Abstract

The first Canadian society formally devoted to poetry was founded in Vancouver, British Columbia by six local hobby poets on 21 October 1916. Over the course of nearly sixty years, the Vancouver Poetry Society (VPS) matured into a formidable cultural institution, hosting numerous readings, lectures, plays, gala nights, a radio programme and several publishing enterprises. These activities were supported by an exceptional membership of influential Canadian poets: romantics Charles G.D. Roberts and Bliss Carman in the early years of the Society, and later, modernist poets Dorothy Livesay, Al Purdy, and Pat Lowther, among a wide variety of poets, artists, publishers, and playwrights. I argue that the history of the Vancouver Poetry Society is framed by a constant struggle to generate and maintain cultural authority and distinction in the contested spaces of Canadian literature. Produced by the VPS through the mediation of local and national literary publics with its internal politics and aesthetics, its authority functioned only in conjunction with the vibrant, multivocal circulation of varied and often contradictory literary discourses within its ranks.

I document Society efforts to establish authority through an examination of its early history and changes in institutional frameworks into the 1930s, including the appropriation of literary celebrities in the persons of Carman and Roberts, and the adherence to the spiritual and critical language of Theosophy as an ultimate guiding authority. Secondly, I narrate the Society’s accommodation and cautious encouragement of modernism. Finally, I briefly trace the Society’s loss of cultural capital after its increasingly consistent disavowal of modernism.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................... ii
Table of Contents ........................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................... iv
Dedication ......................................................................................................... v

1. Introduction ................................................................................................. 1
   1.1 Retrieving the Vancouver Poetry Society ............................................. 1
   1.2 Uncanny Archival Traces ......................................................................... 4
   1.3 Institutions, Authority and Publics ....................................................... 5
   1.4 Precedents: Literary Societies and Cultural Institutions in Vancouver .... 10

2. A Western Movement: Authorizing the VPS ............................................. 13
   2.1 Beginnings .............................................................................................. 13
   2.2 Constructing Authority: Administration, Publishing and Mandates ........ 16
   2.3 Cultivating Authority: Courting Literary Celebrity .............................. 25
   2.4 Higher Authority: Theosophy and VPS Poetics .................................... 29

3. A “Cacophony of New Verse”: Accommodating the Disruptive Aesthetics of
   Modernism ..................................................................................................... 38
   3.1 Situating a Fragmentary Modernism .................................................... 38
   3.2 “Terrible Things”: The Challenge of Vers Libre .................................... 42
   3.3 Theosophical Modernism: Transitional Figures and Poetics of the 1920s to 1930s .. 45
   3.4 Modernist Advocates: Livesay, Crawley and Marriott in the 1930s and 1940s ...... 56
   3.5 Modernist Disavowal: The 1940s to 1960s ........................................... 62

4. Conclusion ...................................................................................................... 66
   4.1 “A Private Club”: Institutions and Modernism, 1950 to 1974 ............... 66
   4.2 Concluding Questions: Re-Reading the Vancouver Poetry Society ........ 73

Bibliography ...................................................................................................... 76
Appendices ......................................................................................................... 87
   Appendix A: Photographs ............................................................................ 87
   Appendix B: Poetry ....................................................................................... 91
Acknowledgements

My most sincere gratitude goes to a splendid thesis committee for their encouragement, insight and assistance: my co-supervisors Dr. Laura Moss, Dr. Patricia Badir and committee member Dr. Richard Cavell. Your enthusiasm for the project has been my constant motivation.

Many thanks to the kind staff at the City of Vancouver Archives and the Rare Books and Special Collections Library at the University of British Columbia for their untiring assistance in locating items as I removed box after box of materials from their collections.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my dearest father, sister and late mother for their unending love and support.

And to Christina Turner for her invaluable assistance during its composition.
1. Introduction

1.1 Retrieving the Vancouver Poetry Society

When I first climbed the stairs of my new apartment at 2590 West 5th Avenue in the Kitsilano neighbourhood of Vancouver, I was unaware of the remarkable narrative that had occupied the structure nearly a century before. A few weeks in advance of my arrival I had finally succeeded in securing a lease via telephone from my hometown in New Brunswick. Now the 1911 Arts and Crafts residence was to be my home in a new and strange city. Perhaps stranger was that I had unknowingly claimed a space that Canadian editor and publisher Lorne Pierce had memorialized in correspondence some seventy years prior. “There are few homes that shelter so many glorious memories,” Pierce wrote, “Every nook and corner is a reminder of some person, some experience, something that seemed good then and that seems wonderful even now” (qtd. in Grace Fewster 4). That the space carried the burden of many such memories began to be revealed when I chanced to enter the address of the home into a Google Books search soon after having settled in. The result was a brief mention in an essay by R.A. Kizuk contained in Bliss Carman: A Reappraisal (1990). Noting of the poet’s correspondence with Ernest and Grace Fewster of Vancouver, Kizuk quotes from Carman’s letters in which he refers to the Fewsters as his “family at 2590” (Carman 348). To confirm if the 2590 of Bliss Carman’s remembrance was the same as my own, I located the Kate Eastman fonds at Rare Books and Special Collections at University of British Columbia, a collection that promised photographs of Carman visiting Vancouver. Opening a scrapbook, the first image depicted Fewster and Eastman gazing towards the photographer out of what was then my kitchen window. Further photographs in the book included snapshots of Carman and Fewster posing in the home’s garden.¹ An odd coincidence,

¹ Copied in Appendix A, page 87-88.
considering I had travelled to Vancouver with a copy of Carman’s *Later Poems* (1921) that rested on the mantle over which Carman himself had once “chatted around the hearth fire”; and a serendipitous coincidence, as I discovered the opportunity offered by the Vancouver Poetry Society (VPS) as a neglected locus of Canadian literary culture (*Book of Days* 25).

Founded by Ernest Fewster on 21 October 1916, the Vancouver Poetry Society has the distinction of being the first Canadian society formally devoted to poetry. Over the course of fifty-eight years until its end in 1974, the VPS matured into a formidable cultural institution, hosting numerous readings, lectures, plays, gala nights, a radio programme, and several publishing enterprises. These activities were supported by an exceptional membership of influential Canadian authors: Confederation Poets Charles G.D. Roberts and Bliss Carman in the early years of the Society, and later, modernist poets and advocates Dorothy Livesay, Alan Crawley, Anne Marriott, Al Purdy, and Patricia Lowther, among a wide variety of lesser-known poets, artists, publishers, and playwrights. Despite the involvement of these canonical Canadian figures during the Society’s tenure, the VPS has received little sustained critical attention since *The Vancouver Poetry Society, 1916-1946: A Book of Days*, a Society-authored historical memoir published by Ryerson Press in 1946.

My project narrates the history of the VPS collected from a range of primary sources: the VPS fonds at the City of Vancouver Archives, the fonds of individual members at the University of British Columbia Rare Books and Special Collections, the full run of the Society magazine *Full Tide* (1936-74) and *A Book of Days*, among a significant bibliography of members’ poetry publications. Through an examination of the specific institutional frameworks, membership, conflicts, activities, and aesthetics of the Society, I argue that the history of the Vancouver Poetry Society is framed by a constant struggle to generate and maintain cultural authority in the
contested spaces of Canadian literature. Produced by the VPS through the mediation of local and national literary publics with its internal politics and aesthetics, its authority functioned only in conjunction with the vibrant, multivocal circulation of varied and often contradictory literary discourses within its ranks. The participation of intellectually engaged publics during the VPS’s heyday of the 1920s to the mid-1940s exemplified the Society’s careful cultivation and maintenance of literary-cultural legitimacy. When the Society closed its doors to a significant segment of its public in the form of modernist advocates and practitioners, it lost the authority and status it had established over decades of activity. Critical responses to the Society since its end have consistently repeated the point: that the Society remained a bastion of literary traditionalism whose legacy is, for better or worse, still left unexamined. A literary history of the VPS offers an account not only of the Society’s distinctive record of cultural production, but of its rapid decline and subsequent critical absence in Canadian literary history.

Section two follows Society efforts to establish authority and the conditions for authorship in Vancouver through an examination of its early history, changes in institutional frameworks, early publications, and fluctuating interests in national literary culture. The second and third parts of the section argue that cultural legitimacy was actively cultivated in two separate fields: the appropriation of literary celebrities in the persons of Carman and Roberts, and the adherence to the spiritual and critical discourses of Theosophy as an ultimate guiding authority.

Section three describes a second, apparently conflicting source of authority: the accommodation and cautious encouragement of modernist poetics within the Society through to the 1940s. Modernism, though the subject of derision on the part of dominant Society voices, nevertheless created authority from the diversity of VPS associations and the broadening of the
Society’s literary publics, particularly as the VPS hosted established Canadian practitioners of modernist art and literature. As a secondary argument to this section, I suggest that the VPS repositions the history of Canadian modernism beyond its currently limited position to Eastern Canada.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I briefly trace the Society’s loss of cultural capital after its increasingly consistent disavowal of modernism. I argue this stance led to its failed institutional engagements through the 1950s and 1960s, though hosting in its midst a final modernist, the poet Patricia Lowther.

The following sections of the introduction propose the broader critical frameworks of my project in three parts. First, I acknowledge the archival and historiographical aims and limitations of the sections that follow. Second, I examine some of the implications that the study of a society such as the VPS brings forth, particularly in regards to the interrelated interests of institutions, the creation of authority, and literary publics. Third, I offer a brief summary of the precedent of both literary societies in Canadian culture and writing in Vancouver prior to the VPS.

1.2 Uncanny Archival Traces

My first encounter with the image of Fewster and Eastman at the University of British Columbia Archives initiated what would become a profoundly archival project since so little of the Society’s history has been documented. The primary problem in doing so has been communicating the remarkable multiplicity of its narratives. A group comprised of a profusion of voices emerging and disappearing over the course of a lengthy temporal record resists the critical (and admittedly quite personal) desire for a full and complete narrative account. It resists, in the words of Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, the “compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irresistible desire to return to the origin — a homesickness, a nostalgia for the
return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement” (91). While Derrida’s description can apply to all archives, it makes the greatest sense when confronted with the problem of critically encountering a culturally motivated community such as the Vancouver Poetry Society: there is simply too much. Too many poets and poems and too many voices and texts that refuse the interpretive desire to counter their excess. The archival fonds only record the briefest trace of the heterogeneous and multivocal nature of the Society, giving an impression or narrated glimpse of a paper, poem or event in the place of the event itself. Certain voices afforded greater stature within the Society endure for decades, while others enter and recede with little but a few poems to their credit. This project makes what it can of these traces in forming distinct narratives for the Society, but it must be remembered that it represents only a fraction of the archive, and the archive itself is only a trace of the “people of flesh and blood to whom something really happened in the past,” to borrow a phrase from Paul Ricoeur (68). These historical subjects and their fragmentary documentary traces, perhaps epitomized by the eerie gaze of Eastman and Fewster through the window of my former home circa 1930, represent a version of the Freudian uncanny in the familiar rendered unfamiliar. However, these traces are also uncanny in Julia Creet’s secondary definition as “resisting semantic closure”: “memory is never completely recovered, completely known,” and therefore becomes “an unknowing, known and unknowable, together” (267-8). Instead, I offer a literary historiographical “discursive ordering of data” in an attempt to order this “unknowing” (Blodgett 6). I situate the Society archive outside of the archive as much as I depend on the structure and content of the archive itself.

1.3 Institutions, Authority and Publics

As both Derrida and Ricoeur note, the documentary archive is situated in the “house arrest” of the institution (Derrida 2). Victoria Baker’s brief assessment of the VPS for British
Columbia History comes to a similar conclusion in regards to the Society fonds: when the Society dissolved, its “records were directly deposited in the City of Vancouver Archives” and have remained confined to these archives “where the VPS quietly resides today” (22). Baker’s image of the VPS residing “quietly” in the archive suggests a recognition of the institutional nature of archives, particularly in the image of captive traces of the past awaiting escape. For the archive to speak it must exit the institution. Indeed, the problem of the limits of institutionality finds a local correlative in Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art (1991), a collection of essays edited by Stan Douglas. Douglas notes in his preface that the volume offers a “critique of the institutionalization of previously alternative art activities in North America” in order to “determine what of the recent past persists in the present” (11). The Vancouver Poetry Society ought to be counted among these historical exiles as a very particular type of cultural institution that appropriates the structure of institutionality to produce its own brand of authority and legitimacy for a range of literary publics.

Authority, as I use the term throughout the following chapters, constitutes the production of status, recognition and social distinction arising from the dynamic “games of culture,” in the formulation of Pierre Bourdieu, that are constantly enacted between the Society and its broader audiences (Distinction 12). As a largely white, middle-class cultural enterprise, the Society constitutes a struggle in Bourdieu’s terms for the “expression of a privileged position in social space whose distinctive value is objectively established in its relationship to expressions generated from different conditions” (56). In other words, the Society sought the sources of legitimacy, power, status and recognition that are now commonly recognized as cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, capital constitutes “all the goods, material and symbolic ... that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation” (Outline
Cultural capital refers to the recognized accumulation of power and status as a result of these symbolic manifestations that function to create “claims to authority” in relation to other distinctive cultural entities and expressions (Barker 31). Created through the symbolically legitimating processes of institutional organization, social relationships, literary celebrity, material textual production, and the oftentimes idealistic cultural politics of spiritual and aesthetic debate, authority within the context of the Society is the evolving narrative of fluctuating power and status in relation to its publics.

The VPS, like many such societies, signifies a particular kind of mixed public. According to Michael Warner in *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), a public depends upon “a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity” (11-12). In an explanation not unlike Benedict Anderson’s “simultaneity,” wherein national “confidence in [the] steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity” of print media creates an idea of nationhood or belonging, Warner’s conception of the “social imaginary” of a public establishes “common identity ... by [the] independent means” of discourse which “unites strangers through participation alone” (Anderson 26; Warner 75). Furthermore, “no single text can create a public ... since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse” (90). The Vancouver Poetry Society constitutes an interesting mode of partial public in Warner’s terms, since it is both independently “organized through discourse” (literary production, gala events, open lectures, publicly circulating publications and radio broadcasts) but is also constructed by an “external framework” of the *idea* of a society (constitutions, minutes, Presidential addresses, closed membership) which speak to a rather limited group of participants united by a known and restricted membership (Warner 70). As Heather Murray notes in her study of the Canadian Literature Club of Toronto (1915-73), such a
mixture of public and private in the context of localized literary institutions was not uncommon: “Canadian literary societies of the nineteenth and early twentieth century typically saw themselves as ‘projecting societies’ ... whose effects would have a wider public impact” (156-7). The Canadian Literature Club was exclusively a society of readers, and thus its mandate differs from that of the VPS in its single intention to support the reading and interpretation of Canadian literature (Murray 149). However, the publicly oriented aspects of its mandate remain similar. Ernest Fewster relates the mandate of the VPS in the first sentence of his foreword to *A Book of Days* as

1. The study of poetry and poetic criticism.

2. The development of a distinctive Canadian culture capable of appreciating poetry.

3. The encouragement of native poetic talent in Canada.

4. The development of public interest in the work of contemporary poets. (*Days* v).

These “pillars,” as Fewster terms them, indicate a nationally-inflected, public mandate of the VPS that was balanced by a host of localized internal interests and conflicts, particularly over aesthetic issues and questions of authorship. These former, generally private interests were in turn coloured with the spiritualism popular among Society members when the dictum “art must necessarily be the symbol of a spiritual experience” was added as an unofficial “pillar” during the 1920s (*Days* v). Thus, the VPS sits between the public and private, as its discourses circulate between the two spheres of engagement between members and its abstracted local and national literary publics.

The dynamic interchange between the Society’s various publics led to the tenuous creation of its authority. As the Society gained increasing recognition both locally and on the part
of cultural critics in Eastern Canada, artists, authors and other members of the public became motivated to attend its meetings and events, which in turn brought modernism into the fold. Furthermore, the Society looked to literary celebrities and other established cultural authorities as legitimating figures that could be claimed as “Society” authors and popular, public faces for the VPS. Spiritual modes of authority in Theosophy were frequently invoked as a secondary, all-encompassing legitimating discourse. The lyric poetry inspired by Theosophy was read as transcending the petty materialism of other forms of cultural production, figuring the VPS as an institution that, in the minds of many of its members, furthered the spiritual evolution of Western culture. Likewise, the conditions for the cultivation and publication of VPS authors themselves are dependent upon, as Michel Foucault observes, the “the manner in which [discourses] are articulated according to social relationships” (158). Authority emerges from these personal, sociable interchanges as a private and public struggle on the part of members: the struggle for foundation, the struggle for public recognition, and the struggle for the dominant aesthetic values that constitute the history of the VPS. Bourdieu’s essay “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods” is particularly useful in arguing that the latter struggles over aesthetic tastes produce cultural authority:

The struggle itself creates the history of the field; through the struggle the field is given a temporal dimension. The ageing of authors, works or schools is something quite different from the product of a mechanical slippage into the past. It is the continuous creation of the battle between those who have made their names ... and are struggling to stay in view and those who cannot make their own names. (106, emphasis in original).

