

Charles G. D. Roberts's Use of 'Indian Legend' in Four Poems of the Eighteen Eighties and 'Nineties

by D.M.R. Bentley

In his survey of Canadian "Literature" in *The Dominion Annual Register and Review for . . . 1883* (1884), Charles G.D. Roberts mounted a scathing attack on the recent "cry for a literature that shall be distinctively and exclusively Canadian in its characteristics" and offered as an object-lesson in "the possible peril of falling into a narrow provincialism . . . of subject and treatment" the example of the United States:

A similar demand on the part of American critics called forth interminable epics and romances celebrating the sometimes imaginary virtues and not always agreeable peculiarities of the Red Indian. These certainly smacked of the soil, to the critics' heart's desire, and were as a rule received quite rapturously. For the most part they have by this time been relegated to the vast but half-forgotten catalogue of the injuries which the unfortunate Indian has been compelled to endure at the hands of his white oppressor. (207)

This passage is significant not only as an expression of the cosmopolitanism that Roberts espoused as both a poetic and a critical credo in the early-to-mid eighteen eighties, but also for its association of literary nationalism with "Native" themes and for its ambivalent representation of "the Red Indian" as a less than entirely admirable victim of white oppression. Given these far from positive attitudes towards Canadian and Native subject-matter, it is scarcely surprising that the themes of most of the poems that Roberts published in and immediately after *Orion, and Other Poems* (1880) are drawn from European mythology, that few of his poems of this period treat of Canadian history or nature, and that none of them contains so much as a

reference to "Indian" history, legend, or mythology. With the publication of *In Divers Tones* (1886) a very different authorial persona emerged, however: the Roberts of "Tantramar Revisited" and "Canada," "An Ode for the Canadian Confederacy" and "On the Creek," "The Departing of Gluskâp" and "The Quelling of the Moose/A Melicite Legend." It is the purpose of [Page 18] the present paper to provide a context for the turn towards Native myth and legend that is evident in these last two pieces and also in "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec" and "The Vengeance of Gluskâp"/(*A Melicite Legend*), poems which, though published and probably written somewhat later, clearly reflect much the same folkloric interest and, as will be seen, nationalistic impetus.

Although Roberts's letters contain no information about the writing of "The Departing of Gluskâp" and "The Quelling of the Moose" it is safe to presume from his general practice of offering his poems to periodicals or including them in books soon after they were composed that both were written shortly before their appearance in *In Divers Tones* (and, perhaps, with the book in mind).¹ This would place them in the same compositional time-frame as "Canada," which was written between Roberts's return from Ontario to Fredericton in the Fall of 1884 and its first publication as a leaflet at Fredericton in January 1885,² and align them with the increasing interest in local description that is evident in "The Potato Harvest" and other poems that can be said with some certainty to date from the mid-'eighties.³ In addition to being a time of great personal turmoil for Roberts (after his resignation from *The Week* in February 1884 and a fruitless search for other opportunities in central Canada he had returned to Fredericton to live in his parents' house), the period between the Fall of 1884 and the publication of *In Divers Tones* was a time of revitalization and redirection: near the end of November 1884, he told Bliss Carman that he was in the process of emerging from a psychological depression that had lasted "some weeks" and near the end of September 1885 he moved to Windsor, Nova Scotia as Chair of English and French Literature at King's College (*Collected Letters* 45, 51). During this period, Roberts also came increasingly to accept that if he was to make his mark as a national poet he would need to embrace Canadian subjects and themes with the historical reach of William Kirby in *The Golden Dog (Le Chien d'Or). A Legend of Quebec* (1877) and the international success of Louis-Honoré Fréchet in *Fleurs boréales* (1879) and *Oiseaux de neige* (1881). With "Canada" Roberts set himself on the trajectory that would take him to the fervent "Canadianism"⁴ of the late 'eighties when, as he told the equally fervent William Douw Lighthall, he was in the process of "freeing [his] work from a certain scholasticism of subject" and had a quantity of "Canadian Nationalistic and aspirational work in mind to do" (*Collected Letters*

That subjects drawn from Native history and myth would be among the nationalistic works that Roberts would write in the mid-to-late 'eighties is scarcely if at all apparent from his remarks on "Indian legend" [**Page 19**] in the essay entitled "The Outlook for Literature: Acadia's Field for Poetry, History and Romance" that he published in the *Halifax Herald* on January 1, 1886:

There is a continual demand for the working of this field [that is, Indian legend], and continual surprise that it should be so long unharvested. Both the demand and the surprise are as old as literature in North America, and are likely to grow much older before being satisfied. . . . But the stuff seems almost unavailable for purposes of pure literature. The Indian has left a curse in his bequest, and the prize turns worthless in our grasp. The host of American poems and romances with the Indian as inspiration form, *Hiawatha* being excepted, a museum of lamentable failures. They are the crowning insult to a decaying race. . . . Only indirectly by association and suggestion, is Indian legend likely, I think, to exert marked influence on our creative literature. (*Selected* 261-62)

To the extent that they echo Roberts's comments in *The Dominion Annual Register and Review*, these remarks indicate that his thinking about the value of Native materials for Canadian literature had not changed significantly between 1884 and 1886. More than his earlier comments, however, Roberts's remarks in 1886 reveal that, like most of his contemporaries, including Pauline Johnson and, of course, Duncan Campbell Scott, he accepted the view that the Native peoples belonged to a dying race that was doomed to extinction. Only in his concession (derived, perhaps, from a reading of Isabella Valancy Crawford's *Malcolm's Katie* [1884]?) that "Indian legend" might "influence . . . our creative literature" "indirectly, by association and suggestion" is there any noticeable evidence that by 1886 Roberts was warming to Native myth and history as a "field" for Canadian literature.

