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## Alexander McLachlan: the "Robert Burns" of Canada

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## **Alexander McLachlan: The “Robert Burns” of Canada**

*Edward J. Cowan*

Ross Roy is a native of Canada’s most exciting city. In the eighteen-twenties John MacTaggart, the scurrilously wicked author of *The Scottish Gallovidian Encyclopaedia*, having discovered that Montrealers found the Scots brogue not only vulgar but highly offensive, decided “to cultivate the English lisp.” His satirical attempts at self-improvement were no more successful, we may imagine, than his feeble efforts at courtship: “I have met with girls from my own Old Scotland, that I liked to spend the day with very much, but they had no pretensions to beauty: we could talk of witches, and quote Burns together.”<sup>1</sup>

An engineer on the Rideau Canal and a poet of some accomplishment himself, MacTaggart neatly conveys a sense of how the Scots, out of all proportion to their numbers, dominated the politics and economics of what remained Canada’s most important city throughout the nineteenth-century, while indicating the resentment bred of their achievement. Scots were still to the fore as Ross Roy was growing up and where there were Scots there was Burns. As he himself has asserted, the Bible and Burns accompanied most Scots emigrants, including his own great-grandfather,

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<sup>1</sup> John MacTaggart, *Three Years in Canada: An Account of the Actual State of the Country in 1826-7-8 Comprehending Its Resources, Productions, Improvements, and Capabilities: and Including Sketches of the State of Society, Advice to Emigrants, &c*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1829), I: 39-42.

so his life-long fascination for the poet arguably had prenatal origins.<sup>2</sup>

It was nonetheless a problem at Burns Suppers in Canada to find plausible reference to that great country in Burns's poetry. One such was Burns' awesome *cri de coeur*, "Address of Beelzebub," his devastating response to those highland landlords who refused to allow their tenants "whose property they were" to emigrate "to the wilds of Canada, in search of that fantastic thing – Liberty" (Kinsley I:254). Another was when the spurned Burns, refused the hand of Jean by old Armour, compared his bewilderment to that of a "a feebly-struggling beaver down the roarings of Niagara" (Roy I: 36). It was at a conference organised by the local Burns Club in Niagara-on-the-Lake that I first met Ross, ever since treasuring fond memories of Burns, whisky and guid crack. It is a pleasure, as well as a privilege, to be able to contribute to his festschrift.

As Professor Roy and others have charted, in the aftermath of the Burns phenomenon every community in Scotland, and many in Canada as well, produced its local bards, or perhaps song-writers would be more accurate for many of these effusions were meant to be, and were, sung.<sup>3</sup> It was claimed that the Land of Burns had produced over 3000 poets "of greater or lesser degree," though how this figure was guesstimated is not revealed.<sup>4</sup> As a Montrealer, Ross Roy

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<sup>2</sup> "Critique," *The Scotsman*, 1 November 2008, 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> G. Ross Roy and Michael Gnarowski, "Canadian Poetry, A Supplementary Bibliography," *Culture*, 25:2 (June 1964): 160-170; cf. G. Ross Roy, "We are exiles from our Fathers' Land': Nineteenth-Century Scottish Canadian Poets," *Nationalism in Literature/Literarischer Nationalismus: Literature, Language, and National Identity*, ed. Horst W. Drescher and Hermann Völkel. *Scottish Studies*, 9 (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1989), 299-314; reprinted in Catherine Kerrigan, ed., *The Immigrant Experience: Proceedings of a Conference held at the University of Guelph 8-11 June 1989* (Guelph: University of Guelph, 1992), 111-127; and Waterston, as in n. 6 below.

<sup>4</sup> *Selections from Scottish Canadian Poets Being A Collection of the Best Poetry Written by Scotsmen and their Descendants in the Dominion of Canada*, Introduction by Daniel Clark, The

would have been familiar with the much-loved verses of William Henry Drummond, whose *Complete Poems* with an introduction by Neil Munro was published by McClelland & Stewart in 1926. He may also have known the works of J. M. Harper of Quebec who was born in Johnstone, Renfrewshire.<sup>5</sup>