When the VPS negotiated the literature of its roots in Canadian Confederation poetry and Theosophical verse with new allies in modernism, its cultural authority flourished. As soon as
these discourses ground to a single, monologic end, so did the VPS reach the end of its usefulness. The history of the VPS is, in effect, a circulatory narrative of authority and distinction gained and lost as the cultural sphere of early twentieth century Canada gave way to the changing literary institutional landscapes of the 1970s.

1.4 Precedents: Literary Societies and Cultural Institutions in Vancouver

The Vancouver Poetry Society’s foundation in 1916 had a strong precedent in the history of the reception and creation of literature in Western culture. Emerging from a “longstanding American tradition of self-improvement,” literary societies encouraged the egalitarian reception of knowledge prior to a wider network of state systems designed to fulfill such roles (Gere 384). In Canada, reading societies owed their existence to the educative institutions known as Mechanics’ Institutes beginning in the 1820s and 30s (Vance 118-19). Founded with an “improving agenda,” these institutes typically offered instruction and entertainment to an emerging Canadian middle class (Vance 122). *Come Bright Improvement!* by Heather Murray examines the hundreds of small reading clubs in Ontario that flourished on a similar model as the Mechanics’ Institutes during the greater part of the nineteenth century. These groups emphasized the “rhetorical pursuits” of “reading, composition, declamation, [and] performance” as necessary tools for middle class education (7). Inheriting this tradition, the socially productive agenda of the VPS was initially local in its intended scope. The Society emerged in Vancouver at a time when the city was founding the cultural institutions required to counter the myth of the culturally-vacant “frontier” city isolated from the cultural centres of the East. By 1916, a plethora of cultural institutions had been created to service a growing economically driven and literate citizenry: the *Vancouver Daily Province* appeared in 1898, quickly becoming the city’s largest-circulation paper (Davis 39). The Carnegie Library followed in 1903, collecting under one roof
some 8,000 volumes that had been previously spread across the city, and the University of British Columbia celebrated its first convocation in the same year the VPS was founded (Davis 50, 98). Local literature was also beginning to be published in newspapers and by small, typically commercial presses. Since 1911, a small group of philanthropists labouring under the name “The Pauline Johnson Trust” had privately printed editions of the famed poet’s Legends of Vancouver to enthusiastic local reception (Quirk 212). When Johnson died in Vancouver on 7 March 1913, her funeral procession met thousands of mourners (Davis 76).

When the VPS entered the literary field in the fall of 1916, it was joining a growing landscape of local producers intent on fostering “culture” and cultural capital on behalf a city that was understood as empty of these markers. As Fewster commented in A Book of Days, “we ... recognized that we were builders, and with that knowledge the Vancouver Poetry Society received its sight ... today we stand full grown, potentially and actually useful” (v). Fifty-eight years later by the time of the Society’s last meeting on 21 February 1974, poetry in Vancouver had matured considerably. As Christine Wiesenthal notes, the VPS was something of a cultural throwback in a city then populated by a “spectrum of heterogeneous and protean literary subcultures and classes ... as it birthed postmodernism,” including the likes of George Bowering’s Tish group of poets at UBC (146). Indeed, Bowering was still invoking the imagery of the frontier town in need of poetry in his 1993 survey “Vancouver as Postmodern Poetry.” Speaking of the founding of Tish in the 1960s, Bowering positions himself and his contemporaries as vanguards on the Western front of “void and margin” and, ironically, as marginalized from the East as the VPS had considered itself (122). “There was, as far as they could see,” he writes, “no tradition of Vancouver poetry” because “from 1915 to 1945 Vancouver was a hick town in which any poets were trying to be Kipling” (122, 141). Beyond
Bowering’s self-important need to position his own literary efforts as “new” in a city already populated by a strong history of poetry, his comments point to just how far the VPS’s authority had slipped by its end. Though Thomas Hodd and Forrest D. Pass have both recently offered accounts of the VPS in the pages of *Canadian Poetry*, the former examining the influence of Theosophy on some of the Society’s members’ poetry, the latter arguing that the VPS constituted a brand of British Columbian engagement with the needs of Canadian nationalism, neither work engages with the specificity that the narrative the Vancouver Poetry Society offers, nor the broader literary-cultural frameworks that accurate analysis of the VPS requires.

The members of the VPS, their public works and publications, construct greater cultural histories that remain untold. Unduly absent from critical accounts of Canadian poetry both local and national, obscured by historically determined and taste-based critical discourses, and confined to its present status largely as archival residue, the Vancouver Poetry Society remains a distinctive narrative in Canadian literary history that awaits the telling.
2. A Western Movement: Authorizing the VPS

2.1 Beginnings

On 18 October 1916, Dr. Ernest Fewster circulated the following typewritten note to eight hobby poets living in the city of Vancouver:

The formation of a Poetry Society in this city has been proposed, the members of which shall be those who write and those who love poetry, and the object of the Society to be: The promotion of a wider reading of poetry and the encouragement of beginners. A preliminary meeting will be held in Room 322 Rogers Building, at eight p.m., Saturday, October 21, 1916. Your presence is requested. (Vancouver Poetry Society Minutes, 18 Oct. 1916).

Fewster had evidently consulted Alfred Buckley, then the Vancouver city librarian, for potential comrades, as among his contacts was May Percival Judge, a budding poet who had recently won a city-sponsored sonnet competition in recognition of the 1916 Shakespeare tercentenary (*Book of Days* 1). Judge vividly recounts her experience of meeting the assembly of would-be poets in Fewster’s office: “They carried an air of solemn, detached aloofness, as if they were buttoned up tightly in little worlds of their own” (*Days* 2). When Fewster finally appeared among the “frigid little assembly of strangers,” he vainly attempted to “make them see through the limitation of words his wonderful, far-off vision” where “men and women writers with a mutual interest ... might be able to meet and discuss different forms of poetry” (*Days* 3). The minutes from these early meetings reflect a similar detachment as the poets from the object of these lofty aims: less time is taken in speaking about poetry than the necessity of laying the administrative groundwork.

---

befitting a serious literary society. During the first meeting, Fewster’s aims as outlined in his initial note were carried as the official objects of the Society and Thorlief Larsen, a professor of literature at the University of British Columbia, was elected president.

Over the next three meetings of 2 November and 5 December, 1916 and 9 January 1917, the group actively discussed the shape of their proposed enterprise. A constitution was discussed clause by clause, including resolutions that the Society be comprised of a maximum of “twenty-five producers of verse” and “fifteen associate members” (Minutes, 2 Nov. 1916), that members pay a fee of ten cents per meeting, and that anonymous, type-written poems intended for criticism be sent to the newly-elected secretary, Alice Winlow (Minutes, 21 Oct. 1916). It was not until the meeting of January 9 that the group finally decided on a name for their assembly. A small card in the archives titled “Proposed Names for the Society” lists variations of “The Western Poets’ Club” and “The Society of Western Poets” among its options. “The Coterie” and “The Lucky Seven” (referring to the seven charter members) were also suggested (Days 3).

However, the group decided to localize its mandate not to a broad notion of the Canadian West, but to Vancouver as burgeoning urban centre in order to situate their poetics within the colonialist cultural void of the frontier city.³ As the VPS determined the immediate shape of its public, it also elected Ernest Fewster as President, beginning a 30-year term that would only end with his death in 1947. Though not unchallenged, Fewster’s longstanding presence as head of the VPS played a significant role in the foundation of the Society’s status in Canadian literary circles thanks to his strong beliefs in the socially productive role of poetry, his close correspondence and friendship with Canadian authors such as Bliss Carman, and his lifelong adherence to Theosophy as a guiding order to the activity and work of the VPS.

³ Vancouver has long been conceived of as a frontier, either in the colonialist sense as on the periphery of westward expansion, or more recently, as culturally at a remove from “the centre of national interest” and dominant artistic practice (Sava 49).
The Great War had been the primary motivator for the initiation of Fewster’s venture. In collaboration with Alice Winlow, Fewster issued a small booklet of patriotic verses titled *Poems of Armageddon* for the benefit of the Belgian War Relief Fund shortly after the German invasion of 1914. The spectre of war remained foremost in the minds of Society members over ensuing years. Surplus money from the Society was to be donated to the Prisoners of War Fund, and earlier, a Mrs. Birdsall who was to address the Society was incapacitated by “Nervous shock over the death of her eldest son” serving in France (Minutes, 5 Dec. 1918; Minutes, 22 Mar. 1917). Under the duress of wartime, the Poetry Society arrived to faithfully “carry on the fight for the goal of true poetry,” in the words of Fewster, “true poetry” being any works that fit his aesthetic preference for mystically inspired lyric verse (*Days v*). As John Garvin writes in the foreword to his anthology *Canadian Poems of the Great War* (1918), Canadians, “involved for the first time in a life and death struggle,” composed poetry to resist the “moral and spiritual degeneracy” against which the war was fought (4, 3). “Poets are the seers and prophets of a nation,” he concludes, “Their function is to interpret life and nature in terms of beauty and passion, and through imagination and inspiration, reveal the Infinite and the True” (3). Fewster’s 31 May 1918 paper to the Society titled “Why Does a Poet Write?” arrives at the same conclusion:

> The true poet [is] ungoverned by any consideration but impelled to express, despite the limitation of human speech, the vision of Truth, and therefore, Beauty ... The mystic fire of creative thought could not be poured into arbitrary moulds but would determine its own matrix of form and expression, as the pauses between the dark thunder and the revealing lightning. (Minutes, 31 May 1918).

4 Two selections are copied in Appendix B, page 91.
The dynamics between abstracted notions of true poetry and the often resolutely material life and activity of the VPS fit Fewster’s metaphor of the pause between dark and light nicely. This chapter examines an isomorphic series of VPS activities that together give a portrait of its search for cultural capital: its administrative structure, publications and associations; its cultivation of recognized Canadian authors as VPS members; and its enduring relationship with the higher authority of heterodox spiritual belief through Theosophy. All three examples of VPS life are works initiated and practiced in order to achieve authority and status. They represent a search for publics through the local structures of institutional arts organization, textual production and pretensions towards national influence that were further cultivated by Canadian literary celebrity and the distinct poetics and critical language of Theosophy. Crucially, these efforts function as structures for authorization by creating, attracting and captivating the publics that functioned to create the Vancouver Poetry Society as a society: a publicly-oriented, active and potentially relevant social entity with clout, legitimacy and power in the field of Canadian culture.

2.2 Constructing Authority: Administration, Publishing and Mandates

The evolving objectives, structure and mandates of the Society give a strong portrait of its changing membership, audience and purpose over the course of Fewster’s tenure as President. As the Society grew, and its cultural capital increased, the institutional structures of the VPS shifted in response. Similarly, as its formal mandates broadened to national topics, the divide between its public and private worlds became greater. Membership within the Society grew increasingly limited and more difficult for the public to obtain, while publishing enterprises, lavish public events and collaborations with other literary institutions began to extend the Vancouver Poetry Society’s aims to greater notions of national influence. As the Society earned
greater cultural capital, its early investment in the material realities of localized action and institutional structure gave way to increasingly abstracted purposes on the national literary stage.

Ernest Fewster’s insistence in the foreword to *A Book of Days* that the four “pillars” cited in the introduction were introduced “shortly afterward” their first meeting may be true, but they were not officially introduced into the VPS constitution until its renewal in 1932. Rather, the constitution crafted during their 2 November 1916 to 6 February 1917 meetings created a rather sparse set of aims that would remain in place for the next fifteen years. The objectives of the society were concluded to be:

- **Within the Society:** To cultivate and popularize Poetry as an art, and for its own sake, and To arrange for its possible publication as discretion. Under the auspices of the Society: to establish a Local Laureateship, to be decided in open competition and To invite addresses on subjects of poetical interest. (“The Vancouver Poetry Society Constitution [1916]”).

These aims reflect a primary interest in the cultivation of literature in the city of Vancouver. Though the Laureateship would never occur, and publication ventures would remain limited until the introduction of the magazine *Full Tide* in 1936, the stated objectives reflect a generalist organization more concerned about the social status, legitimacy, and welfare of poetry as cultural capital within the context of a developing city and province, than explicitly nationalist attempts in the creation Canadian culture which would emerge as a pressing concern in the years to come.

The first stage was to organize and act within a limited local context. It was during this period that the membership formed a general structure and schedule for its genteel gatherings that would remain relatively unchanged until the Society’s last meeting in 1974. Once or twice yearly the Society held a private “Members’ Night” restricted to active members who would
gather to present new works of poetry subject to criticism and discussion, allowing for a fixed
and private sense of community within the boundaries cultivated by authorship. In contrast, the
Society would hold an annual public “Gala Night,” oftentimes at a well-known location such as
the Blue Room of the Hotel Vancouver, featuring lavish programs including lectures by local
cultural figures, classical music, little theatre performances, and plenty of members’ poetry. Gala
or “open” nights as they were sometimes termed, cultivated a public that would in turn support
the Society through membership, press and the circulation of VPS texts. The backbone of the
Society consisted of its regular general meetings at members’ homes. Open to guests, these
events would typically consist of a selection of opening poems by members or a popular poet, a
keynote lecture by a member, academic or author, and an informal social discussion. General
meetings performed the greatest social work of the Society and produced the most capital,
cultural and otherwise, by interfacing between its public and private life. Members paid to attend
each separate meeting and during these events they were expected to engage both intellectually
and socially through the contribution of original poetry, critical thought, and assistance in the
social enterprise of the Society. Here VPS discourses were debated, authorized, and later
reproduced in public venues either directly through VPS events and publishing or indirectly
through members’ published poetry and essays. Other than the occasional field trip to the
Burnaby Arts and Crafts retreat of Aubrey Goodall and one failed attempt to meet at Stanley
Park (the mosquitoes proved to be particularly anti-poetic), yearly sessions held true to this
format with little alteration over the Society’s long history.

The minutes during these early years are coloured by the presence of H. Bromley
Coleman, a young man for whom the company of the Society seemingly provides endless
enthusiasm. His hyperbolic language, usually depicting Society events in overladen terms
bordering on the ironic, likely comes from his active membership in the Vancouver Vagabonds Club (1914-28), a popular Vancouver gentleman’s literary society which shared several active VPS members including charter members Aubrey Goodall and Lionel Haweis. The Vagabonds’ membership privileged witty repartee during gatherings: “it was not the verbal barrage itself that mattered; it was the content and the way you delivered the barrage” (Gore ii). Coleman’s minutes are therefore rarely neutral: his insights into the interests and occasional absurdities of the VPS are useful in reconstructing a sense of their internal culture.

Coleman’s tenure ended in 1928 when he returned to his birthplace in Great Britain. During the period between 1916 and 1928 the Society witnessed the rapid growth of its membership to an average of 50-60 paying members per year, and correspondingly, its activities and administrative structure (VPS, “Membership Lists”). With increasing numbers of members came not only greater revenue, but also public awareness of the Society’s status. By the gala night of 29 March 1925, for example, the local dignitaries’ table counted among its members pioneer Okanagan playwright Carroll Aikins, the jurist and historian Robie Lewis Reid, and journalists Bernard McEvoy and J. Francis Bursill (better known by his pen name “Felix Penne”) (Minutes, 29 Mar. 1925). Due to its growing public profile, the group initiated an ill-conceived structure dividing the VPS into A and B sections in 1924, the first being confined to only producers of poetry, while the second was open to appreciators and authors alike. The split goes unmentioned in A Book of Days, though it was likely initiated due to the pressure of greater membership combined with a desire for the elitist coterie of writing poets to separate from those motivated by a mere interest in literature. Meetings of each section were held alternately during the month at Fewster’s home and the Theosophical Rooms at 33 West Hastings. Coleman

---

5 A transcript of his minutes for 3 April 1926, in which Charles G.D. Roberts makes an appearance, is copied in Appendix B, page 92.
disdains the “motion to sever the Society’s Siamese Twins” at the initial 6 December 1924 meeting which decided upon the split, and general dislike of the separation caused constant grumbling until the structure was dissolved at an executive meeting on 23 October 1926 (Minutes, 6 Dec. 1924; Minutes, 23 Oct. 1926). A further response to the growth of the Society’s cultural mandates during the 1920s called for a change in its out-dated constitution, a process that took up a large portion of meetings during 1932 and into the late 1930s. The “pillars” adopted by Fewster, cited in the introduction to this thesis, were carried into the constitution, though “The development of a distinctive Canadian culture capable of appreciating poetry” replaced the original “The encouragement of the speaking of English verse,” a switch that demonstrates the increasingly nationalist consciousness of the VPS (“Vancouver Poetry Society Constitution [1932]”). While local realities remained a focus, the VPS was officially broadening its mandate to occupy and influence an increasingly abstract national space.