Interspersed with Roberts's largely dismissive remarks about the usability of "Indian legend" in "The Outlook for Literature" are some observations that provide very valuable clues to the manner of his own imminent "harvest[ing]" of the "field": "some of them," he writes of "Indian legends," are "wildly poetic, and vigorous in conception; and they are easily attainable, both from the lips of their hereditary possessors and from such books as Leland's admirable 'Legends of the

Algonquin Indians' [that is, Charles Godfrey Leland's *The Algonquin Legends of New England* (1884)]. . . . [T]here is room to do invaluable work in the collection and comparative study of Indian folk-lore and kindred matter, for the results of which there is now a ready appreciation. Leland has left behind him some very good gleanings, owing to the wideness of the field which he has occupied" (*Selected* 261-62). Not only do these statements bespeak [Page 20] Roberts's acquaintance—perhaps by way of Bliss Carman⁵—with one product of the widespread and growing interest in comparative mythology that had developed on both sides of the Atlantic in the wake of the work of Max Müller and others, but they also reflect his awareness of the use being made by amateur and semi-professional collectors of "Indian folk-lore and kindred matter" such as Leland of oral sources among the Native peoples. A number of the stories related in *The Algonquin Legends of New England* purport to be transcriptions made by Leland of "verbal Indian narration[s]" and a number of others purport to be based on transcriptions made by other collectors, most notably the "Baptist Missionary among the Micmac Indians at Hantsport, Nova Scotia," Silas Tertius Rand, whose posthumously published *Legends of the Micmacs* (1894) was available to Leland as a nine-hundred page manuscript entitled "Indian Legends" (ix-x). Nor did Roberts need Leland's book to know that in the Maritimes "Indian legends" were being "attain[ed] from the lips of their hereditary possessors": in the early eighties, newspapers in Fredericton and Chatham (where he lived from 1879 to 1882) carried several articles, probably by the Fredericton journalist Edward Jack, recounting stories told to him by a certain Gabriel (or "Gabe"), whom Jack describes as "the distinguished Sachem of the remnant Malicite" who lived on the east side of the Saint John River "opposite the city" ("Indian Legends").⁶ Since Jack evidently furnished Leland with "several Micmac legends and many letters containing folk-lore, all taken by him directly from Indians" (ix), some of his work would certainly have been known to Roberts in one form or another.

The Roberts poem to which all this most obviously pertinent is "The Departing of Gluskâp" a transmutation of Tennyson's *The Passing of Arthur* (1870) that may well owe part of its inspiration to the legend that Leland appears to have assembled from various sources, including Rand and Jack (and thus "Gabe"), under the title "*How Glooscap, leaving the World, all the Animals mourned for him, and how, ere he departed, he gave Gifts to Men*" (66). Roberts's summary of Glooscap's *Gifts to Men* is briefer than Leland's, but his description of the reasons and preparations for the demigod's departure is little more than a versified rendition of its prose source:

And words and ways of men and beasts
became
Evil, and all their thoughts continually
Were but of evil. Then he made a feast.
Upon the shore that is beside the sea
That takes the setting sun, he ordered it,
[Page 21]
And called the beasts thereto. Only the men
He called not, seeing them evil utterly.
(Roberts, *Collected Poems*
98)

"Now when the days of men and beasts waxed evil they greatly
vexed Glooskap, and at length he could no longer endure them,
and he made a rich feast by the shore of the Great Lake Minas.
All the beasts came to it. . . ." (Leland 67)

In some instances, Roberts scarcely deviates from his prose source ("and
when the feast was over" [Leland]: "And when the feast was
done" [Roberts]); in others he substitutes fresh details ("he got into a
great canoe" [Leland]: "Gluskâp launched his birch canoe" [Roberts]);
and in yet others he adds both detail and dramatic emphasis:

"And after they ceased to see him, they still heard his voice as
he sang; but the sounds grew fainter and fainter in the distance
and at last they wholly died away; and then deep silence fell on
them all, and a great marvel came to pass, and the beasts, who
had till now spoken but one language, were no longer able to
understand each other, and they fled away, each his own way,
and never again have they met together in
council." (Leland 67)

And when the beasts could see his form no
more,
They still heard him, singing as he sailed,
And still they listened, hanging down their
heads
In long row, where the thin wave washed
and fled.
But when the sound of singing died, and
when
They lifted up their voice in grief,
Lo! on the mouth of every beast a strange
New tongue! Then rose they all and fled
apart,
Nor met again in council from that day.

In the version of the legend given by Leland, Glooscap "shall return to restore the Golden Age, and make men and animals dwell once more together in amity and peace" (67-68), but in Roberts's poem there is no such optimistic vision of restoration, and, rather than being explicitly stated, the legend's Hesiodic resonances are expressed in a description of Glooscap's "feast" as the final manifestation of a peaceable kingdom:

He fed the panther's crafty brood, and filled
The lean wolf's hunger; from the hollow
tree [Page 22]

His honey stayed the bear's terrific jaws;
And the brown rabbit couched at peace,
within
The circling shadow of the eagle's wings.

(*Collected Poems*

98)

In both versions, of course, the diction of the King James Bible proclaims the analogue between the linguistic and societal consequences of Glooscap's departure and the "confusion of tongues" at the building of Babel in Genesis 11. The conclusion that *The Algonquin Legends of New England* was the source of "The Departing of Gluskâp" seems both inevitable and unassailable.