Another of the bardic crew from Johnstone who made something of a name for himself on both sides of the Atlantic, was Alexander McLachlan, of whom it was observed in 1862 that he was to Canada what Burns was to Scotland.<sup>6</sup> Two years later he was dubbed the “Robert Burns of Canada.” The dubber became something of the duffer following his statement that “In racy humour, in natural pathos, and in graphic portraiture of character, he will compare favourably with the great peasant bard. In moral grandeur and beauty he strikes higher notes than ever echoed from the harp of Burns.”<sup>7</sup> Further hyperbole accrued. McLachlan’s poem, *God*, was said to be equal in “grandeur and sublimity to the best efforts of the greatest Anglo-Saxon or Celtic poets.” His *Balaclava* stood comparison with

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Caledonian Society of Toronto (Toronto: Imrie, Graham and Company, 1909), x.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Ross, *The Scot in America* (New York: Raeburn Book Company, 1896) 405.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Waterston, *Rapt in Plaid: Canadian Literature and Scottish Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001) 25. On McLachlan, also cf. Roy, “Exiles,” as in n. 3 above, pp. 116-118; and Waterston, “The Lowland Tradition in Canadian Literature,” in W. Stanford Reid, ed., *The Scottish Tradition in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 203-231, esp. pp. 208-211. The Roy Collection has a copy of McLachlan’s *Poems and Songs* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose, 1874), inscribed in 1890 to Ross Roy’s great-grandfather by his grandfather W. Ormiston Roy.

<sup>7</sup> *The Poetical Works of Alexander McLachlan*, Introduction by E. Margaret Fulton, *Literature of Canada: Poetry and Prose in Reprint* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974) 11-12. The statement is by Edward Hartley Dewart in his Introduction to *Poetical Works*, quoting his “Introductory Essay,” *Selections from Canadian Poets* (Montreal: John Lovell, 1864) xiii.

Macaulay and Aytoun.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after his death he was characterised as “in many respects, the most thoughtful, the most richly endowed, of all the Scottish American poets.”<sup>9</sup> It is the intention of this investigation to determine whether there is any merit in these somewhat exaggerated claims.

McLachlan and his family are of considerable interest in the context of the mid-nineteenth-century emigrant experience. His father, Charles, a cotton-mill mechanic, went to Canada with his brother Daniel in the 1830s, settling in Caledon Township, Ontario, where they each acquired half of a two hundred acre lot. Daniel was accompanied by his wife and children but Charles left his family at home where he returned to visit them at least twice. Plans of the family joining him were dashed when he died suddenly at Paterson, New Jersey, where he worked winters as a machinist. Back home, Alexander’s upbringing was entrusted to his maternal grandfather, Alexander Sutherland, a Cameronian, and spiritual descendant of the extreme Covenanters, the “suffering, bleeding remnant,” who were severely persecuted by the state for their religious beliefs during the “Killing Times” of the 1680s. This man had a great influence on young Alexander. An unpublished scrap by McLachlan was entitled *Hamilton’s Address to the Covenanting Army before the Battle of Drumclog*:

Long, too long, has the oppressor,  
Trampled o’er this bleeding land.  
For our country, God and Freedom,  
For the covenant we stand.<sup>10</sup>

Short though it is, this is much more effective than Burns’s “Solemn League and Covenant” quatrain (Kinsley II:803).

The other individual who made a lifelong impact on the boy was his teacher John Fraser, who, he later declared, “inspired me with the wish to do something for humanity, and to, by and by, leave the world a little better than I found

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<sup>8</sup> John D. Ross, *Scottish Poets in America with Biographical and Critical Notices* (New York: Pagan and Ross, 1889) 153, 159-60.

<sup>9</sup> Ross, *Scot in America*, 399.

<sup>10</sup> Metro Toronto Public Library.

it.” Years later in Johnstone, in 1874, Fraser presided over a lecture on Shakespeare by his onetime pupil, now billed as the “celebrated Scoto Canadian poet,” who was on tour partly to promote his recent publication, *Poems and Songs*. Fraser also gave the address when McLachlan was presented with an edition of Shakespeare and twenty-four volumes of Scott’s works, publicly subscribed in Johnstone.