As Forrest D. Pass argues in his paper on British Columbian literary nationalism, the VPS, largely through the influence of A.M. Stephen and his 1925 Dalhousie Review paper “The Western Movement in Canadian Poetry,” was beginning to conceive of itself as contributor to a national culture that could be refashioned “along regional lines” (Pass 45). The “Western Movement” was a manifesto for national cultural production wherein British Columbia was positioned as the new “centre of cultural innovation” that Stephen hoped would unite literary communities across the country in nationalist spirit (Pass 69). During the A and B section split, the minutes record a reference to the VPS as a “Western School of Poetry” as an attempt to brand the VPS as a distinctly unified aesthetic collective rather than the more diluted “society” it actually was (Minutes, 4 Dec. 1924). As Stephen writes in “The Western Movement,” West coast poetry is youthful in its “exuberance ... its confidence, its wise recklessness, its disdain of
worldly considerations” wherein “East meets West” (213). The latter phrase has two implications: the first is the possibility of uniting Canadian poetry into national experience already understood by Stephen as represented in British Columbia as a centre of “the world vision of the New Age” (217). The second offers an interpretation the mysticism of the Orient as imported and accommodated by the Pacific Rim location of Vancouver, a blending that Thomas Hodd argues is central to the Society’s embrace of Theosophy to be discussed in the final section of this chapter (51).

Despite its bifurcation, the VPS cultivated strong links with established cultural authorities during the period. Cordial, if distant, relations with the Canadian Authors’ Association were initiated in 1926 when the VPS held a banquet as part of the CAA’s first convention held on the West Coast. The CAA convention was primarily concerned at the time with its role as a national entity. Watson Kirkconnell’s secretarial report for the convention noted the “disquieting tendency towards sectionalism and disintegration into a mere group of literary societies across Canada … the Association needs to move in the opposite direction and make itself more definitely felt as a national organization” (qtd. in Harrington 98). The Vancouver Poetry Society was one such sectionalized group poised at the periphery of the CAA’s power and the VPS “vigilantly defended its turf against the CAA and other national bodies” with the belief that centralization “might stifle local creativity” (Pass 48-9). The VPS had the preservation of its own cultural capital in mind: the 1926 banquet was characterized by poet and critic Lionel Stevenson as one that transformed the Society from “the obscurity of a small, unpublicized, local club” to “its due place as one of the vital forces working towards the creation of a Canadian culture and a Canadian vision” (Days 30). Furthermore, the Society began cultivating cross-border relations through a unique lectureship exchange with the Seattle Poetry Club in 1927.
A.M. Stephen attended a conference of poets in the summer 1927 and delegates from Seattle are frequently represented at meetings into the 1940s (Minutes, 3 Sept. 1927). During a period when CAA was faced with the problem of fostering centralized Canadian literary organization, the VPS was taking its own actions to increase its publics and extend its influence beyond the boundaries of the nation.

A second source of authority came in the form of the Vancouver Poetry Society chapbook, a production that was the first of its kind in Canada. Modelled after the Arts and Crafts works of Claud Lovat Fraser of the London Bookshop, the publication is often cited as the inspiration for Lorne Pierce’s long-running Ryerson series of poetry chapbooks (Baker 21). As the opening editorial for *Full Tide* claims, the book was used as a model for the series “after a courteous request by the firm” (Anonymous, *FT* 1.1). VPS member Janet Eaves was primarily responsible for initiating interest and publishing the work. Eaves had been an active participant in the VPS since 1917 when she describes having been “allowed to tag behind [her husband Aubrey Goodall]” at a meeting and “promised to say nothing ... I had no qualifications except an objection to being left alone in the bush” (*Days* 6). Eaves describes feeling intimidated among the group with little writing experience herself, but having “disgraced [herself] by daring to argue with [Fewster] when Graphic Art” was being evaluated, her persistence meant she was “duly elected to membership” (Ibid.). At the 31 January 1925 meeting Eaves gave a lecture on the artist Claud Lovat Fraser, passing around examples of the chapbooks produced in London, before submitting a proposal do the same (Minutes, 31 Jan. 1925). Following the proposal, funds were raised by subscription at subsequent meetings. During one such meeting, editor and publisher Lorne Pierce declared that the “‘V.P.S.’ and the ‘Group of Seven’ in Toronto were the two most active and fruitful” groups of artists in Canada, a significant mark of approval from an
Eastern cultural authority no doubt due in part to the active work on the part of Eaves in compiling the chapbook (Minutes, 28 Feb. 1925). Evidently, the public actions of the VPS, as it entered the realm of material textual circulation, could create significant cultural capital even further afield.

The chapbook was finished on 17 October 1925 with thirteen woodcuts by Eaves and printed by local photographer Charles Bradbury on Van Gelder handmade paper (VPS, Letter to R.E. Watters). The book was considered the first of an ongoing series, but Eaves departed for England the following year, and though there were half-hearted discussions of creating a second volume, Eaves’ energy was lost and the project abandoned to other ventures. The aims of the chapbook would be revived when the long-running Society magazine *Full Tide*, issued tri-annually and limited to the poetry of members, began publication in 1936. Both publishing enterprises functioned to legitimate Society work by placing it in print and before an audience, extending the Society’s publics beyond the immediacy of local events or meetings to a variety of print media that could be engaged as discursive texts. Combined with an impressive array of published works by VPS poets, these publications sought to “extend [the] circulation” of the VPS as a society beyond the limits of personal membership into the realm of public discourse, albeit still located within the knowable social entities of Vancouver citizens, literary critics, readers of Canadian literature and other authors (Warner 106).

The Society’s balance in interest between local and national cultural politics coupled with a rising profile naturally led to some interior tension. A 23 May 1936 motion was passed requiring new members to have two sponsors who were already members of the VPS to act on their behalf, essentially functioning as gatekeepers of taste (Minutes, 28 May 1926). In the same manner, it was resolved that no guest could attend more than twice “in either half of any
session,” therefore increasing the divide between the Society’s private and public manifestations (Ibid.). Though the Society had become increasingly invested in national influence, its local presence sought to preserve the private exclusivity of literary sociability. More dramatic was John Mecredy’s challenge to Fewster’s previously unquestioned position as lifelong President. Fewster had resigned as President (though he remained on the executive committee) for a short period between 10 September 1927 and 6 October 1928 owing to the “pressure of professional duties” (Days 31). His absence as related in the Society history was considered no less than a tragedy and apparently led to “the gradual falling off in the attendance of members” though the minutes during this period record no lapse in activity (Ibid.). Thus, the written 12 October 1935 challenge from Mecredy created considerable scandal. Mecredy proposed that “No Officer or Member of the Executive of the Society (other than Charter Members who are automatically Life Members of the Executive), may hold the same office for more than three consecutive years,” meaning that Fewster, though always a member, could not be consistently re-elected as President each year (Minutes, 12 Oct. 1935). “I believe such an amendment to be essential to the life, progress and vitality of the Society,” Mecredy wrote, “especially so in a group that wishes to develop initiative, independent thought and creative activity in the minds of its members” (Ibid.). Only one unnamed member supported the motion and it was duly put aside until Mecredy could appear before the membership himself. He apparently never did, as the subject was not discussed again until a business meeting on 28 May 1936 where it was resolved “that in view of the fact that this Notice of Motion was fully discussed on the occasion of its second reading at the meeting of October 12th, 1935, when it was plainly shown that the majority was not in favor of the passing of such a Motion, the notice of Motion be put aside” (Minutes, 28 May 1936). At a full meeting on 14 November 1936 it was carried that all reference to Mecredy’s dissent be
struck out of past minutes. Despite his insistence otherwise, the incident was clearly aimed at Fewster rather than the abstract institutional role of President. Mecredy was treated particularly harshly for his challenge because Fewster had so admirably stood as the public face of the organization: he had the uncanny ability to foster the recognition and status the VPS desired. As the next section details, Fewster’s careful cultivation of Canadian literary figures made him a functional agent of publicity for the Society in the circulation of literary bodies and the cultivation of authorship.

2.3 Cultivating Authority: Courting Literary Celebrity

Aside from the legitimacy afforded by formal organization, the Society took great pains to cultivate strong relations with recognized cultural figures, a tact that not only leant the organization legitimacy, but also effectively appropriated largely Eastern or otherwise prominent cultural figures as having found their “spiritual home” in Vancouver. Literary celebrity functioned for the VPS as a fluid source of cultural capital, as poets such as Bliss Carman could be adopted as Society figureheads largely through their mere attendance at events. However, Carman’s specific case involves a particularly close relationship with the VPS. Initiated through a series of social and sexual relations, his lifelong association with the Society remained able to signal rapture among VPS members into the 1960s.6

Bliss Carman’s first appearance in Vancouver occurred during his successful Western reading tour of 1921. Among the large crowds that turned out to meet the “unofficial” Poet Laureate of Canada at nearly every stop were a group of admirers from the Vancouver Poetry Society7 (Gundy 273). Prior the tour, Carman had battled over a decade of ill health and the

---

6 One such exchange is an admiring 1961 interview between Kate Eastman and Roy Lwother in which Lwother’s questions touch on such topics as Carman’s “great kinship with the mountains” and his reputation as a “great comedian” (Eastman, “Bliss Carman”).

7 See “To Bliss Carman” (1923) by A.M. Stephen, Appendix B, page 94.
fading of his celebrity (McGillivray 12-13). Indeed, Fewster had initiated correspondence with Carman precisely due to his health, enclosing a cheque for Carman’s mounting medical expenses following a series of illnesses which were publicized by Mary Perry King, the poet’s “sometime lover and closest companion” (Gundy 267; Mount 3). Carman met Fewster, A.M. Pound and A.M. Stephen during his first visit to Vancouver and Fewster hosted Carman at his home for dinner (Eastman, “Bliss Carman. His First Meeting”). The minutes for 1921-22 are unfortunately absent from the record, though Carman did not reappear in Vancouver until the summer of 1922, returning as the newly-elected Honourary President of the VPS, an event that required the creation of such an office in the constitution. Clearly, the VPS wished for Carman as an ally. In the meantime, he had begun a newfound romance with Kate Eastman following their initial meeting at a lecture in London, Ontario (Gundy 286). Eastman herself headed west to visit her brother in Vancouver in July of 1922. Arriving in August, she met with the Fewster family for dinner on the recommendation of Carman (Days 24). Carman himself reunited with Eastman in late September, spending several days at her brother’s camp on Bowen Island followed by six weeks with the Fewsters at their home with Eastman, who began completing secretarial work for the poet (Eastman, “Bliss Carman. His First Meeting”). Having departed for California en route back East, Carman continued a strong correspondence with Fewster, commenting on his “lonely pangs for B.C. and the mountains about Vancouver” and as “haunted with homesickness” for the Fewster family (Carman 307, 312). During this time Eastman was demoted from lover to literary agent and platonic friend due to the jealousies incurred by Carman’s continued relationship with King (Miller 249). It was Eastman, however, who organized his second tour of Canada which brought him to Vancouver as its last stop, where he was detained for two weeks thanks to adoring crowds at “unscheduled impromptu gatherings” (Miller 252).
One such gathering was with the Vancouver Poetry Society on 16 February 1924 and the first of many times Carman would appear formally or informally before the group. Bromley Coleman seems incapable of containing himself in his minutes and the events of the meeting are difficult to interpret through his hyperbole. A short stop in Vancouver in April of the following year brought him again into the company of the VPS. Reading the poem “Sanctuary,” Carman requested that the Society support the upcoming visit of Charles G.D. Roberts, who would be arriving in Vancouver on the 18th (Minutes, 11 Apr. 1925). Fewster concluded the event by reminding Carman “that his real home was Vancouver,” and the recorder for the evening notes that the poet’s appearance “stands out prominently in the annals of the Society as one of those which amply justify its existence” (Ibid.). Carman’s literary celebrity not only graced its ranks with a recognized, highly popular poet: it authorized the Society’s relevance. At the next meeting on 25 April 1925, Charles G.D. Roberts duly made his first appearance where he read an unpublished humorous poem titled “To Bliss and his Wheel.” Written during his youth spent with Carman, the poem “perhaps more than anything else brought out the deep love existing between these two men,” according to the recorder, an affection which was gradually redeveloping following fifteen years of estrangement after a 1907 “quarrel ... over Mrs. King’s influence on his writing” (Minutes, 25 Apr. 1925; Miller 255). In the span of a few short months, the VPS had secured the support of two of Canada’s most heralded authors, and perhaps enabled their reconciliation. The inclusion of Roberts and Carman into the fold meant appropriating them from the literary “East” even as far as insisting on submitting an oft-mentioned “rumour” to the minutes “to the effect that Mr. Roberts might make Vancouver his permanent home in the near future” (Minutes, 25 Apr. 1925). Over the next several years, Roberts and Carman would make

---

8 Coleman himself gave a paper titled “The Great Adventure” to which Carman apparently commented (in Coleman’s words) on the “submerging effect of ungovernable rhythm in relation to ideas - the momentum of emotion in ecstatic contortion crushing out the infant vision of beauty and truth.” (Minutes, 16 Feb. 1924).
multiple appearances at VPS meetings and events. Roberts in particular stayed most of the spring and summer of 1926 and into the spring of 1927, observing at the 27 November 1926 meeting that “for a period of years, his Muse had deserted him. After his visit to Vancouver last year, the atmosphere of our ‘Magic Coast’ had led to an awakening which had resulted in poetry”\(^9\) (Minutes, 27 Nov. 1926).

Both Carman and Roberts were on hand for the 5 March 1927 recital in honour of Fewster’s first published book, *My Garden Dreams* (1926)\(^10\) where Carman took the chair of a meeting “for the first and only time in his life” (*Days* 29-30). Later the cousins, posing alongside Pierce, Fewster, A.M. Stephen and Dalton, appear in an iconic VPS photograph.\(^11\) Surely, as Fewster suggests in *A Book of Days*, the Society “was carrying out its intention of bridging the literary chasm between East and West” (30). Probably poking fun at this posing on the part of Fewster, Bromley Coleman concludes that it was not the VPS in which East and West met, but the person of Kate Eastman (Minutes, 19 Feb. 1927). Carman’s last visit occurred during May 1929 when he made a brief visit to the Society and the Fewster family and took a picnic on the Indian River Road in North Vancouver. Fewster relates in a short memorial essay titled “Bliss Carman at Vancouver” how Carman was “unusually happy” during his last visit, but expressed an “anxious tenderness in his speech and dealing with all of us” (26). Photographs taken during the event\(^12\) by Grace Fewster record the doctor towering paternally over a bashful Carman and Eastman: truly Carman at Vancouver was the member of a “family romance” which R.A. Kizuk argues Carman sought the entirety of his life (158). These images of the heralded Confederation

---

\(^9\) The recorder concludes, “It is evident that his artistry, and convincing power have not been diminished by his long silence. The FATHER OF CANADIAN POETRY is still one of Canada’s youngest and most virile sons. If he wisely decides to stay in Vancouver ... at least, to visit us frequently, we feel that he will add splendidly to his notable contribution to our literature.” (Minutes, 27 Nov. 1926).

\(^10\) Excerpts are copied in Appendix B, page 92.

\(^11\) Copied in Appendix A, page 90.