The matter is not quite so straightforward, however, for the version of the legend provided by Leland is descended both directly and indirectly from another printed version of it that was apparently used by Roberts in the composition of his poem. Probably between the Fall of 1881 and the Summer of 1883, when he was researching and writing his essay on "New Brunswick" for George Monro Grant's *Picturesque Canada: the Country as It Was and Is*, which was published in thirty-six instalments and then as a two-volume set in 1882-84, Roberts appears to have read *Wilderness Journeys in New Brunswick in 1862-63* (1864) by Arthur Hamilton Gordon, the lieutenant-governor of the province from 1861 to 1866. While preparing "New Brunswick" he probably also read M.F. Sweetser's *The Maritime Provinces: a Guide for Travellers* (1875), a volume that, as Leland notes, contains "seven short extracts relative to Glooskap without reference to any book or author" (x), one of these being, in fact, the account of Glooscap's departure that Leland quotes almost verbatim in *The Algonquin Legends of New England* and that Roberts quarries so extensively in "The Departing of Gluskâp."⁷ To the extent that, as Thomas C. Parkhill has convincingly argued in *Weaving*

Ourselves into the Land: Charles Godfrey Leland, "Indians," and the Study of Native American Religions, Sweetser relied heavily on Gordon for his version of the legend of Glooscap's departure, the question of whether *Wilderness Journey* or *The Maritime Provinces* or both provided Roberts with the inspiration for his poem seems both pointless and insoluble. Nevertheless, there is one aspect of "The Departure of Gluskâp" that points to *Wilderness Journeys* as its primary source: when first published in *In Divers Tones* and as reprinted in the *King's College Record* (1886), *Songs of the Great Dominion* (1889), and *Canadian Poems and Lays* (1893), Roberts's poem was entitled "The Departing of Clote Scarp," Clote Scarp being the Melicite name for the Micmacs' Glooscap and the name used by Gordon in his version of the legend (62-63). It may be that the inciting moment for "The Departing of Clote Scarp" [Page 23] was Gordon's comment that "the widest, most poetical, and most striking legend" that he heard during his wilderness journeys "is that which relates the final disappearance of Clote Scarp from earth" (62).

Further support for Gordon as the primary source and inspiration for "The Departing of Clote Scarp" can be found in the legendary material included in Roberts's essay on "New Brunswick" in *Picturesque Canada*. There the name of the Melicite hero is given as "Clote Scaurp," the "stories of his disappearances" are said to have "differed widely" (780), and the wording of the version chosen for inclusion deviates in notable ways from that in *Wilderness Journeys*,⁸ but Roberts's remark that it "reads with the wild, impressive beauty of Celtic tradition" is reminiscent of Gordon, as is the manner in which his version concludes. Here is Gordon:

"And the loons, who had been the hunting dogs of Clote Scarp, go restlessly up and down through the world, seeking vainly for their master, whom they cannot find, and wailing sadly because they find him not." (62-63)

And here is Roberts:

"And Clote Scaurp's hunting dogs go up and down the world in search of him, and men hear them howling after him in the night." (781)

A reason for the relative brevity of Roberts's concluding sentence may lie in the scenario that he uses to introduce the legend of Clote Scarp's "disappearance." After returning to camp on the Restigouche River with their three Melicite guides,⁹ he and his travelling companions (one of whom was F.B. Schell, the illustrator of the essay),¹⁰ Roberts writes,

We . . . lay with our feet to the fire, smoking, and repeating in low voices certain uncanny legends of these shores. Suddenly a long, tremulous, exceeding sorrowful cry came floating in upon our ears from vaguest distances. We sprang to our feet. Wild and unearthly it swelled, died away, rose again more near and more distant; and it seemed as if we heard in it a note of strange laughter. Shuddering, we turned to our Indians, and saw them sitting attentive, awed, but not afraid. In answer to our mute inquiry the chief guide muttered—"Clote Scaurp's hunting-dogs! Big storm bime-by, mebbe!" He said they would not come near us. Their howls were often heard at night time in these regions, where they ranged in search of their master, but no man of those now living had ever seen them. Nor could he tell us what manner of beast they were. But, with that voice still in our ears, we straightway pictured them gliding under and parting the low thickets in the desolate, broad, moon-lighted [Page 24] spaces of the wilderness. Then, as the cry was not repeated, we questioned of this Clote Scaurp, and were told quaint fables of him. (780)

To confirm even at the conclusion of the legend of Clote Scarp's departure that his hunting-dogs are loons would be unnecessary and redundant— hence, the omission of Gordon's "And the loons. . . ." Whatever else he was doing, Roberts was serving his apprenticeship as a story-teller in the framing and editing of the legend that he describes as "the Melicite 'Passing of Arthur'" ("New Brunswick" 84; *The Canadian Guide-Book* 157).

The final points that need to be made about the relationship of "The Departing of Gluskâp" or "Clote Scarp" to *Wilderness Journeys* flow from the information that Gordon provides about the source of the legends that he recounts and from what has now been discovered about that source. Early in his book, Gordon describes the Native guide whom he employed for some of his journeys, including the one down the Restigouche River that provides the setting for his narration of the Clote Scaurp legends, as "a Melicete Indian from the camp opposite Fredericton, Gabriel by name, [who was] the pet guide and huntsman of the garrison—a clever fellow, speaking good English, which, however, as he had learnt it chiefly from officers, abounded in odd expressions of military slang" (9-10). Probably correctly, Parkhill and Andrea Bear Nicholas identify this Gabriel and the Gabriel or "Gabe" from whom Jack was collecting legends some twenty years later as the same man, namely Gabriel Acquin (circa 1811-1901), a renowned "Maliseet hunter, guide, interpreter, showman, and founder of the St. Mary's Indian Reserve" near Fredericton (Nicholas 3). It would thus seem that directly

or indirectly (and sometimes both), Gordon, Jack, Sweetser, Leland, Roberts, and, of course, others relied ultimately on the same source for their various renditions of the legend of Clote Scarp/ Gluskâp's departure, that source being, in Nicholas's words, "a classic case of the colonized striving to imitate the colonizer in language, manners, and preferences," a man who, even as he "participated in the destruction of a way of life, . . . did at least ensure that some record of it would survive"(4).¹¹ Complex and hybrid as is the genealogy of the legend to which Roberts gave poetic expression in "The Departing of Gluskâp," the evidence at least suggests that, so far as he could have been aware, he based his poem through Gordon on a version of it "attain[ed] from the lips of [one of its] hereditary possessors."