At age 13 Alexander went to work in the Paisley cotton mills which he escaped on becoming apprenticed as a tailor in Glasgow. An encounter with Chartism, doubtless inspired by Fraser who was a Chartist activist, bred a lifelong interest. Quite a number of Scottish emigrants to Canada at this time had Chartist sympathies, and it is possible that McLachlan was no exception, for there is some evidence that his political activities necessitated his departure in 1840 at the age of 22. Similar radical political views had earlier forced fellow-poet Alexander Wilson of Paisley to emigrate to America in 1794, where he became known as “The Father of American Ornithology.”<sup>11</sup>

Within a year McLachlan had sold half of his father’s farm and bought another lot in Perth County which he cleared. He married his cousin Clamina (daughter of his Uncle Daniel), by whom he had eleven children. He took two of his sisters out to Canada, but it was not until 1859 that his last sister emigrated along with their mother, who died a year later. In the mid eighteen-forties Alexander moved his growing family back to Caledon. Like Burns he was a poor farmer, resuming his tailoring in the town of Erin which had been founded by Clamina’s brother-in-law, Daniel MacMillan. In time they moved to Amaranth a little north of Erin. He seems to have spent most of his time writing, reading, lecturing and dreaming. He died at Orangeville in 1896. Throughout his life he operated, as did so many of his countrymen, through a Scottish network.

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<sup>11</sup> Clark Hunter, *The Life and Letters of Alexander Wilson* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983) 45-61; Edward J. Cowan and Mike Paterson, *Folk in Print: Scotland’s Chapbook Heritage 1750-1850* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2007) 41-3.

Back in Scotland Alexander had won a reputation for “spouting,” and the muse followed him to Canada. He published *The Spirit of Love and other poems* in 1846, to be followed by three other volumes printed at his own expense. In addition, he contributed to publications in Canada and Scotland. On 25 January, 1859, he spoke at the Burns centennial festival in Toronto, praising his hero as the descendant of “the old blue-bonneted apostles of integrity,” who were responsible for creating a social fabric, “which had its foundation in rectitude and sturdy self-reliance,” informed by the Bible and the ballad. He proudly asserted that Burns stood at “the head of the literature of the working classes.”<sup>12</sup> Alexander then recited his poem “To the Memory of Robert Burns.”<sup>13</sup> The prominent politician Darcy McGee shared the platform with McLachlan on that day. Through McGee’s influence, the poet was appointed Emigration Agent for the Province of Canada in Scotland, a post which demanded a return home in 1862 in search of potential recruits. He targeted Paisley and Glasgow, attracting many weavers to his meetings. In a lecture to the Paisley Emigration Society he stressed the toughness and heroism of the pioneering life and praised winter as the most enjoyable time of the Canadian year. From 1859 McLachlan became a popular lecturer throughout Ontario and New York State, and it may be suspected that Burns was one of his favourite subjects.

There is no doubt that the poet’s empathy with Burns ran deeper than the usual superficial invocation of the bard. A healthy sense of man’s inhumanity to man sustained him until the end of his life. He claimed that since early boyhood he had worshipped Freedom under the Wallace oak at Elderslie, and that sense of freedom was to inform much of his verse. Burns, with all his faults, was his hero:

To thee the noble work was given

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Mary Jane Edwards, in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 1891-1900, vol. 12, online version. This excellent article, which I have shamelessly plundered, has uncovered a great deal of new information about McLachlan.

<sup>13</sup> Published in his *Poems and Songs* (1874), 38-39.



To lift the poor and lowly.  
 Thy words are living, soulful things,  
 Around the world they're ringing;  
 Hope's smiles they bear, and ev'rywhere  
 Set weary hearts a-singing. (95)<sup>14</sup>

There are distinct echoes of Burns in McLachlan's "The Spirits of the Press":

He's but a knave — a party slave,  
 To aims heroic blind —  
 Who'll meanly strive to keep alive  
 The hatreds of mankind.  
 Leave party slurs to hungry curs  
 Who're paid to bark and bite!  
 Trade not for gain your heart and brain,  
 But dare defend the right. (99)

Almost ballad-like is the "The Fisherman's Wife":

Oh, they hae mony ills to dreed,  
 A weary weird to dree,  
 The folk ordain'd to snatch their breid  
 Frae oot the angry sea  
 Oh! little do the big folk ken  
 The struggles o' the poor,  
 The battles o' brave fishermen,  
 Or what their wives endure." (291-2)