\(^12\) Copied in Appendix A, page 89.
poets joined with Fewster, Dalton and Stephen constituted a remarkable coup for the fledgling Society. Roberts and Carman were, for their part, attracted to the VPS through a combination of shared interests and aims. They certainly had admirers: Society members were unquestioningly ardent in their love for their works, particularly those of Carman (Pass 55). As Thomas Hodd has observed, Carman and Roberts were also attracted by common interests in Theosophy (50). Carman’s letters to Fewster are suffused with references to Theosophy during his travels and he credited Fewster and A.M. Stephen for having “converted” him (Gundy 316). Most importantly, perhaps, the VPS signified an energetic and close-knit renaissance in Canadian poetry on the Western frontier that had all but died in the East. The work of the Montreal modernists was yet to receive widespread recognition and little other notable poetic activity during the period centred in any particular author or group (Thompson 360). Roberts’s attendance fell off almost completely after Carman’s death, though he served as Honorary President from 1937 until his death in 1943. Though Carman and Roberts offered a significant measure of authority merely through the transfer of their fame and recognized cultural capital, this aspect of Society efforts was impossible to maintain as literary celebrity itself waned for a time in Canada. The Society never gained another celebrity from whom they could claim so much pleasure by counting him as “one of their own.”

2.4 Higher Authority: Theosophy and VPS Poetics

The overt aims, interests and aesthetics of the Vancouver Poetry Society were never entirely uniform over time, as the previous examination of their changing mandates indicates. However, the Society did possess a relatively consistent aesthetic philosophy in the form of Theosophy. Though the word “Theosophy” never appears in Society minutes or other

13 For example, a clipping in the VPS archives from an unidentified newspaper reprints the photograph with the byline “Poets of National Fame Are Caught By the Camera.” The caption suggests that the image “is the only one in existence showing Dr. Carman and Dr. Roberts together” (Anonymous, “Poets of National Fame”).
documents, the group’s members, visitors, poetic output, and most importantly, its aesthetic and
critical vocabulary, evidence a longstanding affinity with the heterodox spiritual tradition
popular from the 1890s through to the 1940s among Western intellectual elites. Thomas Hodd
has argued in his essay on the influence of Theosophy in the works of Annie Charlotte Dalton,
A.M. Stephen and Fewster that the spiritualist beliefs of prominent VPS members created an
alternative mode of poetry that marks them as “not simply imitators of their Romantic
predecessors” but as innovators deeply concerned with the cause of using poetry as a medium for
revealed spiritual truths (51). Theosophy afforded the Society a critical structure and aesthetic
foundation whose traces last long into VPS records even as the overt evidence of its spiritual
influence has faded from the poetry itself. The expression of Theosophy in its poetry and critical
output, particularly in A.M. Stephen’s “Western Movement” paper, leant the VPS a third,
distinct source of “higher authority” understood by members as unconfined to the perceived
materialism of other cultural producers in Canada. Theosophical discourses invoking morally
superior claims to universal or mystic truths, arcane or hidden knowledge and anti-materialism
are legitimating, authorizing processes that provide an even greater purpose for the VPS: the
spiritual evolution of Western culture. As Ernest Fewster writes in the final Presidential Report
presented to the Society before his death:

Let us make of our VPS a peace centre where we can rest & gather strength and peace for
distribution to our fellow men. The new ... age has come in in blood as promised[.] I fear
that it will for sometime continue in blood, distrust and above all material and individual
selfishness. We as poets of Higher Things as ambassadors of peace to our fellows must
first obtain that peace in our own hearts. We must walk the waves of our own storm &
still them ... Let us inhabit a peace centre in ourself[,] a rock of refuge for our fellows[,]
an island of calm were those our brothers & sisters may come & rest in peace & so find strength for their souls. If our poetry can mean that for ourselves & give that to our own neighbours in their need then the Vancouver Poetry Society will have justified its existence. (“President’s Report,” 1 June 1947).

Theosophy occupies a longstanding, if frequently unacknowledged, position alongside the history of Western religious traditions as a source of esoteric knowledge and exegesis (Campbell 13). Derived from its Greek roots, “theos,” meaning God or the divine, and “sophia,” being “wise” or “wisdom,” the term refers to a broad heterogeneous body of thought and practice ranging “from Christianity’s beginning to the present day” which incorporates knowledge associated with the various occult, spiritualist and hermetic movements that have persisted over millennia (Versluis 100; Campbell 11). Helena Blavatsky, a Russian spiritualist whose writings form the foundation of modern Theosophy, and her co-founders, Henry Steele Olcott and William Quan Judge, appropriated the term by naming their group the “Theosophical Society” in 1875. The Society is both of and distinct from the wider tradition of Theosophy. In the words of Olcott, its basis is a concern for the interpretation of “‘ancient wisdom ... [the] primeval source of all religions’” with the aim of elevating humanity through the revelation of esoteric knowledge of the cosmos (qtd. in Campbell 29). The Society’s original objectives were “to oppose the materialism of science and every form of dogmatic theology, especially the Christian ... to disseminate a knowledge of the sublime teachings of that pure esoteric system of the archaic period, and finally, and chiefly, to aid in the institution of a Brotherhood of Humanity” (qtd. in Greenwalt 3). Their broad concerns render Theosophy a notoriously synthetic doctrine that Peter Washington suggests was the result of the “nineteenth-century preoccupation [with] the search for a single key that would solve the mysteries of the universe” (9).
In Canada, Theosophy had a profound influence on the intellectual elite during its heyday of the 1920s and 30s. As Michèle Lacombe notes in the survey “Theosophy and the Canadian Idealist Tradition: A Preliminary Exploration,” Theosophy is “one of the least investigated strands of Canadian intellectual history,” and yet left a significant legacy of Canadian cultural production during its height between the 1920s and 1930s (100). The clearest adherents of Theosophy within the VPS were also its most active members, a condition that was not a coincidence. Theosophists were “joiners”: they served as members of various clubs and associations with “equal success and enthusiasm” as their devotion to Theosophy, a tendency no doubt encouraged by the Theosophical Society’s tenet of “Universal Brotherhood” (Lacombe 103). However, adherents were not always publicly forthright about their associations, making the absolute determination of certain VPS members difficult to determine (Ibid.). Rather, Theosophists attempted to communicate their beliefs through other cultural products: poetry and literature were a primary mode as entries into public discourse. This is not to infer, however, that the VPS was univocal in its adherence to Theosophical doctrines. While some members were fervent adherents, such as the Fewsters, others were merely interested, and others still absorbed its critical terminology without wholly committing themselves to the cause. Indeed, though some of Bromley Coleman’s poetry clearly speaks to Theosophical concepts, his minutes occasionally adopt a sarcastic tone to Theosophy’s predominant rhetorical mode of ecstatic revelation combined with its insistence on inaccessible, mystical truths.

The first indirect reference to Theosophy comes from the recorder’s (probably Coleman) comments on Alice Winlow’s poem “Voices,” the lines of which “[stir] a primal consciousness, and rebellion at the futility of the concrete mind to contact the soul through knowledge,” a comment which gestures towards the planes of existence through knowledge a Theosophist was
understood to travel towards in their spiritual evolution (Minutes, 22 Mar. 1918). A few weeks later the Society hosted its first external lecturer: not a poet, but Charles Lazenby, a popular and “mesmerizing” lecturer on Theosophy who claimed he had studied under Jung in the 1920s (Lacombe 105). Fewster had written to Lazenby some weeks prior requesting his presence and Coleman’s minutes give something of the address’s content:

The abolition of an anthropomorphic God in terms of affirmation of self divinity was the key note struck throughout. The essential unity of Man, the impossibility of a private good or a private evil, and hence the absurdity of standardized ethics or the classifying of any faculty for life and consciousness as good or evil, except as polarities of unity, indicated. The lecture closed with a magnificent picture of the majestic encounter ’twixt spirit and form the rending of the veils of opposites and their radiant revelation in unity. (Minutes, 12 Apr. 1918).

Despite a touch of Coleman’s irony, Lazenby’s address gives a textbook approach to Theosophy that would be clearly conveyed in Canada through the initiation of the magazine *The Canadian Theosophist* in 1920. A.M. Stephen and Fewster were among those associated with the VPS to publish poetry and essays in the journal. Theosophists were almost uniformly intellectually engaged, literate and middle to upper-class individuals often working as physicians, lawyers, authors and artists (Ashcraft 26). The VPS and its interests fit the stereotype particularly well. By the 1920s Vancouver alone supported three separate lodges; a 1922 listing for the Orpheus Lodge gives Fewster’s address as its contact. Theosophy certainly led to much of the VPS’s creative output: members such as A.M. Stephen and Fewster wrote verse that directly or indirectly related to the interests and aims of its doctrine. However, it also served to philosophically situate the activity of the Society on a broader plane of existence (to adopt one of

---

14 Some representative pieces are copied in Appendix B, pages 93-7.
Theosophy’s favourite constructions) by its interaction with an extensive and versatile series of spiritualist discourses that were then actively circulating in Canadian cultural life, particularly as Theosophy filled an educative, social purpose in the furthering of human self-knowledge.

A common text cited in regards to poetic criticism was P.D. Ouspensky’s esoteric 1920 text *Tertium Organum*. At the 22 December 1924 meeting Alice Winlow concludes that the text insists that “everything ... has its spiritual reality to be interpreted” and that every poet must be “in some measure an Occultist searching for the hidden meaning rather than visible causes” (Minutes, 22 Dec. 1924). She warns that “the poet much never cease his search for new beauty. If for a moment he imagines he has found ultimate beauty we find him surrounded by a wall built about himself harming his further progress” (Ibid.). For many interpreters of Theosophy, the poet serves merely as a medium for much grander truths of humanity’s future. As Stephen writes in his essay “What the Theosophical Society Stands For,” “much of what has been called love for the last two thousand years has been a sickly and morbid shadow of the reality”: literature must strive to express beyond these limitations of human experience (20). Though direct references to Theosophical ideals wax and wane over ensuing decades, the language of truth seeking, the poet’s social role as contributor to universal spiritual development, and the power of poetry to communicate esoteric knowledge remains a constant trope. Theosophically inclined lyric poetry gained a measure of transcendence when brought before the Society or a broader public reading its poetry. Though still confined to the material context of reader and audience or printed page, it speaks directly to an auditor who was to achieve a mode of enlightenment through the act of reading or listening (Warner 80-81). As Fewster wrote in his 1948 report, VPS poets considered themselves authors of “Higher Things” whose mandate extended beyond the writing of poetry as art: the Society was to act as contributor to the spiritual evolution of its publics.
Another VPS member concerned with the future of poetry as social enterprise was Annie Charlotte Dalton. Though she never officially joined Theosophy, its language and philosophy finds ample expression in her work. The long poem *Flame and Adventure* (1924), for example, records the spiritual evolution of humans as connected to biological evolution, a popular concept among Theosophists (Hodd 42). Dalton also established a relationship with Group of Seven artist Lawren Harris, himself a devoted adherent to Theosophy (Davis 112). In a 5 June 1931 letter to Kate Eastman, Dalton bemoans the fact that “Harris has invited us to visit his studio, but his glorious ‘Mountain Form’ is in the States - am so sorry. I did want to see it again. It is sublime.”

It was during this time that Dalton published the essay *The Future of Our Poetry* (1931) that was presented to a convention of the Canadian Authors’ Association in Toronto, 22-26 June 1931. Dalton meditates particularly upon Harris’s “Mountain Form,” a series of abstracted mountain structures explored by Harris throughout his early career (Davis 116). Harris’s *Mount Temple* (c. 1925), reproduced on the cover of the published version of the essay, commands her particular attention. Upon her first encounter of the work at an exhibition in Vancouver, Dalton relates, “it was though I saw before me, the very soul of a new and tremendous poetry” (n. pag.). According to Dalton, the painting radiates “purity, strength, and remoteness ... suffused with the quality of holiness” that beckons to hidden, unspeakable knowledge, a “sixth sense of understanding” (n. pag.). As an example of an esoteric truth, the symbol of the “Mountain Form” is ultimately impossible to communicate, but is evidence of an eternal, esoteric truth borrowed from Theosophy. Dalton argues that

> All the virtues which I find therein, are those which I hope and believe will soon be the strongest characteristics of our poetry: the refreshment of originality, its restraint and

---

15 Excerpts copied in Appendix B, page 97.
freedom, its gifts of spiritual illumination and expression; the extraordinary depth and quality of its feeling; its symbolism; and its wonderful suggestion of light. (n. pag.).

The work of Harris, in the mind of Dalton, is to find its expression in poetry for Canada in a blending of Theosophy and Canadian nationalism that Lacombe notes was common among Canadian Theosophists. These thinkers supported the idea that Canada offered a “special occult destiny” in the myth of northern strength that mixed with the VPS’s general approach to nationalism during the period (Lacombe 111-12). Indeed, Dalton’s interests find a correlative in Stephen’s “Western Movement.” First presented in draft form to the VPS during the 24 November 1923 meeting, Stephen’s paper argues that the aspect specific to the “Western School” of British Columbia aesthetics is its “mysticism ... the spiritual ideas of the Oriental philosophies ... modified solely by the virile, red-blooded healthiness natural to a pioneer community” (213). The combination of a “northern” interpretation reminiscent of colonial muscular Christianity with the “mystical tendency” imported to Vancouver via the East is a set of ideals that align well with Lawren Harris’s images of a northern mysticism centred in the “primacy of nature” (Davis 115).

Theosophy functioned in service of the Society to elevate its poetry and praxis, acting as an authorizing discourse appealing to transcendence and universality that found broader expressions in Canadian nationalism. Its calls to higher authority functioned in terms of an intellectual and aesthetic distinction, to invoke Bourdieu, that created a “dimension of a distant, self-assured relation to the world and others” (*Distinction* 56). Theosophically inspired VPS poetry was self-justifying as it posited superior knowledge and the spiritual evolution of its publics: any poetry that did otherwise had succumbed to crass materialism. However, as I will argue in the following section, Theosophy also opened the VPS up to other aesthetic approaches
as interpreters such as Dalton and the photographer John Vanderpant advocated aspects of modernism often expressed via the language of Theosophy.

These three expressions of legitimating and authorizing discourses functioned in tandem as fundamental processes in the creation of authority by operating through a variety of discursive spaces. The Vancouver Poetry Society proved itself as a remarkably versatile mediator of its cultural capital and publics during its early phase. In the contested territories of Canadian nationalism, textual circulation, literary celebrity and the shape of the spiritual realm, the VPS established and maintained its cultural authority, broadened its publics, and forcefully entered the Canadian cultural landscape despite relatively humble beginnings. The next chapter will detail the maintenance of authority under the challenging entry and accommodation of modernist poetics, and the concurrent loss of its cultural capital as modernism met increasing resistance during the 1940s.
3. A “Cacophony of New Verse”: Accommodating the Disruptive Aesthetics of Modernism

3.1 Situating a Fragmentary Modernism

The lasting legacy of the Vancouver Poetry Society has been, if one takes the few critical mentions of the Society at face value, a corpus of distasteful or otherwise negligible Victorian or Georgian verse so resolutely traditional or pre-modernist as to be laughable. The introduction to Alan Safarik’s 1986 anthology *Vancouver Poetry* regretfully dates the Society’s end to 1946, insisting that the VPS had “outlived its usefulness by the mid-thirties” and was even then producing only “Georgian poetry” of little lasting relevance (11-12). Forrest D. Pass’s 2011 paper on nationalism and poetics in British Columbia notes that “modernist and internationalist voices” were only “occasionally accommodated” by the Society, preferring to allow the resolutely conservative voice of Fewster guide his assessment of the group (55). The most telling of these assessments is Christine Wiesenthal’s brief discussion of the VPS in light of Patricia Lowther. Suggesting that the VPS represents a “tenacious, residual, premodernist literary traditionalism” in the history of Canadian literature, Wiesenthal accurately speaks to the public perception of the VPS during Lowther’s membership in the late 1960s (17). Indeed, the late 1950s to the Society’s end was a period when the VPS staunchly refused to engage in the formal and conceptual aspects of modernism. However, this version of the Society’s position in the 1960s ignores a history of significant engagement with modernist poetics from the beginning of the VPS to the 1940s. Alongside the narrative of the Society’s strong attachment to the Confederation poets and the mystical aesthetics offered by Theosophy, lies compelling evidence of early literary modernism in British Columbia that has been obscured by dominant critical voices within and outside the Society over time.
The received narrative of Canadian modernism is typically located in the pioneering work of the Montreal modernists headed by A.J.M. Smith and F.R. Scott. As Brian Trehearne writes, “Properly speaking, Canadian Modernism begins somewhere in *The McGill Fortnightly,*” Scott and Smith’s rebellious literary journal (252). While this narrative has come under question by a range of critics, particularly in its gendered exclusion of the pioneering women in Canadian modernism, it remains centred in the East and focused on a limited version of modernist writing that privileges the critical dictums of Scott and Smith best summarized by Smith’s “Rejected Preface” intended for the anthology *New Provinces* (1936):

> The bulk of Canadian verse is romantic in conception and conventional in form. Its two great themes are nature and love—nature humanized, endowed with feeling, and made sentimental; love idealized, sanctified and inflated. Its characteristic type is the lyric. Its rhythms are definite, mechanically correct, and obvious; its rhymes are commonplace. (39).