Weaker claim for authenticity must be made on behalf of the second poem that Roberts based on an "Indian legend." First published in *In Divers Tones* (1886) and very likely written for inclusion in that volume, "The Quelling of the Moose / A Melicite Legend" purports to be a [Page 25] "story . . . told" by one "Sacóbi" around a campfire "when tent was pitched, and supper done, / And forgotten were paddle, and rod, and gun, / And the low, bright planets, one by one, / Lit in the pine-tops their lamps of gold" (*Collected Poems* 106). Not surprisingly, the genealogy of this scenario extends back through Roberts's essay in *Picturesque Canada* (where, it will be recalled, the campers "lay with [their] feet to the fire, smoking, and repeating in low voices certain uncanny legends of these shores") to Gordon's accounts of the narrational circumstances of the Clote Scarp legends: "I sat long over the fire after the rest had gone to sleep, listening to Indian legends told in low mysterious tones" (53), Gordon recalls at one point, and at another:

We came upon some fine pines during our ascent [of Mount Sagamook]. It was dark long before we returned to camp, and nothing could be more picturesque than its appearances, lighted up by the red flames of a large fire which was itself for the most part concealed from us by the bushes. After devouring our supper of trout, I sat long over the fire listening to Indian legends. Some of these are very picturesque and curious. (56)

Wilderness Journeys contains no version of the legend recounted in "The Quelling of the Moose," however; for this, Roberts apparently drew on some, as yet unidentified, source¹² or/and on *The Algonquin Legends of New England*, where two of the origin myths recounted by Leland contain the raw materials from which the poem could easily have been elaborated:

Glooskap made all the animals. He made them at first very large. Then he said to Moose, the great Moose who was as tall as Ketawkw's ["A giant, high as the tallest pines, or as the clouds" (Leland's note)], "What would you do should you see an Indian coming?" Moose replied, "I would tear down the trees on him." Then Glooskap saw that the Moose was too strong, and made him smaller, so that the Indians could kill him. (19)

In old times . . . , in the beginning of things, men were as animals and animals as men. . . . Now Glooskap lived on an island . . . , and with him were many Indians with the names and natures of animals and birds. . . . There is another story which says that he was living at the mouth of the Oolastook, at a place called Menogwes [S[ain]t John, N.B.]. (32-33)

Rather than being created by Glooskap, "the Moose" of Roberts's poem appears from "out of the white north-east," but it is no less enormous, dangerous, and capable of being cut down to size: **[Page 26]**

. . . in those days dwelt Clote Scarp with men.

• • •

In his wigwam, built by the Oolastook,
Where the ash-trees over the water look,
A voice of trouble the stillness shook

"He rose, and took his bow from the wall,
And listened; he heard his people call
Pierce up from the village one and all.

• • •

"That terrible forehead, maned with flame,
He smote with his open hand,—and tame
As a dog the raging beast became.

"He smote with his open hand; and lo!
As shrinks in the rains of spring and snow
So shrank the monster beneath that blow,

"Till scarce the bulk of a bull he stood,
And Clote Scarp led him down to the

wood,
And gave him the tender shoots for food."

(107)

This is very weak poetry ("Pierce up from the village one and all" is especially feeble), and it is weakened further by the trite and inappropriate moral that brings the poem to a close: "Understand / How huge a peril will shrink like sand, / When stayed by a prompt and steady hand" [108]). At least Roberts had the good judgement not to allow "The Quelling of the Moose" to be reprinted after its appearance in *In Divers Tones and Poems of Wild Life* (1888).¹³

The third and final poem that emerged from Roberts's interest in the Glooscap legends recalls "The Quelling of the Moose" both in form and in accomplishment. Although largely written in decasyllabic couplets, "The Vengeance of Gluskâp / (*A Melicite Legend*)" contains three rhymed tercets, one of which is at least as feeble and bathetic as anything in the earlier poem:

They came upon the tempest's midnight
wings,
With shock of thunder and the lightning's
slings, [Page 27]
And flame, and hail, and all disastrous
things.

(*Collected Poems*

185)

The "They" to which these lamentable lines refer are the "wandering wizards" whose depredations on Gluskâp's village while he is away "journeying three days apace" provokes the desire for vengeance that takes him, with the help of some "obedient" whales, to the "hiding-places" of "the wizard host," whom he first drives to "madness" and then transforms into the "stiffened clay" of the Atlantic coast (*Collected Poems* 185).

Despite its "host" of "wizards," "The Vengeance of Gluskâp" is obviously, though loosely, based on a legend that Roberts probably encountered first in the abbreviated form supplied by Sweetser in *The Maritime Provinces*:

The site of S[ain]t John was the *Menagwes* of ancient Micmac tradition, where the divine Glooscap once had his home. Hence, during his absence, his attendants were carried away by a powerful evil magician, who fled with them to Grand Manan, Cape Breton, and Newfoundland, where he was pursued by

Glooscap, who rode much of the way on the backs of whales which he called in from the deep sea. Passing through Cape Breton, he at length reached the dark Newfoundland shores, where he assumed such a stature that the clouds rolled about his head. The evil-doing wizard was soon found and put to death and the servants of Glooscap were set free. (19)

In *The Maritime Provinces*, Roberts would also have encountered precedents for the transformation of the offending wizards into coastal land-formations in "[t]he Indian legend [that] says that [Cape] Blomidon was made by the divine Glooscap . . . [when he] broke [a] great beaver dam off th[e] shore and swung its end around into its present position" and in the legend that "[o]n the approach of the English he turned his huge hunting-dogs into stone and then passed away" (102, 106). It can only be regretted that the uncluttered prose of Sweetser's versions of the legends inspired such lines as "He grew and gloomed before them like a cloud, / And his eye drew them till they cried aloud . . . Rank upon rank they lay without a moan, / His finger touched them, and their hearts grew stone" (*Collected Poems* 184). Roberts apparently thought more highly of "The Vengeance of Gluskâp" than of "The Quelling of the Moose," however, for he included it under the title "Menagwes" in *The Canadian Guide-Book* (1841) that he co-authored with Ernest Ingersoll in 1890-91 and allowed it to appear twice in periodicals (*The Independent* and *King's College Record*) in [Page 28] November 1894 and twice in collections of his poetry (*The Book of the Native* [1896] and *Poems* [1901, 1907]).