McLachlan's "Provost John M'Rae" satirises the man who is on his way to success and greatness because he has acquired a cow:

Weel, Kirsty, since we've got a coo  
 We maun turn Tories, lass:  
 We maunna speak to puir folk noo,  
 But snoul them as we pass.  
 We'll get in wi' the muckle folk,  
 An' min' ma words this day,  
 Ye'll see I'll be nae langer Jock,  
 But Mr. John McRae. (300)

While some of McLachlan's Scottish poems perhaps tend to cleverness rather than brilliance, as in "A Lang-Heidit Laddie" (347) and "Ahead of His Time" (349), there is much merit in such compositions as the "Auld Hawkie" sequence (304, 324, 342), which is redolent with emulations of

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<sup>14</sup> Page references below are to *Poetical Works of Alexander McLachlan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974).

Burnsian language and sentiment. Auld Hawkie was the nickname of William Cameron, a well-known Glasgow patterer who composed and sold chapbooks:<sup>15</sup>

For rich and puir would gather roun'  
 To hear him lay the gospel down  
 Or lash some wicked, graceless loun,  
 In some high station,  
 Wha ground the faces o' the poor,  
 And obstinately, dowff and dour,  
 Misruled the nation.

He placed the culprit in your sicht,  
 And gart you lauch wi' a' your micht—  
 Nae wee bit snicker, but outricht,  
 Wi' sides a' shakin';  
 Or made your heart heave like a sea,  
 For oh, an orator was he  
 O' Nature's makin'!

Productions like “Auld Granny Broon” (318) and “The Warlock o' Gryffe” (328) illustrate his strength “in the weird” that one commentator detected.<sup>16</sup> He shared with Burns a facility for effectively combining horror and humour in his treatment of the supernatural.

The Willie Fulton poems are hugely enjoyable, Willie serving as a kind of alter ego for McLachlan:

Willie Fulton leev'd up 'mang the Gleniffer braes,  
 In a wee flow'ry spot o' his ain;  
 Peculiar he was in his words and his ways,  
 Yet surely he leev'd not in vain . . .  
 I couldna tell a' that was writ in that face;  
 'Twas a volume to study and scan—  
 A guide to oor incomprehensible race  
 On a new and original plan;  
 A kind o' judicial synoptical face,  
 Closely written and a' underlined—  
 A living comment on the haill human race,  
 By Faith, Love and Hope countersigned. (359)

Human dignity and worth pervade “The Cringer Re-buked” (362) and “Poverty's Child” (364). “Clamina” (384) treats of

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<sup>15</sup> Cowan and Paterson, *Folk in Print*, 28-30.

<sup>16</sup> *Poetical Works*, 26.

his personal desolation on the death of his wife, though it is striking that love poetry is conspicuously absent in the McLachlan canon; his world is relentlessly male. “Rein Old Adam In” (386) is an attack on consumerism; “Auld Skinflint’s Dream” (389), hilariously inspired by “Holy Willie’s Prayer,” concerns the thoughts of a miser contemplating his impending death.

I would not wish to convey the impression that McLachlan was exclusively a political poet. Like his mentor he was capable of producing a good deal of rubbish, much of it cringe-inducing and better left unwritten, with the obvious proviso that words written to be sung often appear bathetic in print. He produced many poems of almost unbearable banality, crassly sentimental effusions like those which clutter the pages of anthologies of the Victorian era in both Scotland and Canada. Poems such as “Poverty’s Compensations” and “*Gaun Hame*” are nowadays quite unacceptable. The latter is about death, as are an unhealthy number of McLachlan’s creations:

It’s no’ me that’s deein ava, Mary.  
 It’s no’ me that’s deein ava:  
 It’s but the worn clay drappin aff, Mary  
 It’s but the auld house gaun to fa’;  
 It’s but the caged bird getting free, Mary  
 That soon will soar singin awa’. (66)

Many of his poems dwell upon the meaning of life and death. He clearly had serious doubts about the hereafter and it is fairly certain that for a time his faith deserted him, as evidenced by such examples as “Man” and “A Dream”:

Life’s a great mystery, deeper than Death,  
 Infinite History, woven of breath.  
 Mortal do thou make their meaning sublime. (45)

The theme runs through many other compositions such as “To An Indian Skull” (69), “The Old Ruin Grey” (78), “The Seer” (79), “The Ruined Temple” (84), and “Change” (86). Confirmation of this period of doubt is provided by the 1848 census which lists his household as having “no creed or denomination.” In later life he turned to spiritualism, a topic on which he lectured in both Scotland and Canada.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, as in n. 12 above.