Though Smith’s assessment of the state of Canadian verse applies quite accurately (if superficially) to much of the VPS’s creative output, the Society nevertheless managed to produce its own version of Canadian modernism separate from the canonized works that emerged from Montreal. Much like the Montreal modernists, the Society began its entry into modernism with an interest in free verse from 1917 to the late 1920s. However, other VPS members during the 1920s and early 1930s found sympathies between Theosophy and modernism, including the photographer John Vanderpant and poet Annie Charlotte Dalton. Some proto-modernist and modernist verse inflected with the influence of Theosophy was produced during the same period. Despite the language and syntax of romantic verse, these pieces demonstrate a complex

---

16 For example, the works of A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott, A.M. Klein and Leo Kennedy commonly contained in contemporary anthologies of Canadian poetry.
engagement with modernist approaches to form and content, including the use of free verse and nonstandard enjambment, and a thematic focus on interior psychology, sexuality, and the alienation of selfhood in relation to the requirements of urban capitalist production. In particular, the poetry of Annie Charlotte Dalton offers an ironic response to the work of British modernists Edith Sitwell and Viola Meynell using fragmented language to communicate the experience of deafness. The Theosophically inclined modernists of the 1920s and 30s gave way to directed appeals to Society members for the relevance of modern form and content from established practitioners, including Dorothy Livesay, Anne Marriott, and Alan Crawley. These figures consistently pressed for the necessity of adopting modernism in Canadian writing, though their messages became restricted by the 1940s when the increasingly vocal disavowal of modernist poetics on the part of Society members began to represent the sole voice of the Society.

It must be remembered that modernism did not constitute the single aesthetic discourse of the Society during the 1920s and 1930s. Modernism is a counter narrative that runs parallel to the prior chapter’s examination of the VPS’s other interests in Confederation Group-styled nature poetry such as that produced by Carman and Roberts and the mystical verse of Theosophy. Those poets who are now most closely aligned with modernism, including Livesay and a young Al Purdy, circulated through the VPS for limited periods of time, developing networks with other poets, experimenting in approaches to verse, and contributing to Society life, before finding more sympathetic companions elsewhere. Though I argue that Theosophy led to the acceptance of aspects of modernism, this was only the case for some practitioners. Other poets, such as A.M. Stephen and Fewster, remained convinced that traditional forms of lyric poetry remained the only means for relevant poetic expression, and their voices became those that defined the Society’s public discourse in later decades.
The accommodation of modernist voices over a lengthy period of time lent the Society greater cultural capital both in the opportunity for debate and dissent in the challenge of modern free verse poetics and strong cultural associations with advocates for modernism. Modernism enabled the entry of a wide host of established cultural figures, even if they represented a threat to the dominant members of the Society. Pierre Bourdieu, as invoked in the thesis introduction, observes the socially productive struggle or “game” of aesthetic debate, even as VPS members “[treated] intellectual struggles, the object of so many pathetic manifestos, as a simple question of right and wrong” (Distinction 54). When the grounds for debate ground to a halt during the 1940s thanks to the increasing alienation of modernists within the Society, external cultural institutions began to read the Society as resolutely traditionalist and therefore unworthy of notice. The public disavowal of modernism eventually led to the beginning of its end in 1960, when the UBC Poetry Centre refused to collaborate with the Society due to the apparent traditionalism of its poetics. Modernism was therefore partly the source of its enormous cultural authority during the 1920s into the 1940s and the primary reason for its loss of institutional authority into the 1960s. It is no coincidence that the most active and successful period of the Society was during the accommodation, if not total embrace, of modernist voices. For a group so commonly understood as a bastion of traditionalism, the VPS’s critical engagement with the tenets and formal aspects of modernism and modernist, imagist and symbolist verse is remarkably consistent over the course of the Society’s history. Canadian literary modernism has too often been perceived as a teleology beginning with the rejection of Carman and Roberts by Scott and Smith.17 The VPS demonstrates an alternative account of modernism in Canadian literature. The narrative of the Society as a heterogeneous collection of shifting individuals was

17 Roberts himself recognized the fallacy of Scott and Smith’s posturing in his essay “A Note on Modernism,” commenting that modernism constitutes a natural process of the “reaction of the younger creators against the too long dominance of their older predecessors” who themselves negotiated the same artistic process (19).
never univocal, as the previous chapter has illustrated. However, the development of literary modernism in Canada should be counted as among the most significant of the VPS’s narratives.

3.2 “Terrible Things”: The Challenge of Vers Libre

Among the Society’s earliest sources of modernist dissent were lengthy debates surrounding the validity of poetry without consistent meter or rhyme typically termed “free verse” or “vers libre.” These debates began in earnest at the 15 June 1917 meeting with charter member Lionel Haweis’s lecture titled “Terrible Things,” with Haweis obviously taking the negative side of free verse in his estimation (Minutes, 15 Jun. 1917). According to A History of Free Verse, identical debates were occurring from the earliest appearance of modern free verse in British and American periodicals beginning in 1913 (Beyers 1-2). Ezra Pound’s March 1913 tenets for Imagism published in Poetry declare that the poet should “compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome,” a standard for free verse that would be repeated in Society definitions as “poetical prose, divided up into lines which would emphasize the expectancy of the rhythm” (qtd. in Sutton 33; Minutes, 5 Feb. 1926.1). That vers libre constituted something of a “cultural war” in Canadian poetics is evidenced from the content of VPS discussions surrounding the topic (Beyers 1). As Lee Briscoe Thompson writes of Canadian popular poetry of the 1920s and 30s, free verse “represented all that traditionalists saw going awry with their universe” in the chaos and disorder left by the absence of pattern, rhyme and meter (362). Not only do VPS members debate the poetic value of free verse, they also discuss contemporary modernist practitioners and other related cultural forms, demonstrating a significant cultural awareness of international literary trends on the part of a group too easily understood as existing solely on the periphery of Canadian poetics. The free verse debates served two important functions: first, they offered a source of productive disagreement and dissent, the
encouragement of which rendered the VPS “no mutual admiration society,” but a functional and possibly radical assembly of engaged authors and readers that attracted increasingly large audiences and later, established modernists such as Dorothy Livesay (Days 19). Secondly, the debates paved the way for the slow acceptance of the more difficult values of Canadian modernism in its stark economy of language. Once the use of vers libre was begrudgingly admitted, so could other formal and conceptual aspects of modernism be freely discussed. As I argue in the following section of this chapter, the marriage of Theosophy and modernism performed a similar function in encouraging stronger Society engagement with contemporary trends in verse.

Following Haweis’s initial lecture, free verse appears as a regular topic in Society minutes. During one discussion the debate became heated when Fewster delivered a reading of an unnamed American poet’s work at a 27 May 1921 meeting, concluding “the intelligence of the writer to be little removed from that of a jibbering [sic] idiot” (Minutes, 27 May 1921). A Mrs. Tolman disagreed, stating that “the new poetry had its place in the scheme of things like ragtime Jazz” (Ibid.). Tolman commented further that she was “out to make money by her verse,” a claim that possibly indicates the poet denigrated by Fewster might have been Amy Lowell or another of the several women published in American periodicals sympathetic to free verse (Ibid.). Indeed, the free verse debate appears to have been almost entirely generated by women challenging the criticisms of men in the Society, with the sole exception of H. Bromley Coleman, himself an author of free verse works tinged with Theosophy.18 At a 5 February 1926 meeting Fewster again denigrated the “bad eggs” Carl Sandberg, Vachel Lindsay and Amy Lowell, reducing the works of Lowell and others as “abominable efforts of some women to appear different” (Minutes, 5 Feb. 1926.2). Aside from Tolman, a Mrs. Fielding and Miss Fraser both

strongly supported free verse in lectures in 1926 and 1928 respectively, perhaps as a rebuttal to Fewster’s stance. Fielding argued that vers libre was “the most free medium for poetic expression,” though contemporary poets failed “in the fact that they endeavoured to use it as a vehicle for the expression of common ideas rather than fundamental ideas” (Minutes, 5 Feb. 1926.1). A lecture on Lowell by Fraser might have attempted to reverse Fewster’s criticism in arguing for Amy Lowell’s “strong vigorous mentality and great tenacity of purpose,” though commenting on “her unfortunate tendency to arouse in others the keenest antagonism” (Minutes, 25 Feb. 1928). The identification of women authors of the VPS with their published American counterparts in the face of conservative antagonism is another example of the uneasy relationship between women and modernism articulated by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century (1988). Modernist verse was by definition an “an implicitly masculine aesthetic of hard, abstract, learned verse that is opposed to the aesthetic of soft, effusive, personal verse supposedly written by women and Romantics”: the defense of poets such as Lowell suggests that certain members of the VPS looked beyond the relatively limited purview of Fewster’s vision towards the gendered possibilities of modern forms (153). For his part, H. Bromley Coleman challenged Fewster’s posturing, concluding that Free Verse has done its part in releasing the beauty captive in the commonplace, and has served no less a purpose in revealing the tawdry and conventional for what they are in relation to human greed and ignorance. It has, both by design and accident, discovered the syncopated agony of modern life, modern industrialism, modern art, modern manners and customs ... on the whole it has interpreted the unrest of our day in terms that have shocked the literary pharisees and stimulated some scribes to a naked intensity of purpose. (Minutes, Coleman, 5 Feb. 1926.2).
The free verse debate was quelled by the late 1920s, likely thanks to the diplomacy of Coleman and his insistence that free verse, whatever its inherent value, functioned to offer desperately needed new approaches to poetry and created culturally productive debate and dissent. Furthermore, the vers libre debates reveal that VPS members were reading and engaging with early trends in modern poetry, particularly on the part of women apologists such as Lowell. The acceptance of new approaches is repeated by a second transition between Theosophy and modernism in the figures of John Vanderpant and Annie Charlotte Dalton during the 1920s and 1930s, a period that produced a small selection of Society verse offering evidence of interest and engagement in modernism derived from the dual inspirations of free verse and Theosophical insight.

3.3 Theosophical Modernism: Transitional Figures and Poetics of the 1920s to 1930s

Aside from the aesthetic debates surrounding the validity vers libre, the VPS accommodated a number of advocates for modernist form and content within the fold during the 1920s and 1930s thanks to the dual adherence of these figures to both Theosophy (or otherwise esoteric spiritual views) and modernist aesthetics. The space between an understanding of Theosophy and engagement in modernism gave rise to verse by members Edwina Winter, H. Bromley Coleman and H.J.T. Coleman. The critical aspects of Theosophy folded well into those of modernism. Theosophy was notoriously syncretic, adapting a variety of religious texts “concocted of obsolete Egyptian, Cabbalistic, occultist and Hindu beliefs and notions, and modern spiritualistic ideas and formulas, spiced with a bit of Christian ethics, Darwinism and modernism then in vogue” in the words of critic Louis Adamic (qtd. in Ashcraft 63). High modernist authors were equally invested in the vast cultural texts of Western culture best expressed by James Joyce in Ulysses and T.S. Eliot in “The Waste Land.” Aspects of Helena
Blavatsky’s social thought, particularly the notion of revolt against religious orthodoxy, the support for the emancipation for women, and the interests of social welfare tied to the notion of Universal Brotherhood, also conjoined with the interests of socially engaged modernist artists. Though Theosophy owed as much to Victorian thought, it bridged aspects of modernism in encouraging the evolution of poetic form as an entry into superior knowledge. In their adherence to Theosophy and modernism, cultural figures such as John Vanderpant and Annie Charlotte Dalton initiated interest and created authority in modernist narratives that would be continued by later authors unassociated with Theosophy.

Following the general theorization of free verse, the photographer John Vanderpant was the first sustained advocate for the necessity of embracing modern aesthetics in art. Born in Holland in 1884, Vanderpant arrived in New Westminster via Alberta in 1919, running his own photographic studio until the founding of Vanderpant Galleries with artist and critic Harold Mortimer-Lamb in 1926 (Schwartz). Located at 1216 Robson Street, the Galleries became a centre for the city’s intellectual and artistic communities during the 1920s and 30s (Salloum, “John Vanderpant” 42). The Vancouver Poetry Society was among the several local cultural groups hosted by Vanderpant at the Galleries during these years. The VPS met regularly at the space from October 1928 to October 1932, when the $3.50 fee charged by Vanderpant became difficult to manage because of the reduction of Society funds during the Great Depression (Minutes, 27 Oct. 1932). Gala nights and occasional general meetings continued to be held at the Galleries until Vanderpant’s death in 1939. As an active member of the VPS, Vanderpant and the Galleries lent significant cultural capital to the Society within the local context of the city of Vancouver. The public visibility of the Vanderpant Galleries as a meeting place provided the VPS with a stable site for its activities. Attendance during these years averaged between 40 and
60 persons for general meetings and over 100 persons for gala events such as a 20 July 1936 soiree in honor of Charles G.D. Roberts (VPS, “Membership Lists”). Furthermore, Vanderpant himself was an internationally recognized cultural figure. As a member of the Royal Photographic Society in Britain, his work is cited by Sheryl Salloum as a major influence on both the artistic practice and technique of photography and the legitimation of photography as an artistic medium (Underlying Vibrations 21).

Vanderpant’s lectures and photography reveal a consistent interest in Theosophical subjects. Though he never joined the Theosophical Society, Vanderpant took inspiration from Theosophy, writing that photography might function as a means of conveying hidden truths of the subject depicted or interpreted (Salloum, Underlying Vibrations 7). As stated in a 1933 lecture titled “Art in General; Canadian Art in Particular” presented at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vanderpant believed that photography should express the “the consciousness of life ... in aesthetic form, pattern, rhythm, and relationship” (qtd. in Salloum, Underlying Vibrations 21). Vanderpant’s adherence to Theosophy likely contributed to his enthusiastic reception as a lecturer: during his tenure as a VPS member he delivered eight lectures, participated in two panel discussions, and was invited to speak by the programme committee yearly. It was his status as a valued member of the VPS that enabled Vanderpant to regularly advocate for the embrace of modernist practices within the artistic production of the Society.

Vanderpant’s 1928 essay for the Royal Society’s Photographic Journal titled “Tradition in Art” might well be his manifesto. Arguing that “Tradition in art is the greatest drawback for the advance in self-expression ... The only quality of tradition in art to the artist and his work is a negative one,” Vanderpant notes that tradition cannot, however, be solely conceived as a simple rupture from the work of the past (447). Much in the same mode as T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and
the Individual Talent,” Vanderpant notes that though the artist must by necessity, and occasionally violently, diverge from the past to make new, “the breakage is the linking point joining him with the past, holding him in reasonable bondage to his time, guiding him in advance of present day conceptions” (448). Like Dalton’s argument in The Future of Our Poetry, Canadian art is poised to offer an alternative. Vanderpant concludes his paper by stating that a Canadian artist must aim for pure representation: “one tries to express in extreme simplicity of composition, form strength, obvious contrast in light and shade ... the forms, contrasts, proportions and designs, which belong to Canada and to no other country,” an approach that was to be fulfilled in the Imagist poetry of such Montreal authors as A.J.M. Smith in “The Lonely Land” (449).

The necessity for renewal in art was the topic of many of Vanderpant’s lectures during the 1930s. An opening 8 March 1930 lecture titled “Concerning Matters Artistic” put the issue succinctly: “In science, in literature and in architecture ... momentous changes have taken place in which new standards have been raised and many old traditions swept aside. It would be strange ... if art alone should remain unchanged” (Minutes, 8 Mar. 1930). Over the course of further lectures, Vanderpant expanded on this initial approach, reasoning that though modern art was entirely of the moment, and therefore deserved the utmost attention, “the reason why so many people did not appreciate modern art was because they were not ready for it” (Minutes, 5 Mar. 1932). These talks reportedly resulted in “stimulating controversy,” with Fewster commenting on a 24 November 1934 lecture on the “modern high ideal of self expression” in photography offered “light thrown on the value of modern art in general” (Minutes, 24 Nov. 1934) Though Fewster’s comment may have been merely diplomatic, the validity of

19. “This is a beauty / of dissonance, / this resonance of stony strand, this smoky cry / curled over a black pine ... This is the beauty / of strength / broken by strength / and still strong” (Smith 98).
Vanderpant’s consistent devotion to communicating the value of modernist aesthetics was difficult for even Fewster to deny, and prefiguring Dorothy Livesay, Alan Crawley and Anne Marriott’s separate appeals to modernism at Society meetings through the remainder of the 1930s and 1940s.