Although Roberts need have looked no further than Sweetser for the material that he required for "The Vengeance of Gluskâp," he would have encountered a longer version of the vengeance legend in *The Algonquin Legends of New England*, which also contains examples of Glooscap's capacity to transform living creatures into land-formations (see 31-44, 49 n. and elsewhere). Moreover, by November 1894, when he published the poem in *The Independent* and the *King's College Register*, Roberts may well have known Rand's *Legends of the Micmacs* (1894), which includes a lengthy version of the vengeance legend entitled "A Wizard Carries off Glooscap's Housekeeper" that concludes with the hero's transformation of a moose into an island and his dogs into rocks (see 284-94); indeed, perhaps the publication of Rand's posthumous collection rekindled the interest in "Indian legend" that during the previous decade had produced "The Departing of Gluskâp," "The Quelling of the moose," and—the final poem to be examined here—"How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec."

Some six years before its first appearance in a book by Roberts

(namely, *Songs of the Common Day and Ave: an Ode for the Shelley Centenary* [1893]), "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec" was offered to *The Century Magazine* (New York) as "a new poem" on March 4, 1887 (*Collected Letters* 64) and first published in that periodical in June 1888. It has been saved for consideration until last for several reasons, the most obvious of which is the fact that it is based, not on a Glooscap or Clote Scarp legend like Roberts's three other "Indian" poems, but on a story that was apparently assumed by Roberts and his primary source—Gordon—to be the relation of an actual, historical incident. After comparing the Grand Falls on the Saint John River to "more celebrated Canadian falls," Gordon observes that "[t]hey are the scene of an Indian legend, which is probably not untrue":

It is related, that a large war-party of Mohawks made a descent on the upper St. John from Canada, for the purpose of exterminating the Melicetes: They carried their canoes with them, and embarked on the St. John below Edmundston, from which point to the Grand Falls the river is perfectly smooth and deep. Not knowing the navigation, they landed and seized two squaws, whom they compelled to act as their guides down the river. When night fell, the different canoes were tied together so that the warriors might sleep whilst a few only paddled the leading canoes, under direction of the women, whose boats were tied, one on the right, the other on the left, of the flotilla. They neared the falls, and still the women paddled on. The roar of the falling waters rose [Page 29] on the still night air. Those who paddled looked anxious; some few of the sleepers awoke. To lull suspicion, the women spoke of the great stream which here fell into the Walloostook, the Indian name of the St. John; and still they paddled on. When they saw, at length, that the whole mass of canoes in the centre of the river was well entered on the smooth treacherous current, which, looking so calm and gentle, was bearing them irresistibly to the falls, the women leaped into the water, and strove to reach the shore by swimming in the comparatively feeble stream near the banks. Tied inextricably together, the centre canoes drew the others on, and the whole body of the invaders plunged down the cataract, and perished in the foaming waters of the narrow gorge below. I asked eagerly whether the women escaped. It does not speak highly of Indian chivalry that no one knew, or seemed to think it matter worthy of recollection, whether the two squaws had, or had not, sacrificed their own lives in defending those of their tribe.

(19-20)

In the note that prefaces "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec," Roberts not only presents the legend as fact, but also reinforces its veracity through the addition of local place names. However, his version of the capture and fate of the Melicite women differs greatly from Gordon's:

When the invading Mohawks captured the outlying Melicite village of Madawaska they spared two squaws to guide them downstream to the main Melicite town of Medoctec, below Grand Falls. The squaws steered themselves and their captors over the Falls. (Collected Poems 114)

The differences between these two versions of the story, as well as other aspects of "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec" such as its vignette of the Melicite town as unsuspecting and therefore undefended ("This many a heedless year / The Mohawks come not near. / The lodge-gate stands unbarred . . ." and so on [*Collected Poems* 114]), may be explicable in one or another (or a combination) of two ways: either Roberts adapted and embellished Gordon's version to his own requirements and purposes or (and?) he relied in whole or in part on a variant of it.

Of Roberts's familiarity with at least one such variant there can be little, if any, doubt: after describing Grand Falls in terms that may well have helped to shape the description of them in the poem,¹⁴ Sweetser interpolates without attribution a version of the story that is unequivocal about the women's survival:

It is a tradition of the Micmacs that in a remote age two families of their tribe were on the upper St. John hunting, and were surprised by a war-party of the [Page 30] strange and dreaded Northern Indians. The latter were descending the river to attack the lower Micmac villages, and forced the captured women to pilot them down. A few miles above the falls, they asked the unwilling guides if the stream was all smooth below, and on receiving an affirmative answer, lashed the canoes together into a raft, and went to sleep, exhausted with their march. When near the Grand Falls the women quietly dropped overboard and swam ashore, while the hostile warriors, wrapped in slumber, were swept down into the rapids, only to awaken when escape was impossible. Their bodies were stripped by the Micmacs on the river below, and the brave women were ever afterward held in high honor by the

The fact that another variant of the story appears in Rand's *Legends of the Micmacs*, where it is attributed to "Gabriel Thomas, of St. Mary"(341),¹⁵ and yet another in William T. Baird's *Seventy Years of New Brunswick Life* (1890), where it is attributed to Joe Sebatis, an unusually "communicative" member of the "Melicite tribe" (114), gives but a small indication of its currency and popularity at the time of the writing and publication of "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec."¹⁶ Nor did the story lose its appeal in ensuing decades: a poetic version of it appears in James Hannay's *Ballads of Acadia* (1909), a prose version derived from Baird in William O. Raymond's *The River St. John* (1910), and a French prose version with a strongly poetical cast in Abbé Thomas Albert's *Histoire du Madawaska* (1920).¹⁷ Versions of the story also appear in, among many other places, Thomas Lowell and Rex Barton's *In New Brunswick We'll Find It* (1939) and Stuart Trueman's *Tall Tales and True Tales from Down East* (1979).