His “Memories of Scottish Literature: An Address to the Scottish Thistle in Canada” is best forgotten with its hopelessly clichéd rhymes. In truth some of what can be assumed to have been his earlier Scottish effusions could have been written by anybody. He apostrophised the River Cart in “Cartha Again,” a favourite theme which figures in several pieces:

Oh why did I leave thee? Oh why did I part  
 From thee lovely Cartha, thou stream of my heart?  
 Oh why did I leave thee and wander awa’  
 Frae the hame o my childhood, Gleniffer an a’? (102).

“I Winna Gae Hame” and “Scotland Revisited” are in similar vein. Rather better is “Recollections of Clydes-dale,” a poem in honour of David Boyle of Greenock who was Archaeologist of Ontario. After much nonsense about “running aboot the braes,” paddling in the rills, celebrating “Benlomond hoar” and the spirit of freedom, the poem ends with:

Just here the muse got aff the track  
 And as I canna ca’ her back  
 Nae langer noo my brains I’ll rack  
 Sae let her gang  
 In hope we sune may hae a crack  
 I quat (quit) my sang. (112)

“The Scot,” a poem for James Bain of Toronto Public Library, demonstrates McLachlan’s sense of humour:

A real enthusiast indeed,  
 His heart is apt to tak’ the lead,  
 And get the better o’ his heid,  
 E’en for a myth,  
 To ruin beyond a’ remede  
 Rins a’ his pith. . . .

He’s gi’en owre muckle to debating,  
 And theologic speculating:  
 On far-aff things he’s contemplating,  
 Lost in a trance:  
 To be, as said, watching, waiting  
 For the main chance. (122-3)

Alexander McLachlan remained poor most of his life because, according to one of his editors there was not a great market for poetry in nineteenth-century Canada. He lacked any kind of patron; “to the struggling pioneer, poetry was no

indispensable desideratum.” Nonetheless it is clear that his poetry did bring some rewards and that his poverty has been somewhat exaggerated. It was stated in 1900 that McLachlan “remained a Scottish bard of the first half of his century, rather than a Canadian bard of the second half, the bard of a glorious dawn” in Canada’s literature.<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Waterston argues that he

remained an emigrant, not an immigrant. He was too tied to his native range of awareness to be able to move on and adjust as poet to his new homeland. It was a mark of his limitation as well as of his achievement that he was always called ‘the Burns of Canada.’<sup>19</sup>

The judgements of both commentators are rather harsh. McLachlan is of great interest precisely because he inhabited two worlds. He was an individual who attempted to keep alive his Scottish identity based on his early life beside the Cart and the Clyde and his experiences as a radical; as such he is a valuable example of how Scots approached Scottishness and kept it alive in exile.

Rather more perceptive is the view of Kenneth Hughes that McLachlan, “Poet Laureate of Labour,” represented a “vulgar” strain of Canadian writing which found little acceptance in the country’s elitist and conservative literary establishment, and W. J. Keith’s comment hailing the poet’s output as “the first notable Canadian example of what might be called proletarian verse.”<sup>20</sup> Such views are somewhat more sympathetic than that of my friend, Professor Waterston, who seems to ask a great deal in expecting McLachlan to adjust poetically, much more rapidly than she thinks he actually did, to his adopted country. He makes the point in poem after poem that the freedom which had eluded him in Scotland was attainable in Canada. Indeed, it will be argued in the remainder of this discussion that McLachlan was deeply committed both emotionally and artistically to Canada, a commitment clearly demonstrated in his later

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<sup>18</sup> *Poetical Works*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Waterston, *Rapt in Plaid* 27.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in introduction to Alexander McLachlan, *The Emigrant*, 1861, ed. D. M. R. Bentley (London: Canadian Poetry Press, 1991, online version).

poetry and powerfully signalled in his ambitious sequence *The Emigrant*, a truly remarkable attempt to encapsulate the emigrant experience, while conferring a poetic identity upon the great new country which sustained him. Of course, since the work is unfinished, his ambition was not fulfilled but the experiment was not a total failure as some recent excellent Canadian criticism has shown.