The marriage of Theosophy and modernism in the poetic production of the VPS is sporadic but observable trend. The initial discussions of modernism via the topic of free verse likely led to the experimentation of Society poets sympathetic to Theosophy: if the spirit could evolve towards higher planes, according to Theosophy, then perhaps art could also undergo a brand of spiritual evolution offered by modernism. VPS poets Edwina Winter, H. Bromley Coleman and H.J.T. Coleman produced distinctly modernist works that also end in a Theosophical turn.

At the 9 January 1920 meeting a Miss Edwina Winter read the poem “Tired,” a piece which H. Bromley Coleman commented communicates “the hunger of the Soul for Beauty and Truth,” finding “Expression in an aching contempt for the contrived prisons of comfort and conveniences that are the [boast] of man made cities with their enclosing walls and barriers” (Minutes, 9 Jan. 1920). Little can be determined of Winter’s biography. In the collection of unpublished writing of VPS members contained in the Vancouver Poetry Society fonds, hers is oddly the largest file, containing hundreds of pages of manuscript poetry among a few letters and other personal items. *A Book of Days* records her 1920 entry into the Society as an author of “rather mystical rhapsodical verse” (18). Indeed, much of the poetry in the Winter file conforms to the lyric mode. “Tired,” though somewhat lyrical, expresses a sense of modern malaise alluded to in Coleman’s commentary that signals the poem as a significant, though technically flawed, union of Theosophy with modernism. The speaker complains in modernist terms of

\[\text{Copied in Appendix B, page 101.}\]
being “tired of body and soul, / Of the stifling heat of the city’s streets / Of the smallness of life ’twixt office walls” that builds until they are reduced to “naught but a soulless slave” (n. pag.).

However, the poem ends on the beach where the speaker desires a “life that is fair as the crested waves,” and in their “mystic call” wishes to join “In thy arms forever” (n. pag.). The juxtaposition of the first stanza chronicling proto-modern capitalist alienation with a mystical union of the self with nature offers a curious dialogue between Theosophy and modernism.

Winter’s approach is repeated in a series of untitled fragments contained in her file. In a similar subject and conclusion as “Tired” but accomplished with greater economy of language, Winter writes:

They dislike the wind —

These pale faced women whom I work with,

(Wind that shakes the very building

with its breathing)

And so I dared not tell them,

But oh, how I should love to be

Out under the wild sky,

Naked, racing against it. (n. pag.).

In confessional mode, a second untitled piece21 records the disturbing “waves of mad, erotic thought / And lewd suggestion” that “beat against the temple of my mind” (n. pag.). The speaker wishes that “the inevitable minds that send them / forth” had “Known health,” though her own consciousness only would “add to their vile product” (n. pag.). Despite the language and syntax typical of romantic verse, these pieces indicate an engagement with modernist approaches to poetry in their fragmentary composition, dark tone, and thematic interests in interior psychology,

21 Copied in Appendix B, page 102.
sexuality, and the difficulties of conforming to capitalist modes of production while maintaining an intact sense of selfhood.

H. Bromley Coleman’s poem “One Morning” contained in his sole collection *Vagabond Thoughts in Rhythm* (1923) and reprinted in the 1925 chapbook, adopts a similar construction as Winter’s “Tired” in its turn to Theosophy, but here figured towards the social realization of Universal Brotherhood. Much of Coleman’s poetry concerns mystical topics. As the introductory essay on poetry in *Vagabond Thoughts* concludes, “Poetry is the garment of consciousness; the eye of the spirit perceiving the whole in the part, the part in the whole” (8). “One Morning” moves from the particular to the universal through several disparate images of social unrest and despair to an appeal to look towards a broader conception of beauty. The speaker recounts walking “one hour / On the brink of morning” seeing “a woman / Swaying toward a tenement / Drunken with despair,” and a “man / Whose eyes were harbours / Of hate and hunger” (16). A contrasting image of “daffodils / on a market wagon / Swaying in the breeze” flirts with Wordsworthian romanticism, but the speaker concludes that “The yellow daffodils were not as beautiful / As these bruised human flowers” (16). The free verse poem combines social realism in its frank depictions of poverty with a Theosophical optimism that these “bruised human flowers” might find eventual spiritual renewal.

Finally, H.J.T. Coleman’s title poem from the chapbook *The Poet Confides* (1928) ends in an equivalent construction wherein the speaker moves from a discussion of his upper-class status towards a mystical revelation of the potentially violent interiority of authorship. The speaker is a man who “bears a conventional name / And sometimes wears evening clothes, / And has a street address and a telephone number, / And is mentioned in Who’s Who” but whose internal self is “not the person you take me for, ... that you might not care to shake hands / with

---

22 Copied in Appendix B, page 103.
me if you saw me truly, / Yet I hope you could pity me even if you could not love me / For I am the soul of man” (1). The free verse composition grounds its discourse in the commonplace and trivial aspects of the speaker’s character, yet points towards an unresolved inner conflict only fleetingly described. Coleman’s speaker suggests that this is the condition of authorship, the figure of the poet who declares that “always I write (when I write truly) / With my heart’s blood” (1). Represented in a modernist form with distinct imagery and diction, the poem moves towards Theosophical notions of truth nevertheless expressed in a vernacular and economical style.

The poetry of Annie Charlotte Dalton represents a more prominent, if equally inconsistent, approach to modernism within the Society’s poetic output of the 1920s. A Victorian poetess of the highest order in publications such as The Marriage of Music (1910), her poetry takes a distinctly modern turn from the Theosophy examined in the previous chapter as represented by the 1926 chapbook The Ear Trumpet. Though she would return to poetry similar to her prior mystical works by the end of her career, this publication exhibits a strong interest in modernist modes of speaking coloured by a dialogue with British authors Edith Sitwell and Viola Meynell. As a more technically proficient poet than some of her VPS contemporaries, Dalton’s work in these publications might be the strongest, most distinctly modernist work produced by a VPS member during this period.

In The Future of Our Poetry Dalton suggests that modernist verse might have something to offer the poet after all:

A friend has dared me to hazard a guess as to the technical form the new poetry may take ... I think the difference will lie not so much in a change of technique as in a change of heart; in self-discipline. There will be less concern with prettiness of phrase, perhaps
less humanity, less patience with sentiment, but certainly there will be more strength as befitting the heroic age. (n. pag.).

As with Vanderpant, modern poetry in its simplicity and sparseness offers a truer image of Canada. “Let us then be grateful for our rebels,” she continues, “For too often it is said that [Canadians] are ‘too comfortable,’ and that we have never known great suffering; that is, we have never been faced with real peril on our own soil, and until that happens no literary work of the first rank can be expected from us” (n. pag., emphasis in original). Dalston’s admiration for the figure of the rebel finds its correlation in an unpublished biographical essay titled “My Beginnings,” where she muses on her childhood: “Perhaps it is the long years of submissiveness in my youth that has bred the rebelliousness of age. We took everything so tamely: ill-health, disappointment, bereavement, all were the ‘Will of God,’ and piety demanded Complete submission” (12). The Ear Trumpet is as rebellious a collection as might be found in Dalston’s bibliography as she confronts the published works of Sitwell and Meynell on the grounds of their misrepresentations of deafness.

“The Ear Trumpet”23 adopts the title of Sitwell’s “Solo for Ear-Trumpet” in which Sitwell’s speaker maligns a “rich relation” for her inability to understand the speaker’s message that “It is Judgment Day!” (378). Dalston’s poem chides “Foolish, foolish / Edith Sitwell” who “made a solo / of her auntie, / her rich auntie / and her trumpet” (1). Rendered in clipped, searing phrases, “The Ear Trumpet” suggests that Sitwell will one day herself need a hearing aid and “How she’ll shiver / when she knows it, / thinking of that / scornful solo, / thinking of the / Day of Judgment” (2). The poem is an ironic take on Sitwell’s assumptions as it harasses the reader with its forceful tone. “To Viola Meynell”24 functions primarily as an expression of the

23 Copied in Appendix B, page 104.
24 Copied in Appendix B, page 105.
experience of deafness and of only partially contacting the world through fragmented pieces of language. The repeated refrain of “We were just saying” is derived from Meynell’s short story of the same title. The story concerns a family burdened by the charity required by a partially deaf cousin named Bertha Coombe. Bertha’s aunt speaks loudly in front of Bertha of her father’s death, which had been occasioned by Bertha’s mother, also deaf. All the while Bertha looks on in “docile, inevitable patience” for the benefit for a small jewel of conversation that she might be able to understand (271). As Dalton’s note to the poem relates with considerable irony, “‘We Were Just Saying’ illustrates that phrase, which with a thoughtful person usually begins an explanation of a conversation to one who is partially deaf, and which is always so welcome and productive of delight” (8). Her response is a remarkable exploration of accusatory and fragmentary language doubling as a retelling of Meynell’s story. The poem assaults the reader in the first section, asking whether they, and Meynell herself, has truly “Like Mary, ... chosen the loving part” in their interactions with others (4). Dalton’s speaker questions the motivations of the distanced utterance in its “Strange tale well told,” asking, “How many hearts will bless the loving thought? / How many callous ones will fear the bold / Light, you have thrown on the havoc they have wrought” (4). The second section of the poem cuts through the content of Meynell’s work by fragmenting its narrative. In the close of the section, the piece adopts the tone of Eliot’s “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock,” commenting on the “grim tales, so grossly nurtured, vile?” of Meynell’s narrative:

Dear lady with the wistful smile!

Ask me no more what the tart tongues say—

Cold, evil spite their speech debases,

And I—I can but pray,
“Ask me no more!”

Hot is my heart and sore,

Pure is the air without the door,…

Ah! come away,

The very furniture grimaces! (5).

It is notable that W.A. Deacon, then editor of *Saturday Night*, warned Dalton in a 29 April 1926 letter that *The Ear Trumpet* would be incomprehensible to a Canadian audience:

> My suggestion is that your introductory notes be expanded to double their size and placed at the top of each poem. People here won’t understand otherwise. Edith Sitwell is hardly worth your powder: outside of a handful of us writers nobody in Canada knows who she is, much less what she said. Ditto the others. I mean it: *the people do not know what you are talking about*. (Deacon, Letter to Dalton, 29 Apr. 1926, emphasis in original).

Dalton was functioning in a register that makes editors such as Deacon uncomfortable: these poems take on the terms of British modernist poetry rather than the bulk of Canadian popular poetry of the period. They are not for “the people” as Deacon understood the Canadian reading public. As an admired member of the Society, Honorary President of the VPS from 1929 to 1938, and one of their most recognized living cultural figures during the 1930s, Dalton’s status was only increased when she was created a Member of the Order of the British Empire in 1935 (*Days 75*). Though largely admired by the Society for her expressions of Theosophy in her poetry, her skillful rebuttals to Sitwell and Meynell represent a high point for modernist poetics within the Society’s membership. Modernism was afforded printed authority during this period of the VPS thanks to the works of Vanderpant and Dalton and the engagement of its Theosophically transgressive poets in Winter, Coleman and Coleman.
3.4 Modernist Advocates: Livesay, Crawley and Marriott in the 1930s and 1940s

Annie Charlotte Dalton’s transitional status between the spiritual tenets of Theosophy popular with the Society and an interest in the possibilities of modernism found the sympathy of Dorothy Livesay, certainly one of the most revered modernist poets in Canada. Though Dalton goes unmentioned in her autobiographical works, a then 29-year-old Livesay delivered a eulogy at Dalton’s funeral following her death on 12 January 1938. Livesay praised Dalton’s poetic contribution as “the story of these earth fruits on which the growth of our West has been founded, beyond the stages of history into the realms of mythology” and whose life’s work “symbolizes the ‘strength, the sweetness, and the bitterness’” of authorship (Livesay, “Untitled Eulogy”). A previously uncollected poem entitled “Annie Charlotte Dalton” followed in Saturday Night on 29 January 1938. Livesay’s speaker muses on Dalton’s personal deafness and “struggle otherwise; to find / In crippled silence, music’s form / And in the barren night, release / For words’ wild avalanche of storm” despite the fact that “No battles made she with a sword, / No sacrifice on bloodied plain” (n. pag.). The invocation of battle imagery likely derives from a reading of Dalton’s Flame and Adventure which abounded in medievalist reference, but also might refer, as Livesay’s eulogy does, to the difficulties faced by the figure of the writing woman in Canadian letters. “No companion women poets were born until the end of the First World War,” Livesay writes in Right Hand, Left Hand: in Dalton, perhaps, Livesay found a kind of kinship specifically within the context of the Vancouver Poetry Society (19).

Theosophy remained a strong interest among Society members into the 1930s, and it was the combination of Theosophy and mutual interests in social welfare and poetry that led Livesay into the fold of the VPS upon her arrival in Vancouver in the spring of 1936. It was A.M. Stephen who provided her initial entry into their ranks. As she relates in her biographical work 25 Copied in Appendix B, page 107.
Journey With My Selves (1991), she arrived in Vancouver initially as an midpoint to San Francisco where Livesay hoped to further the cause of New Frontier, the leftist journal with which she was closely involved (152). A staff member at the journal had recommended meeting with A.M. Stephen as he was known as a left-wing activist and likely to find sympathy with the magazine. Stephen then recommended the young Duncan Macnair as another possible collaborator. Like Stephen, Macnair had spent much time rambling the frontier of Ontario and British Columbia and was an active Theosophist (153). Livesay and Macnair met sometime later on Granville Street and Macnair agreed to help in the sale of subscriptions for New Frontier (Livesay 153). On a following day the two walked to the University of British Columbia and back, calling on “progressive” scholars including G.G. Sedgwick, Hunter Lewis and A.F.B. Clark, all of whom were frequent lecturers at VPS meetings (Livesay 154). Thus, Livesay’s entry as a guest of the Society at the 2 May 1936 meeting comes as no surprise: “Miss Dorothy Livesey [sic], ... gave a brief address, in the course of which she read several of her own charming poems” (Minutes, 2 May 1936). For his part, Macnair quickly integrated himself into the fabric of Society activities, reading works by Ezra Pound and Leo Kennedy at meetings, volunteering to give society announcements on local radio station CJOR, and taking the negative side on a panel VPS discussion at the 24 April 1937 gala night titled “Is the traditional form of poetry adequate to express Canadian contemporary life?” (Minutes, 24 Apr. 1937).

In the meantime, the two were married in August of 1937. That fall, Livesay gave the first of several lectures to the Society at the 12 November 1937 meeting. Titled “New Directions in Poetry,” Livesay traced the developments of poetry since the Great War drawing especial notice to change in form and content, and went on to say that for a time the younger poets in Canada
have been deeply influenced by T.S. Eliot and by [Dr.] James Fraser’s [sic] “The Golden Bough.”

Eliot, she said, was conscious of the destruction of his ideals, and showed a note of doom. (Minutes, 12 Nov. 1937).

Livesay also quoted from two prominent modern American poets, H.D. and Genevieve Taggard, and “concluded by reading her own poem ‘Wind on the Heath’” (Ibid.). At the next meeting of 11 December 1937, Livesay expanded upon her belief that Canadian poetry was becoming increasingly international in scope. Participating in a panel discussion titled “That the younger Canadian poets will have to follow the direction of Auden, Spender and Lewis,” Livesay contended that “poetry must always plunge forward, and that in the face of current changes so vast and sudden, the younger English poets had a difficult task to keep pace ... the younger Canadian poets would do well to keep in close touch with world affairs” (Minutes, 11 Dec. 1937).