A major reason for the story's growing appeal in the period between the publication of Gordon's *Wilderness Journeys* and Albert's *Histoire du Madawaska* can be inferred from the statement in the former that apparent indifference to the fate of "the two squaws" "does not speak highly of Indian chivalry" and from the statement in the latter that "[l'] histoire grecque, si féconde en gestes chevaleresques de tous genres, n'offre rien de plus grand ni de plus sublime que le sacrifice simple et ignoré" that the story describes (14). In addition to expressing and transmitting the high Victorian ideal of heroic self-sacrifice in the service of community, the story of two Indian women who either gave or risked "their . . . lives in defending those of their tribe" was also consonant with the prevailing view that female heroism consisted primarily of suffering and the wide-spread belief, alluded to earlier, that Canada's Native people were the doomed relics of a race characterized by both savagery and nobility. Thus Roberts depicts the Mohawk warriors as a "Stealthy and swift" horde that "Crowd[s] the breast" of the St. John River in "four[-]score" "war canoes" [**Page 31**] and massacres the Melicites while they sleep and represents the two Melicite women as "tearless," "low-voiced," and "Mute" until the poem's final stanzas, where their "death-chant" proclaims the deliberateness of their self-sacrifice:

A tremor! The blanched waves leap.
The warriors start from sleep.
Faints in the sudden blare
The cry of their swift despair,

And the captives' death-chant shrills.
But afar, remote from ills,
Quiet under the quiet skies
The Melicite village lies.

(*Collected Poems* 114-16)

Both of these stanzas are compromised by forced rhymes such as "blare" and "despair" and the first contains an image—"The blanched waves"—that fails miserably as pathetic fallacy (the river whitens as it approaches the falls, but this can hardly be true of the Mohawk warriors). Nevertheless, the poem's final lines make effective use of caesura ("But afar, remote . . .") and repetition ("Quiet . . . quiet") to reinforce the theme of a tranquil village preserved by heroic self-sacrifice.

That theme is also central, of course, to Archibald Lampman's "At the Long Sault: May, 1660," an unfinished and posthumously published poem that probably owes a debt not only to "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec," but also to "The Keepers of the Pass" (1893), Roberts's contribution to the myth that "*Adam Daulac* [Dollard des Ormeaux] *and a small band of comrades*" gave their lives to save "*the infant town of Montreal*" from a potentially "*overwhelming*" "*Iroquois . . . force*" (*Collected Poems* 117).¹⁸ Written at about the same time as "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec" and first published in the December 1888 number of the *Trinity University Review* (Toronto), "The Keepers of the Pass" is a further manifestation of the Canadian nationalism that motivated much of Robert's work from the early 'eighties to the mid- 'nineties and, as suggested at the outset of this essay, gradually redirected his attention from Classical to Canadian themes and subjects. One reason for this shift—and, hence, one reason for the existence of "The Departing of Gluskâp," "The Quelling of the Moose," "The Vengeance of Gluskâp," and "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec" (not to mention the other nationalistic poems of this [Page 32] period)—was Roberts's desire to represent and market himself as *the* English Canadian poet *par excellence*.

When he wrote and published his first two Glooscap poems in the mid-'eighties, Roberts was teaching at King's College and assiduously engaged in promoting Canadian literature and himself both within the College (through the Haliburton Society) and beyond its walls (through his contacts with Lampman, Joseph Edmund Collins, and others), an aim reflected as much in his poetic renditions of Native legends as by the patriotic poems and local-colour pieces that he assembled in *In Divers Tones* (1886) and by the translation of Philip-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé's *Les anciens Canadiens* (1864) that he published in 1890 as *Canadians*

of Old. But well before 1890 Roberts became intent on securing a more prestigious and remunerative professorship that would permit him, as he told Edmund Clarence Stedman on February 8, 1888, to exert a greater "influence . . . [on] the political development of th[e] country" away from any possibility of annexation to the United States (*Collected Letters* 69-70). "I think I could be a strength to the University of Toronto by reason of my general literary reputation thro' Canada, [and] the reputation which I am striving so hard to win abroad," he told Stedman *à propos* his bid for a newly created Chair of Political Science at that university, adding that "as a teacher" he was "very successful in inspiring young men to work, [and] in holding them under [his] influence" (70). Less than three months later, on May 7, he told Richard Watson Gilder, the editor of *The Century* (New York) to whom he had sent "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec" in March of the previous year, that he had "*withdrawn [his] application* for the Toronto Pol[itical] Science Chair, in order to concentrate [his] effort on the new Chair of English at Queen's College, Kingston," but feared "strong opposition" on the grounds that he had "not studied abroad" and "[s]ome of the Trustees want a young fellow from one of the Old Country universities" (74).¹⁹ "If 'The Mohawks' come out in June, that will help," he importuned; "I am anxious in the matter." Roberts's letters are silent on his Glooscap poems, but the statement regarding "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec" makes it reasonable to assume that he also regarded them as a means of representing and promoting himself as a Canadian poet and professor. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, Native legends thus became a component of Roberts's "cultural capital," objectifications of the "Canadianism" that he was seeking to embody, promulgate, and parley into an academic appointment at a central Canadian college or university.

