is to the soliloquy that Gloucester delivers at the end of Act 1, Scene 2 after Lady Anne has left the stage:

Was ever woman in this humor wooed?
Was ever woman in this humor won?
I'll have her, but I will not keep her long.
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What! I, that killed her husband and his
father,
To take her in her heart's extremest hate,
With curses in her mouth, tears in her
eyes,
The bleeding witness of her hatred by—
Having God, her conscience, and these
bars against me,
And nothing I to back my suit at all
But the plain Devil and dissembling
looks,
And yet to win her, all the world to
nothing!
Ha!

(1.2 230-41)

It is surely not fortuitous that Gloucester belonged to the side of the Yorkist conquerors and Anne to the side of the Lancastrian conquered in the Wars of the Roses. Allusions, like "History" in T.S. Eliot's "Gerontion," "ha[ve] many cunning passages, contrived corridors / And issues . . ." (40).

Note

1. Morpheus, of course, was the Greek god of dreams and Muta the Roman personification of silence. [\[back\]](#)

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