Despite its mandate, this level of interest in contemporary poetry on the part of the Society signaled a new, albeit briefly sustained, direction for the VPS as the possibilities of modernism began to be more integrated into regular Society events and debate: modernism had become an aspect of the Society’s public. Through Livesay and the early influence of poets such as Annie Charlotte Dalton, the VPS had formed a unique response to modernism. Other modernists would soon follow Livesay to the Vancouver Poetry Society. Among them was modernist poetry acolyte Alan Crawley who had arranged to meet with Livesay at the 29 October 1938 meeting, though she did not attend (Irvine 83). Crawley had arrived in Victoria in 1934, and moved to Vancouver a year later, where he met Livesay and other poets interested in modern verse. He later initiated the modernist little magazine *Contemporary Verse* from a base

---

26 Anthropological text on the “beliefs and institutions of mankind, offering the thesis that man progresses from magical through religious to scientific thought” published in installments between 1890 and 1936 (Drabble 382).
in North Vancouver in collaboration with poets Livesay, Anne Marriott, Doris Ferne and Florence Clark McLaren while Crawley himself served as editor (Woodcock 230). Its first issue was published in September 1941. As Dean Irvine notes, CV emerged “out of local poetry groups,” among them the VPS, prior to its inception during the late 1930s (78). As Livesay well knew, the VPS and Full Tide, however conservative its politics were becoming, offered opportunities for “the development of a national literary culture” (Irvine 111). Livesay herself had published two poems, “Grouse Mountain,” and the previously uncollected “Shaped Like a Bugle” in the May 1938 and February 1939 editions of Full Tide. In addition to the CAA, with which Crawley and Marriott were heavily involved in Victoria, three of the CV collaborators lectured to the VPS following Livesay: Florence Clark McLaren gave an account of poetry production in Victoria on 28 January 1939 and Crawley followed her with a lecture on 25 February 1939. Though Irvine reports that Crawley “had little patience with the society” due to their diluted standards for poetry (83) he must have found a certain degree of interest on the part of his audience as he related his “introduction to poetry” through Harold Munro of the Poetry Book Shop in London (Minutes, 25 Feb. 1939). Munro and Claude Lovat Fraser, the inspiration behind the VPS’s 1925 chapbook, had collaborated on the design for publications of the Poetry Book Shop. More notably, however, Crawley gave an “excellent definition of poetry from the ‘Tertium Organum’ of Ouspensky,” a text that had been popular among Society readers interested in Theosophy (Ibid.). The content of Crawley’s talk spoke largely about his interests in modern poetry, reading from Leo Kennedy’s “Calling Eagles” and Lorca’s “Lament for a Dead Bullfighter,” the latter “a most striking poem splendidly rendered,” according to the minutes (Ibid.).

28 See Section 2, page 34.
Anne Marriott, likely introduced into the VPS ranks by Crawley, followed the example of Vanderpant and Livesay with strong primers in modernist thought during lectures on 5 April 1941 and 11 April 1942. In terms coloured by the Second World War and similar to those of A.J.M. Smith’s “Preface” cited in the introduction to this section, Marriott stated in the first lecture that

The Modern Poets are trying to make people realize what is happening in the world today and poetic forms have altered to conform to the ideas of writers. They give an exact phrase rather than a decorative description and have come out of a dream world into a world of reality. People generally are prejudiced against changes and new forms of poetry are not popular in the day in which they are written. Poets of today are making an honest attempt to mirror life and to interpret it as it is, also to answer the questions that are troubling us. (Minutes, 5 Apr. 1941).

Her second lecture was greeted with enthusiasm from a member of the old guard: Confederation poet Duncan Campbell Scott. Titled “New Movements in Canadian Poetry,” Marriott argued that the present “flowering” of Canadian verse in such publications as CV constituted a “renaissance” that was beginning to find international recognition in such venues as the influential modernist journal Poetry, which had released a “Canadian Number” in April 1941 (Minutes 11 Apr. 1942). Following Marriott’s lecture, Scott was “persuaded to read” his poem “At Gull Lake - 1810,” which was pronounced “modern” by the gathering, an assessment likely reflecting last stanza of the poem which D.M.R. Bentley has argued evidences Scott’s interest in hermeticism (Ibid.; n. pag.). Marriott’s lectures were designed to suggest “a better tolerance and understanding of the work of Modern Poets,” despite the fact that this tolerance and understanding were the aspect of the Society’s cultural authority that attracted the likes of Crawley and Marriott to its ranks from
the outset (Minutes, 5 Apr. 1941). Furthermore, several VPS poets were beginning to write modernist works informed by the aesthetics espoused by Livesay et. al. in Society company.

In citing the 1941 issue of *Poetry*, a work Dean Irvine suggests inspired the members of CV to produce their own journal (80), Marriott did not allude to the fact that one VPS member had a poem included among such heralded modernist authors as F.R. Scott, A.J.M. Smith, Livesay and others: Mary Elizabeth Colman. Though Colman published little similar verse, “Answer” competes well alongside the giants of Canadian modernism also included in the volume in its stark, apocalyptic imagery and use of enjambment to communicate a bleak tone looking towards a future moment when “When tall-sceptered time at last / Is whipped, stripped, done and dead” (21). Other poets published in *Full Tide* prior to Coleman make use of equally economical language and imagery, including Hylda K. Wheeler’s “Dawn Song” (1938) and Clara Hopper’s “On the Imperial Limited” (1939). Both works are concise pieces displaying a more complex use of metaphor and direct, charged language than seen in prior works. Hopper’s poem directs the reader towards the “Void, sixty thousand leagues, and trim / Save on the far horizon’s rim” where “A wee white horse stood stiff and stark / As a painted nag from a Noah’s ark” (2). The “Imperial Limited” was the Canadian Pacific train used for transcontinental journey: the void and “painted nag” signal a false sense of nationhood or an unfulfilled promise that stands in contrast to the nationalist uplift of E.J. Pratt’s later long poem, “Towards the Last Spike” (1952).

Another notable figure of the period was Al Purdy. Purdy, after arriving in Vancouver in 1936, had recently published his first volume of verse titled *The Enchanted Echo* (1944). Later to become a much-lauded poet, the “Alfred” of VPS days was introduced at the 4 November 1944

---

29 Copied in Appendix B, page 108.
meeting as a protégé of Joan Buckley, a Confederation School versifier cited by D.M.R. Bentley as “probably the most important influence on Purdy’s creative life in the period surrounding the publication of *The Enchanted Echo*” (35). Bentley documents the social and cultural networks of support offered by Buckley to Purdy’s growth as an aspiring poet. As editor of the poetry page for the *Vancouver Sun*, Buckley offered Purdy a frequent chance for both publication and financial remuneration (36). Purdy also published two poems in *Full Tide*, though his engagement with Society activities was limited. While far from his later, increasingly modernist works, Purdy’s brief involvement with the VPS served as an apprenticeship in which Bentley cites Purdy as “still learning but with new goals” (49). Purdy’s case illustrates how the VPS functioned as support for new poets by executing the force of its cultural capital.

These heady days of modernist advocacy and some limited writing within the Society were short-lived: at very much the same time, VPS figures A.M. Stephen and Ernest Fewster were initiating a program of modernist disavowal which would become the sustained narrative of the Society until its end. The support and advocacy for modernism on the part of authorities such as Livesay had reached an apex of its narrative as the cultural status of modernist poetry became increasingly devalued within the Society. Though Canadian modernism continued to develop, especially as it reached a fever pitch in the 1960s, the Society resolutely returned to a stauncher version of the traditionalism that had always accompanied its modernist experiments.

**3.5 Modernist Disavowal: The 1940s to 1960s**

The 1940s witnessed the beginning of modernist disavowal within the context of the Society. The Second World War had a profound impact on the reception of modern verse within the Society. Ernest Fewster’s editorial in *Full Tide* for November 1941 observes that

---

31 Both copied in Appendix B, pages 109-10.
Less than twenty years ago true poetry was almost overwhelmed by a flood of tawdry verse, our music drowned by raucous noise, our paintings and sculpture eclipsed by daubs and decayed chiselings. These are now fading. Today we scarcely hear of them, and the people are slowly returning to the true Universal Structures. (1).

Despite the authority modernism had gained within the Society over the last twenty years, Fewster and A.M. Stephen were keen to return to what they conceived as the original precepts for the Society. A.M. Stephen’s article “The Fifth Column in Canadian Poetry” published in the January 1941 issue of the Dalhousie Review (and presented as a draft before the Society on 7 December 1940) might have been the catalyst of Fewster’s concerns. Stephen finds in the poetic “urge to revolt” a “blind and raging torrent of destruction” he compares to the destruction of war (471). Modernist form is a particular complaint, as Stephen links the “cacophony of new verse” and its “sinister raft of liquidating verbs and nouns” to a general “reign of chaos” (474-5). In his reactionary rhetoric, Stephen proposes a return to the “unsolved mysteries of consciousness” in which poets might “establish a just social order” where “our mechanical inventions and scientific discoveries may be made the servants and not the destroyers of man” (477-8). Though Stephen was a strong Theosophist, he had no sympathy for modernism, unlike his contemporaries Vanderpant or Dalton, as he understood it as a fundamentally destructive rather than socially productive force. Stephen’s thinking, much like that of Fewster, figured the Society as facing the challenge of “preserving the inalienable rights of man ... amidst the shifting panoramas of material progress and decay” (479). Little did he know, this stance would indirectly contribute to the decay of the Society.

Stephen’s demonization of modernism as a force related to worldwide social unrest began a narrative that would come to define the VPS for the remainder of its history. Fewster’s death
on 18 October 1947 had the added effect of enshrining his perspective for the future of the VPS. As Grace Fewster relates in a November 1949 Full Tide editorial, his dying wish for the Society was to “Keep up all the old traditions - don’t let them die out” (4). The publication of *A Book of Days* just one year prior was also an exercise in tradition. Though Fewster himself had little hand in the project, the collaboration between Lorne Pierce as editor and Grace Fleck as gatherer of Society material and anecdotes created a folksy portrait of the VPS that would be its only lasting public document. As such, *A Book of Days* barely mentions modernism: in memorializing a then-ailling Fewster, as Pierce had stated was the initial intention of the volume, the modernist counter-narrative of the VPS was necessarily excluded (Minutes, 2 May 1946).

Though the Society would continue for many years, a 1960 rejection on the part of the newly formed Poetry Centre at UBC spelled the true end for the Society. In correspondence with the Centre’s representative Jacob Zilber, the UBC poets initially expressed interest in VPS involvement, particularly in the possibility of VPS poets participating in the local reading series being mounted (Minutes, 6 Feb. 1960). However, a note from the Poetry Centre committee, reported at a meeting the following month, rejected the VPS’s offer to participate in the activities at UBC, concluding that the Centre would “confine [its] activities to what is mis-called “modern” poetry, i.e., convert it into a propaganda centre for certain styles. Our writers, in the letter’s terminology, ‘do not fall within the scope of such activity, nor is the VPS desired on the committee’” (Minutes, 5 Mar. 1960). The cultural status once possessed by the Society never recovered. Modernism had indeed provided a measure of cultural capital maintained from its earliest discussions of free verse in 1917 to the inclusion of Dorothy Livesay, members of *CV* and lesser-known modernist practitioners, right to when the Society’s efforts to exclude modernism essentially barred the VPS from contemporary engagement in other local cultural
institutions. Little known to members of the UBC Poetry Centre, however, was the Society’s last modernist: Patricia Lowther, a poet who would go largely unrecognized until after her death. I will examine the difficult legacy of the end of the VPS, including the participation of Lowther, in the conclusion.
4. Conclusion

4.1 “A Private Club”: Institutions and Modernism, 1950 to 1974

As the Vancouver Poetry Society entered the early years of the Cold War, it settled into a comfortable existence as the last bastion of cultural values in a world gone awry. The dynamism that had long characterized the Society’s private and public texts slowly ebbed as the VPS returned to the traditionally held values of spiritually inspired poetry, mystical knowledge, and Universal Brotherhood that had once served as critical standards for authorizing texts. However, Theosophy no longer held the same cultural status within the Society or Canadian intellectual publics, and repeated calls for a return to tradition resulted in little writing of note. Even the late Ernest Fewster had admitted in Presidential Reports during the height of the Society’s embrace of modernism that though “as individuals [members] have never differed more widely” the VPS “never did better team work for the common good” (“President’s Report,” 6 May 1937). Despite impassioned disagreement and debate, “expiration is about the last thing our membership has contemplated,” Fewster declared (“President’s Report,” 16 June 1939).

Expiration was a constant threat following Fewster’s death as the Society’s output became limited to a single, constantly repeated narrative generated by two members: new president John Robert Barrett and W. Gordon Stephen, brother of the late A.M. Stephen. In the flattening of Society discourse through the influence of these members, the VPS slowly lost its public. This is not to say that the Society immediately removed itself from public life. Attempts to collaborate with local and national arts institutions in the “cultural crush of the post-Massey Commission era” hoped to create new publics for the Society, but these efforts failed due to the fossilization of the Society’s aesthetics (Murray, “Canadian Readers” 153). The influences of modernism did not wholly disappear either. The last modern poet to emerge from the Society was Patricia
Lowther. Lowther joined the Society just prior to her marriage with fellow VPS member Roy Lowther in 1962. Noted for her technical experimentation and treatment of such subjects as motherhood, domestic life and the body, her promising career ended prematurely in her tragic 1975 death at the hands of her husband, an event that casts a particularly dark pall over the latter history of the Society (Sullivan 682-3).

Following a brief examination of the Society’s loss of institutional authority and its last few examples of modernism, I conclude with a summary of the questions encountered in this project, suggesting that the Society not only represents a significant contribution to the history of Canadian letters, but also serves as a model for the study of heterogeneous literary collectivities that ought to be investigated further.

When Dr. J.M. Turnbull noted during a 1972 meeting that “our Association [has] become a kind of private club, rather than a society,” he alluded to both the almost total loss of active membership incurred over the prior decades and that the Society no longer constituted a “public” in any sense of the word (Minutes, 2 Dec. 1972). The VPS no longer had any meaningful interactions with other groups and the magazine *Full Tide* published infrequently. The editors even briefly considered the inclusion of any and all submissions, regardless of quality, to keep the magazine afloat (Minutes, 4 Nov. 1972). The usual sources of attrition were the partial cause of the Society’s decline: an aging membership, unstable leadership,\(^{32}\) lack of interest on the part of new members, and greater options for the affiliation of young poets in the city. The VPS lacked resilience, however, not because it struggled to maintain relevance but because it did not. Society aesthetics had reached a standstill by the end of its reign. As W. Gordon Stephen insisted almost yearly through the 1950s, the Society’s role was to remain true to the values of its

---

“Immortals,” reiterating the notion of “spiritual experience” as being fundamental to a true poetry (Minutes, 4 Feb. 1958). The membership evidently agreed, as in the discussion that followed

It was brought out that in this age of the mind analytical, there is already a turning back to the old masters as a relief from the experimentalism which has cursed this age; and the duty laid upon us as a Society is the constant reiteration of the fundamentals of truth. (Ibid.).

In similar terms, VPS President John Robert Barrett, alarmed at the decline in members, declared that “We must not let the founders down nor permit the dreams of Ernest Fewster to die” (Minutes, 25 May 1957). The need for younger members to renew the Society was a constant source of discussion, but efforts to engage new publics proved half-hearted. A special meeting of the executive on 17 June 1959 concluded that new members were urgently needed, but current members should themselves source new recruits “carefully,” noting that “any who come just to be entertained are not suitable” (Minutes, 17 June 1959). Vancouver had no lack of potential candidates during the period: prominent poets of the 1950s included Phyllis Webb, P.K. Page and Earle Birney, who later founded the Canada’s first creative writing program at UBC in 1963 (Davis 240). In 1961 the influential Tish group of poets had emerged from the context of UBC. Headed by George Bowering, Frank Davey and Fred Wah among others, the group mixed with a vibrant small press community in Vancouver proper (Davey 1119). The VPS had no patience for such new, avant-garde poets as represented by Tish: as VPS president Kenneth Symes diplomatically commented in an interview, “we don’t have a [beatnik] beard in the outfit, but that doesn’t mean to day we’re afraid of the way-out group” (qtd. in Wiesenthal 147). Those members of the “way-out group” never broached the ranks of the VPS, as wonderful as such an encounter would have been for the critical record.
Other cultural institutions could have afforded an alternate source of a public for the Society. The VPS remained a longtime member of the Vancouver Community Arts Council, an organization founded in 1946 as a “coordinating council” to support a widespread range of arts activities in the city (City of Vancouver Archives). Aside from attending Council meetings and facilitating the creation of a (later abandoned) literary branch for the Council, the CAC introduced the VPS into the fold of national cultural politics with the request of a brief for the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences in June 1949. Later to become the influential Massey Report, the VPS prepared an account of the Society’s history and activities in support of the Commission (Minutes, 28 June 1949). Of the nationalist upsurge in efforts for Canadian cultural protection spurred by the Massey Report, the Canada Council, founded in 1957, was among the institutions that stood to benefit the VPS the most (Moss 229). Society discussion of the topic was optimistic: John Robert Barrett’s 21 May 1955 address to the membership suggested that the VPS could find renewed direction in supporting “cultural development in the community” and as a contributor to the cultural enterprise of poetry via the Canada Council (Minutes, 21 May 1955). A 1959 letter sent to the CC endorsed much of the structural state support of culture emphasized by the Massey Report: funding for independent presses such as Ryerson, financial aid to magazines and individual poets, reading tours, programs on CBC and scholarships for young writers (Minutes, 17 June 1959). The reply from CC Arts Director Peter Dwyer was decidedly lukewarm: the CC would “not aid poets directly, to publish manuscripts ... The art of dramatic recitation will not be encouraged. And [the] CBC must look after its own efforts in poetry,” the letter warned (Minutes, 3 Oct. 1959). The VPS had attempted association with the CBC over the course of several years, suggesting a series of radio programs consisting of VPS members reading their poems. When the CBC finally rejected their proposal
outright, the announcement was given at the same meeting in which CC support was effectively denied. The VPS’s poetry was concluded to be “beyond [the] scope” of the CBC, a rejection that the VPS read as expressive of the “tastes of [CBC] personnel, to ‘modern’ writing” (Minutes 3 Oct. 1959; Minutes, 24 June 1960). These rejections were among a series of difficulties faced by the Society’s desire for a public that it had effectively alienated. Even a last-ditch effort to save the Society by incorporating it as an affiliate of the local CAA branch during the late 1960s failed as the VPS refused to give up its executive powers (Minutes, 15 May 1968).