In approaching this opus McLachlan was able to draw upon some of the remarkable output of the phenomenal amount of literary material about Canada that had already been produced by Scots.<sup>21</sup> In particular, he depended upon John Galt's two emigrant novels, *Bogle Corbet: or, The Emigrants* (1831) and *Lawrie Todd* (1832), as well as Catherine Parr Traill's *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836). The latter and her sister Susanna Moodie, author of *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852), were both married to Scots, so, along with Galt, who in 1827-29 founded the Ontario towns of Guelph and Goderich on behalf of the Canada Company, they probably reinforced McLachlan's sense of the specifically Scottish emigrant experience. For the background to the Gaelic experience he used *Gloomy Memories* (Toronto 1857), by Donald McLeod, who had emigrated from Scotland in 1854 to Woodstock, Ontario.

*The Emigrant* opens with an apostrophe to Canada, "Land of mighty lake and forest," but apostrophizes it as a land lacking a stirring story, a glorious past, and traditions and songs about the deeds of heroes, and so oddly screens out the experience of the native peoples whom most of his fellow immigrant Scots seemed intent upon discussing and describing. For McLachlan, there is no need to seek foreign inspiration when history is being forged in the backwoods, where poetry, "have we but the hearing ear,/Is always whisp'ring near." The emigrant, undoubtedly a close approximation to Alexander McLachlan himself, receives a

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<sup>21</sup> See Edward J. Cowan, "The Scots' Imaging of Canada" in *A Kingdom of the Mind: How the Scots Helped Make Canada*, eds. Peter E. Rider and Heather McNabb (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006), 3-21.

departing sermon from his grandfather in sentiments worthy of Burns:

There's much which we must teach ourselves,  
 That is not taught at college;  
 Without a sympathetic soul,  
 How vain is all our knowledge!  
 Be charitable when you speak  
 Of man and human nature;  
 Who finds no worth in human hearts  
 Must be a worthless creature. (217).

Having described the journey, the “pioneers of civilization/Founders of a mighty nation” enter the forest, depicted as a pristine wilderness bereft of birdsong. The first tree is cut, the log cabin built. The first winter sets in, a time to be whiled away with stories of a hunter’s love for an Indian maid and the singing of ballads from home. A lengthy account of a battle with the native peoples is seriously anachronistic. There follows the tale of the Gael, Donald Ban. The sequence ends with a promise to return to the saga at some future point when the innocence of the first settlers would be shattered by an influx of speculators, jobbers, incompetent teachers, bogus preachers, unqualified physicians and cunning politicians, all intent upon the destruction of the Canadian Eden (209-56). Such pessimism clearly blighted the colony; when McLachlan was appointed Emigration Agent for Scotland, he was no longer at liberty to enlarge upon such negative developments since he was supposed to be recruiting potential emigrants rather than warning them off.

Shortly after he emigrated, McLachlan consciously contributed to the creation of a poetic identity for Canada. In this, art reflected life because his sense of Canadian identity was firmly rooted in his identity as a Scot. His editor rather exaggerated in asserting that McLachlan’s patriotism and love of motherland were even more pronounced than they were in Burns, but Rabbie never experienced exile. We do not know what he would have made of Jamaica. Burns excelled at transforming the familiar into unforgettable poetical experience. McLachlan had to express the unfamiliarity of the Canadian outback in poetic terms. “The Picnic” is rendered as a very *douce* version of “The Holy

Fair.” The acquisition of “Acres of His Own” signifies “the road to independence,” in which Nature’s nobility scorns mock gentility:

Fools but talk of blood and birth  
 Ev’ry man must prove his worth.  
 Up, be stirring, be alive!  
 Get upon a farm and thrive!  
 He’s a king upon a throne  
 Who has acres of his own! (201-2)

There are echoes of some of Burns’s wounding ditties in “Neighbour John,” “dull as stone,” the kind of person we have all met:

Talk not of old cathedral woods  
 Their Gothic arches throwing,  
 John only sees in all those trees  
 So many saw-logs growing. (203)

McLachlan attempted a Canadian accent in “The Backwoods Philosopher” (264) and Old Hoss (282). Several poems look as if they might have been intended for a follow-up to *The Emigrant*, including one in honour of “Backwoods Hero” Daniel McMillan that provides a believable picture of the inherent difficulties in establishing a community from scratch and dealing with its querulous inhabitants (278). McLachlan’s Carlylean “Past and Present” (195) is as shrewdly observed as his poem on the Sage of Annandale himself (308).