As intimated several times in the course of the preceding discussion, the poems that Roberts generated from Native legends during the eighteen [Page 33] eighties and 'nineties cannot be ranked among his finest works. Nevertheless, "The Departing of Gluskâp," "The Quelling of the Moose," "The Vengeance of Gluskâp," and "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec" reward examination both individually and collectively for the light that they shed on the ethnographic and economic contexts surrounding Canadian writing during the post-Confederation period. More than Roberts would have wanted, they too belong to the "half-forgotten catalogue of the injuries which the unfortunate Indian has been compelled to endure at the hands of his white oppressor," but their relationship to their sources, their conjugation of contemporary assumptions about the Native peoples and heroism, and their status as indicators of their author's cultural competence give them considerable interest as a component of Roberts's

Notes

1. This would certainly accord with the aesthetic of variety that prompted Roberts to diversify the subjects as well as the forms of his poems in the 'eighties. See "Aesthetics: Workmanship and Variety" (Chapter 3) in my "The Confederation Group." [\[back\]](#)
2. Unless otherwise indicated, the dates assigned to Roberts's poems are those given in his *Collected Poems*. [\[back\]](#)
3. In addition to "The Potato Harvest," these include "Tides," "Birch and Paddle," and "Frogs." [\[back\]](#)
4. In "A Canadian-American Liaison" (1889), the Montreal journalist and novelist Watson Griffin defines "Canadianism" as "a love of Canada" (138). The earliest occurrence of it cited in the *OED* is an article in the 1875 volume of *The Canadian Monthly and National Review* and the earliest occurrence of it in Roberts's writings is in a letter of November 18, 1888 (see *Collected Letters* 96, and "Canadianism: 1885-90" in my "The Confederation Group" [Chapter 2]). [\[back\]](#)
5. The November 1884 number of *The University Review* (Fredericton) contains a highly laudatory review of *The Algonquin Legends of New England* in which Carman writes: "How careful and jealous we should be of all this Indian mythology and legend, the greatest Past our land can have [,] and how prodigal and Goth-like we have been. . . . Our interest in the Indians, and our own land, should be deepened, and our sympathy strengthened, by reading Mr. Leland's book. . . . [H]e has come very near the Indian life, as near as we can come, not by imaginative invention, or falsely colored pictures, but simply by working thoroughly, and in a scholarly way, to recover and preserve what still remains of . . . lost and forgotten lore and song. . . ." [\[back\]](#)
6. See also the Fredericton *Star* of May 25, 1880. While Roberts was living in Chatham, New Brunswick that town's *Star*, which was edited by Roberts's friend Joseph Edmund Collins published "A Visit to Gabe" (September 22, 1880) and "An Indian Pythias" (December 1, 1880). [\[back\]](#)
7. There can be little doubt that Sweetser is the (principal) source for the version of the legend that appears in the essay on "Nova Scotia" by R. Murray and A. Simpson in *Picturesque Canada* 830. See also *The Week* (Toronto) for January 23, 1891 for "A Melicite Legend," **[Page 34]** a poetic rendition of the departure of Glooscap

by Charles H. Lugin and August 14 and November 27, 1891 for "Acadiensens: the Indians of Acadia," a two-part article by I. Allen Jack that contains a prose version of the same legend and a prose version of the legend on which Roberts based "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec" (*The Week* 8: 122-23, 589-90, and 830-31).

[\[back\]](#)

8. For example, Gordon has "Now the ways of beasts and men waxed evil, and they greatly vexed Clote Scarp, and at length he could no longer endure them" (62) and Roberts has "After many years the ways of beasts and men grew bad, and Clote Scaurp talked to them, till at last he was angry, and very sorry; and he could endure them no longer" (780-81). The differences between the two versions may merely be the result of an attempt by Roberts to make his version appear different and authentic. [\[back\]](#)
9. According to a passage earlier in the essay, Roberts and his travelling companions engaged the service of "three trusty Melicites" as guides in "the little village of Andover, some twenty-four miles below Grand Falls" on the Saint John River. . . . One of the guides, by name Frank Solas, spoke English fairly well, French better, Micmac thoroughly, and his native Melicite. He could also *write* English intelligibly. His companions, Tom and Steve, had not attained quite so wide and varied a culture, but they were quick-witted and receptive; while Steve was almost an encyclopaedia of useful knowledge, and his knowledge he was wont to impart with a laconic terseness which an encyclopaedist might have envied" (769). See Parkhill 38-42 for a Peter Solis as one of Jack's informants. [\[back\]](#)
10. On August 16, 1882, the *Chatham World* reported that Roberts and Schell "were in town Monday, having come through the woods from Fredericton. Mr. Schell is making sketches, and Mr. Roberts writing descriptions, of New Brunswick, for 'Picturesque Canada.' Mr. Roberts . . . has a book full of notes and a head full of traditions, legends, and memories of men and things." [\[back\]](#)
11. See Parkhill 40-47, 82-83, and 118-30 for Gabriel Acquin as both source and construct and 172 n. 7 for "Gabriel Thomas, of St. Mary," whom Rand cites (341) as the source of a version of the legend upon which Roberts drew for "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec," as Gabriel Thomah, "a literate Passamaquoddy . . . from the Peter Dana Point community of Maine." In *Chiploquorgan* (1872), Richard Lewes Dashwood describes Gabriel Acquin as "a well-known hunter at Fredericton, who spoke excellent English, . . . did not use Yankee terms for everything," and "from his earliest youth had been accustomed to go out with officers stationed in the province" (124). "Gabe proved a most amusing companion in camp," adds Dashwood, "[he] sang

- capital songs, and told excellent hunting stories" (130). [\[back\]](#)
12. In introducing the legend of Glooscap's departure in "New Brunswick" Roberts alludes briefly to a legend concerning the hero's diminution of "the moon." When the typographical error is corrected, the allusion is very clearly to a version of the legend that he knew before Leland's book was published: "In [Clote Scaurp's] time the moo[se] had been a dreadful beast, greater than a mountain, and fierce; but Clote Scaurp struck it between the eyes with the palm of his hand, and it shrunk to the size we see it now" (780). [\[back\]](#)
 13. Some small compensation for the manifest weaknesses of "The Quelling of the Moose" may be found in the matter-of-factness with which it handles "ash-trees" and Glooscap's weaponry, two elements of the Algonquin origin myths that Leland finds rich in parallels with Scandinavian mythology. Of the portion of a narrative in which Glooscap creates "Man" by taking his "bow and arrows" and shooting at "Ash-trees," Leland writes that "[t]he magic arrows of Glooscap are of course world-wide, and date from the shafts of Abaris and those used among the ancient Jews for divination. But . . . those of the Indian hero are like the 'Guse arrows,' described in Oervarodd's Saga. . . ." "Ash and Elm in the Edda were the Adam and Eve of the human race. . . . It is certain . . . that the *ash* was the typic tree of all life, . . . Yggdrasil, the tree of existence, or of the world itself" (18-19, 21-24). [\[back\]](#) **[Page 35]**
 14. "The shape of the fall is singular, since the water leaps from the front and from both sides, with minor and detached cascades over the outer edges. Below the cataract the river whirls and whitens . . . through a rugged gorge . . . , whose walls [are] of dark rock. 'It is a narrow and frightful chasm, lashed by the troubled water, and excavated by boiling eddies and whirlpools always in motion; at last the water plunges in an immense frothy sheet into a basin below, where it becomes tranquil, and the stream resumes its original features'" (56). [\[back\]](#)
 15. See note 10, above. Further complexity is added to the legend's line (s) of descent by the inclusion of a version of it under the title "Another Incident—an Army Destroyed by Two Women" in one of several articles entitled "The Legends of the Micmacs" that Rand published in 1870 and 1871 in the *New Dominion Monthly* (Montreal), where he notes that it was (also?) "Related to [him] by an intelligent Indian of the Maliseet tribe, who resides at Fredericton, N.B., and he represented the parties to be not Micmacs but Maliseets" (333-34). ("[A]s they are near each other and have for a hundred years and more been on friendly terms," comments Rand, "these two tribes . . . might easily get their war stories mixed up together" [334].) Similarities of wording between the Rand

(1871) and Sweetser (1874) versions of the legend (for example, "the warriors lashed their canoes all together so as to form a sort of raft...the women quietly slipped into the water and swam ashore" [Rand] and "they...lashed the canoes together into a raft...the women quietly dropped overboard and swam ashore" [Sweetser]) strongly suggest Sweetser's version is based on Rand's. Nothing as certain can be deduced from the fact that both Rand's version and Roberts's poem name the river as the Oolastook. [\[back\]](#)

16. In Baird's version of the legend, there is only one woman and she lives "to make known her thrilling adventure" (115). In Hannay's, there is again only one woman, now named Malabeam, but she does not survive (see *Ballads* 2-11 and *The Maiden's Sacrifice passim*). It is possible that "How the Mohawks Set Out for Medoctec" was written with knowledge of one or both of these versions of the legend because "The Maiden's Sacrifice" was first published in the Saint John *Telegram* in 1873 (*Ballads* 2) and Baird states that "The Destruction of the Mohawks at Grand Falls" (as he calls the legend) was "[w]ritten by request for *The Aboriginal*, published in St. John" (but, as yet, unidentified) (113). That Roberts knew at least one version of the legend featuring a single heroine is confirmed by his essay on "New Brunswick," which includes the following paragraph:

As might be expected, Grand Falls has been the scene of many an awful tragedy. The first bridge over the gorge fell with several teams upon it. Lumbermen—"steam-drivers"—have been sucked down, and, caught probably in the dreadful whirl of the Coffee Mill [i.e., the whirlpool below the falls], never the smallest trace of them has been seen thereafter. One tragic story is a story also of woman's heroism. In the days when the Melicites were a great nation their unpeaceable enemies were the Mohawks. A Mohawk war party launched its canoes upon the head-waters of the St. John, intending by this new route to surprise the chief village of the Melicits, at Au pak. Before reaching the Falls they captured a small party of Melicites, all of whom they put to death save one young squaw, who was kept to be their guide through the strange waters. As they drifted silently down by night she was put in the foremost canoe, and ordered to take them to a safe landing in the Upper Basin, where they would, next day, make a portage around the cataract. She steered them straight for the vortex. When they started up from their half-slumber, with the hideous menace of that

thunder in their ears, it was too late. A few moments of [Page 36] agonizing effort with their useless paddles, then they and their captive were swept into the gulf. Never did another Mohawk invasion vex the Melicites; but the latter have not preserved the name of the girl. (776-77)

Roberts's reference to the death and disappearance of lumbermen may derive from Gordon, who recounts the story of "[t]wo young men in a canoe who found themselves sucked into the current whilst engaged in drawing logs to the shore" and concludes with the observation that "[n]o trace of the canoe, or their bodies, was ever found" (20). [\[back\]](#)

17. Raymond states that the story, which in his version features a single woman who survives but as a "maniac," was "told by the Indians to the early settlers on the river soon after their arrival in the country" and refers his readers to Hannay's "The Maiden's Tragedy" in *Ballads of Acadia* as "another form of the legend" (*The River St. John* 27-28). Such similarities as the following between the versions of Baird and Raymond suggest that the former was the latter's principal source (or that both relied on another, as yet unidentified common source): "One canoe alone remained from the wreck, to carry the maniac Indian woman to her home and tribe (Baird 116); "One canoe alone remained from the wreck to carry the woman to her home and friends." She had saved her nation, but was a maniac from that day" (Raymond 28). The version of the legend in the *Histoire de Madawska* 12-15 features two women, and was translated into English by Raymond in a 1921 review of Albert's book that was reprinted in 1928. [\[back\]](#)
18. It is more than likely that Roberts's "The Departing of Gluskâp" and his essay on "New Brunswick" lie in the background of Lampman's "The Loons," which was first published in *Scribner's Magazine* (New York) in September 1887 and then included in *Among the Millet, and other Poems* (1888). "Wild and unearthly it swelled . . . and it seemed as if we heard in it a note of strange laughter," runs part of Roberts's description of the cry that the Indians attribute to "Clote Scaurp's hunting-dogs"; "[t]heir howls were often heard at night time in these regions, where they ranged in search of their master . . ." (780). "[A]mong the desolate northern meres," run the equivalent lines in "The Loons," "Still must ye search and wander querulously, / Crying for Glooscap, still bemoan the light / With weird entreaties, and in agony / With awful laughter pierce the lonely night" (*Poems* 119). [\[back\]](#)

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