He also memorialises old acquaintances such as Hugh McDonald (311) and his teacher John Fraser, the Burns-like Chartist:

A bulwark to the mild and meek,  
 A staff was he to all the weak,  
 A voice for all who could not speak . . .

Oh! why will men not walk erect,  
 Their brows with native glory deck’d,  
 And feel the joy of self-respect,  
 And moral worth;  
 And throw aside their castes and creeds,  
 And make their standard noble deeds—  
 Not blood and birth? . . .

Cast selfishness from out thy mind.



Feel for and with all humankind,  
 Leave nothing but regret behind. (317)

John Fraser's musical talents resulted in an American tour with his own cast of performers in 1852. His daughter, Jeanie, caught a chill from which, after a lingering illness she died in Lanark, Ontario. Fraser then retired to Johnstone, dying in 1879.<sup>22</sup>

If these poems on broadly Scottish themes could be said to preserve McLachlan's philosophy of life then Canadian verses such as "The Man Who Rose From Nothing" (204), "Young Canada Or, Jack's As Good's His Master" (207) and "Hurrah For the New Dominion" (208) celebrate freedom, achievement and human worth in the new land. "The Men of the Dominion" (205) could have been in the running for Canada's national anthem and its sentiments are distinctly Burnsian:

The man of downright common-sense  
 Scorns make-believe and all pretence,  
 Puts intrigue far apart,  
 Despising double-dealing work,  
 And ev'ry little dodge and quirk,  
 With all his head and heart.

With freeman written on his brow—  
 His ancient badge the spade and plow—  
 A true-born son of Adam—  
 A brother of humanity,  
 He shows the same urbanity  
 To plowman and to madam. (205)

What McLachlan's modern critics perhaps fail to stress is that he took values from Burns which he transplanted to, and cultivated in, his adopted country. Admittedly, this was a severely selective Burns which suppressed the bard's sexual escapades and misdemeanours, his absence of thrift, his disagreements with the Kirk, and his supposed over-fondness for the bottle, which latter McLachlan was prepared to overlook. Instead he promoted the man of independent mind, the critic of tyranny, privilege, rank, misbegotten wealth, corruption and Man's inhumanity to

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<sup>22</sup> *Poetical Works*, p. 415, note.

Man. He celebrated Burns's reverence for nature, for honest toil, for education, for individual freedom and the sanctity of human worth and dignity, all values which were regarded in the nineteenth century as ideal qualities in new emigrants, and still treasured by most Canadians today. Burns was thirty-seven when he died, McLachlan seventy-eight. We cannot know how Burns's ideas might have evolved had he lived, but what is remarkable is that McLachlan cherished his passion for poetry and the justice of the Chartist cause until his dying day. He was a lifelong socialist who could celebrate imperial achievement.

His "Scottish Emigrant's Song" won second prize at a Scottish event in Toronto 14 September 1859. It begins with the usual maudlin invocation of heathy hills, golden broom, bonnie glens and wimpling burns but it ends by saying that should France threaten to invade, the Scots can be relied upon:

. . . to put the Lion's foot  
 Ance mair upon his neck;  
 A Highland host in Canada  
 Will don the kilt again,  
 And rush their native land to free  
 Like thunder on the main.  
 And brother Scots owre a' the earth  
 Will stretch a haun to save,  
 We're no the chiels wad sit and see  
 Our mother made a slave.  
 The spirit o' the covenant,  
 Wi' every Scot remains.  
 The blood o' Wallace and o' Bruce,  
 Is leaping in our veins.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, McLachlan composed a paean to Britain, celebrating the visit to Canada of the future Edward VII, in 1860. Scots will defend their queen, Victoria, "the glory of the world," but the poem ends with a slight warning:

May wisdom guide the prince's heart  
 And from all ill preserve it,

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<sup>23</sup> This and the quotations in the remainder of this article are from The Alexander McLachlan papers and appear by kind permission of Metro Toronto Public Library for which the author is extremely grateful.

And we'll be true to him, if like  
His mother he'll deserve it.

McLachlan adhered to the long-standing Scottish constitutional principle that so far as the monarch was concerned loyalty had to be earned.

A great opportunity was missed when in 1974 the University of Toronto Press re-issued McLachlan's *Poetical Works* of 1900, with the addition of a few poems from earlier publications. Unfortunately it did not include any of the author's unpublished poems. The 1900 volume had been edited by a group of the poet's friends who left out some of his more interesting material, apparently highlighting anything remotely Christian but censoring items considered too political. When I once stated at the annual Burns Conference at the University of Strathclyde that I did not know where the missing poems were, a sweet lady suggested that I should look in an archive! Actually I had visited many but I had somehow missed the Metropolitan Library of Toronto which contains various papers arranged by McLachlan's daughter, Mary, most likely for a planned publication. Unfortunately there is at present no trace of what must have been a substantial correspondence, which should contain exchanges with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Oliver Wendell Holmes and James Russell Lowell, all Harvard men. Another correspondent, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was obviously a great influence. McLachlan was not totally fixated on Burns; other favourite *literati* were Coleridge, Shelley, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Scott and Hogg, Carlyle and Ruskin.

Some of the Metro Library poems prove that his radicalism accompanied him to the grave. They may have been written much earlier but the fact that he preserved them is significant. "The Workman's Song" requires no comment:

Come all ye weary sons of toil,  
And listen to my song,  
We've ate oppression's bitter bread,  
And ate it far too long.  
O, poverty's a dreadful thing,  
Her bite is always keen:  
Oppression's foot is always shod,

And greed is always mean.  
 The great, the greasy multitude  
 Should neither think nor feel;  
 They've but to lick the hand that holds  
 Their noses to the wheel.  
 O, they forget the blood of Knox  
 Is running in our veins,  
 Or that we e'er listened to  
 The peasant poet's strains.

"The Cry of the Oppressed" reads almost like a call to revolution:

Tell them the change is close at haun,  
 The voice o' the oppressed  
 Is rising up o'er all the laun,  
 And won't be put to rest.  
 Tell them oure lang they've had the grip,  
 It's greed that bursts the sack,  
 And they maun find some fairer way,  
 The game o' gie and tak.  
 For oh, if they're to guide affairs!  
 If such things are to staun.  
 You'll soon hae nocht but Millionaires  
 And Beggars in the laun,  
 And Liberty shall perish then,  
 And Scotland's thistles wither,  
 And slaves shall till ilk Scottish glen,  
 Where we were bairns thegither.

This was meat too strong for Canadian stomachs in 1900.

In 1896, the year of McLachlan's death, Robert Service arrived in British Columbia. In his so-called "sourdough" poems Service would arguably create a much more long-lasting version of Canadian identity which still persists worldwide than anything produced by McLachlan.<sup>24</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century there were, in any case, many competing cultural, literary and ethnic contributions to the rich Canadian mosaic but Alexander McLachlan could be said to have processed Burns for his fellow Canadians so that

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<sup>24</sup> Edward J. Cowan, "The War Rhymes of Robert Service, Folk Poet," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 28 (1993) 13.

long-standing Scottish values and assumptions, encapsulated by the bard, were made available to the denizens of the new dominion. Such values, in many cases, coincided with those which were deemed desirable in aspiring emigrants, for whom, around Confederation, Scots of a certain type were regarded as something of a benchmark.<sup>25</sup> In poetic achievement, adventurousness, wit, the celebration of love and the human spirit, joy and originality he was far from deserving the accolade of “Robert Burns of Canada,” but he never claimed to be so. By his own account he wished to do something for humanity, and to leave the world a little better than he found it, in which endeavours he certainly did not fail. He was the most accomplished of the Scottish-Canadian poets writing in his day and as such, was as deserving as any to be named Canada’s Burns.

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<sup>25</sup> Edward J. Cowan, “The Myth of Scotch Canada” in *Myth, Migration and the Making of Memory: Scotia and Nova Scotia, c. 1700-1990*, ed. Marjory Harper and Michael Vance (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing/John Donald, 1999), 49-72.