Modernism did not vanish from the Society entirely: during the late 1940s and 50s Dorothy Livesay made her last visit at a 5 February 1949 meeting where she read a series of sonnets including then-unpublished pieces from Call My People Home (1950), her series of poems confronting the mistreatment of Japanese Canadians during World War II (Minutes, 5 Feb. 1949). Earle Birney also received one of the most enthusiastic receptions of the period when he read his poems at the 7 April 1951 meeting. Reading from his newly published works, the members refused to let Birney leave without hearing, apparently “against his general principles,” from his popular poem “David” (Minutes, 7 Apr. 1951).

The last significant poet of the Society was herself working with strong modernist poetics, though the VPS provided her no formal education as such: Patricia Lowther. Preceding her was the entry of Roy Lowther, a young member representing the traditional tastes desired by the VPS who quickly rose to the ranks as secretary following his admission as member on 4 January 1958. Lowther likely met the then-Patricia Domphousse at a meeting of the VPS, an event not unlike the meeting of Duncan Macnair and Dorothy Livesay nearly thirty years earlier (Wiesenthal 139). Full Tide announced, “Pat Domphousse is a new member. We note the strength and delicacy in her work, and hope to see more of it” in its December 1962 issue (4).
The couple was married on 20 July 1963. Though the Society records for 1962-1967 are no longer extant, the Lowthers were frequently represented in *Full Tide*: Patricia’s work featured in nearly every issue between 1962 to 1965. Her pieces form a stark contrast to the often awkward, romantically inclined verse surrounding them. “Diamonds,” Her first poem included in Full Tide, begins:

> Not long ago we still believed in time,
> Like slow diamonds, our nature would mature
> Until our hearts were crystalline and pure,
> And we were clearly what we meant to be.
> Then we would love the land and seed the sea,
> And life would have the harmony of rhyme. (4).

However, Lowther’s speaker denies any such optimism: “history refuses us that scope. / We have not grown to purity and strength, / But these flawed jewels are fitted to the length / Of our ambition, breadth of human hope” (4). These words, applied to the context of the VPS, constitute a powerful metaphor for its dying light. Lowther would remain a member until 1967 when her poetry career began to rise. Christine Wiestenthal’s 2003 study *The Half-Lives of Patricia Lowther* offers a close reading of Lowther’s life and death, her relationship with Roy, and the trajectory of her career as a poet; here I dwell on Lowther only as a last, significant burst of activity on the part of the VPS. Wiesenthal comments that for all the faults of the VPS, it “opened a space for literary community and imagining an artistic life,” even if creating such a life meant using the VPS as a source of work to write against (148).

Roy’s “adversarial position” as an upholder of the values of traditional poetry and Pat’s engagement with modernism reflects the continued cultural tensions in the VPS over the course

---

33 “Diamonds” and three other selections from *Full Tide* are copied in Appendix B, pages 110-12.
of the 60s and 70s, even as modernism was itself becoming an anachronism in the broader literary community (Wiesenthal 58). The conflict between these two sides eventually reached a breaking point as the Society sunk further into obsolescence. As early as 1971, the subject of dissolution was suggested by VPS President Kenneth Symes (Minutes, 8 May 1971). Though it continued to struggle on for three additional years, the dissolution of the Society was frequently brought before the membership. At the 2 June 1973 meeting, Symes noted that “we have no really successful writers,” since Lowther left the fold, and “very few of the members are willing to attend the meetings” (Minutes, 2 June 1973). In a 29 November 1973 vote, the membership present - only eight persons - voted six to one with one abstention to dissolve the group (Minutes, 29 Nov. 1973). Its last meeting on 21 February 1974 involved the disposal of Society records. *Full Tide* published its last issue in May of the same year. Lorne Pierce contributed a vitriolic condemnation of new voices in poetry on its last page, writing that

I share your hope that the Society can be revitalized with the infusion of new blood, but I am not hopeful about achieving this through the recruitment of university students ... The current generation of college youths are deeply convinced of their intellectual superiority and are contemptuous of older people who continue to enjoy literature for its beauty and spiritual inspiration. (15).

Pierce had misunderstood the message: without youth, without struggle and without a public, the Society could not possibly possess authority for future membership, let alone posterity.

**4.2 Concluding Questions: Re-Reading the Vancouver Poetry Society**

The question of a legacy for the Vancouver Poetry Society is a difficult one to determine. As my account of the Society has demonstrated, the interests and activities were so varied (and unexpected) over its history that to reduce its life, as prior critics have, to a brief condemnatory
mention constitutes a disservice. The archive brims with much greater potential. Certainly, the cautious encouragement of modernism within its ranks deserves recognition and further study. Modernism, as BC poet Phyllis Webb has commented, remains poorly documented West of Montreal: “when I look back on the way that the history of Canadian literature has been written, it’s been documented mainly by Frank Scott and A.J.M. Smith themselves and they have created their own little history” (qtd. in Wachtel 13-14). The study of modernism in Canada has been too often geographically limited to Montreal or understood as a teleology leading from Carman and Roberts to Scott and Smith. The VPS records a significant instance in which both schools of thought existed alongside each other in culturally productive ways. Furthermore, the study of the VPS and similar societies encodes certain pitfalls that any critic must acknowledge. For one, the poetic legacy left by the Society, as Dean Irvine has noted, is indeed largely “negligible” (111). The small selection of poetry produced by VPS members included in Appendix B is but a fraction of its large bibliography. I have included what has appealed to my own tastes, among poems that demonstrate aspects of modernism in form and content, or are otherwise representative of moments in the Society’s history. The reasons behind a consistent lack of poetry may be accounted for by the traditionalism inherent in the Society throughout its history, but might also be explained in terms of the heterogeneous composition of the Society itself. Why Society members failed to take up the concerns of modernism more consistently, despite all the effort and engagement with modernism itself, is a question that remains unanswered. A second pitfall, which I am partly guilty of, is to focus on the significant characters in its history without mentioning the many interesting lesser-known members.

Finally, in broader terms, I have tried to give an account of the Society’s search for authority, particularly through its attempts to engage multiple publics. Of course, an
understanding of these publics has been necessarily limited. Local poets and VPS publications, events and lectures, among a wider circulation of discourses between national literary celebrities, other cultural institutions such as the CAA, and critics and poets, have all comprised the “public” of the VPS in one way or another. However, the true public of the VPS: readers, local critics and accounts of the Society in the press, responses of attendees at events, book reviews and so on, have been largely left out due to the considerations of time and space. The model of publics and public authority/authorization, however, functions well in such cases as the VPS where the narrative line is not exclusively clear or suffers from oversimplification. The VPS, especially at certain moments in its history, is better understood as a disunity of discourses rather than a somewhat more consistent unity common to more concentrated (and briefer) movements in literature. In its various incarnations, it formed a public and created its own venues for authority and authorship before the usual state-sponsored or publishing-oriented modes of authorization were in place in Canada, a feat that is remarkable in itself.

The ghosts of the Vancouver Poetry Society and the home at 2590 have been set aside for a time, at least personally. But the photograph with which I began this project still maintains an odd power symbolic of the search for the Society through the archive. The photograph induces the nostalgia that, as Derrida notes, so often accompanies archival research in a longing for the clue or truth that would explain it all, but that so often eludes the searcher. The VPS was a nostalgic entity itself for many of the same reasons, searching for a truth its poetics never quite found, despite many assertions to the contrary. For all its grand aims and interests between the wide spiritual expanses of Theosophy to the serious aesthetic and social debates of Canadian modernism, the Vancouver Poetry Society constantly pressed for the value of poetry as cultural product and social enterprise throughout its long life. Passionate, polemical and often quite
bizarre, the VPS wrote its story on the periphery of the usual literary movements commonly rehearsed in Canadian literary history. Its heterogeneous mixture of theosophists, Confederation Poets, modernists and many others created a compelling document of a vibrant poetic life in the Canadian West that remains unequalled to date.
Bibliography

Abbreviations

ACD: Annie Charlotte Dalton fonds, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

VPS: Vancouver Poetry Society fonds, Add. MSS 294, City of Vancouver Archives, Vancouver British Columbia.

KE: Kate Eastman fonds, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.


---. “Unremembered and Learning Much: LAC Alfred W. Purdy.” *The Ivory Thought: Essays on


---. Letter to Kate Eastman, 5 June 1931. KE, Box 1, File 16.

---. “My Beginnings.” ACD, Box 5, File 3.


Deacon, W.A. Letter to Annie Charlotte Dalton, 29 Apr. 1926. ACD, Box 1, File 12.


---. “Bliss Carman. His First Meeting with the Vancouver Poetry Society.” n.d. KE, Box 1, File 15.


---. Untitled Eulogy. n.d. ACD, Box 1, File 2.


Salloum, Sheryl. “John Vanderpant and the Cultural Life of Vancouver, 1920-1939.” *BC Studies*


---. Minutes. 2 Nov. 1916. VPS, 526-D-3, File 3.

---. Minutes. 9 Jan. 1917. VPS, 526-D-3, File 3.


---. Minutes. 12 Apr. 1918. VPS, 526-D-3, File 3.

---. Minutes. 31 May 1918. VPS, 526-D-3, File 3.

---. Minutes. 5 Dec. 1918. VPS, 526-D-3, File 3.


---. Minutes. 27 May 1921. VPS, 526-D-3, File 3.


---. Minutes. 4 Dec. 1924. VPS, 526-D-3, File 6.

---. Minutes. 6 Dec. 1924. VPS, 526-D-3, File 6.


---. Minutes. 11 Apr. 1925. VPS, 525-D-3, File 7.
---. Minutes. 5 Feb. 1926.1 VPS, 526-D-3, File 7.
---. Minutes. 5 Feb. 1926.2 VPS, 526-D-3, File 7.
---. Minutes. 3 Apr. 1926. VPS, 526-D-3, File 7.
---. Minutes. 27 Nov. 1926. VPS, 526-D-3, File 7.
---. Minutes. 8 Mar. 1930. VPS, 526-D-3, File 12.
---. Minutes. 2 May 1936. VPS, 526-D-3, File 14.
---. Minutes. 28 May 1936. VPS, 526-D-3, File 14.
---. Minutes. 5 Apr. 1941. VPS, 526-D-4, File 1.
---. Minutes. 11 Apr. 1942. VPS, 526-D-4, File 1.
---. Minutes. 2 May 1946. VPS, 526-D-4, File 3.
---. Minutes. 28 June 1949. VPS, 526-D-4, File 3.
---. Minutes. 7 Apr. 1951. VPS, 526-D-4, File 3.


Appendix A: Photographs

Photographs 1-5 are reproduced with permission from the Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC.

1. Kate Eastman fonds, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC 1909-13
2. Kate Eastman fonds, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC 1909-36.

3. Kate Eastman fonds, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC 1909-37.
4, 5. Kate Eastman fonds, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. BC 1909-24a and BC 1909-26b.

Photographer: George T. Wadds.
Appendix B: Poetry

from Poems of Armageddon (Sun Job Print, 1914):


Lover of Liberty gaze on these walls,
The shot and shell of tyranny are there,
Before the stains and scars the eyelid falls,
But deeper gaze into the wounds laid bare.

Through each quivering wound a spirit sighs,
It is the soul of one who perished there.
That you might see the glorious sun arise
In stainless skies at dawn and call it fair.

“Kitchener” by E[rnest]. P hilip]. F[ewster].

Silent, sufficient, inflexible of will—
  The menace of the future in his eyes—
Watching beyond the reach of our brief gaze
  The shadows gathering in tomorrow’s skies.
Stern, unsparing, keen, his iron hands
  Moulding a nation’s destiny—today
Wielding a trowel, to-morrow grasps a sword,
  Building to heaven or smiting to decay.

Before him inchoate the future looms
  Vast, threat’ning, yet he lays his hand on fate
And forces her to bend his strong word,
  Compels the unknown to precipitate,
To crystallize, to form his great ideals.
  Before him human flesh dissolves. He see
Nothing between his soul and its high aim
  That shall not flee or bow to his decrees.

Lo, he has dreams—how great they are none know.
  Shrouded, inscrutable, moveth that strong brain,
Missing no jot, leaving no tittle bare,
  Spanning a desert, measuring a grain.
Almost a god built out of human steel,
  Tempered in a fire lit by some occult hand—
He stands between the nations and their fear,
  And lo, his shade is safety for the land.
The scene was tinged with the jackdaw precision of masculine evening wear, the variegated mufti of others who were unaware of the sartorial opportunity, and the more charming lines and contours of feminine vagaries.

The usual preliminaries having been attended to, an air of expectancy distinguished the period of waiting for the guest of honor -- to wit, Charles G.D. Roberts. As The President nervously watched the clock hands advance, beyond the accustomed lateness of the Society’s proceedings, surreptitious glances between members and friends wirelessly forebodings as to the tangential possibilities involved in the poetic temperament; had the shirt of The Father of Canadian Literature failed to come home from the laundry, or had Vancouver’s equivalents for The Cheshire Cheese and the Coffee Taverns of Eld caused a deflection in his night’s itinerary? At last, with a sigh of defeated hope and a smile of eternal good-will, The President saluted upon Mr. W.G. Stephen to read a paper on THE POETIC DRAMA.

At this moment, the psychic Influences that so largely determine a poet’s arrival at any given place at an ungiven time, opened the front door, let Charles G.D. Roberts in, and Thomas Didymus out, and the guest of the evening, in unabashed mufti, took one startled glance at the Doctor’s shining shirt front and collapsed into a chair. The President greeted the guest in happy, genial fashion, and proceeded to assure him that his criminal association with blood and slaughter, by way of the Army, and his assinine decorations for literary achievement would not prevent his adoption by The Vancouver Poetry Society; that, indeed, he was just Good Old Charley to one and all. Dr. Roberts tottered to his feet, grasping his broad, black eye-glass ribbon for support, bowed delightfully toward the sea of adoring faces, and subsided into another chair. The President then redirected Mr. Stephen to proceed with his essay, but interpolating a welcome to a delegation from New Westminster, the What-do-you-call-yourselves-Judge-Howay.

The essayist succeeded in presenting the salient considerations that apply to the making of poetic drama together with flights of personal reflection, and expressed an unconquerable optimism for the future of the poetised play, or, perhaps, the dramatised poem. Well considered, well stated, admirably read -- especially the quotations from “Hassan” -- Mr. Stephen is to be thanked for an exceptionally good evening.

Ernest Fewster

Selections from My Garden Dreams (Graphic, 1926).

My neighbour is looking over the fence. He is said to be a crank, but I find him very interesting. He has rather a red face and I shouldn’t be surprised if he were a consistent opponent of total abstinence. He is fond of flowers, yet has a curious way of talking about them which in many would be stilted, but from him I rather like it. It is refreshing. He is a Scotsman, but speaks good English with just enough of the tongue to sound quaint. He claims that he is city bred and knows nothing about flowers. His sentences are staccato and are not necessarily related. He says:
“I am fond of flowers. Have ye heard the latest news about the war? Never grew a flower in me life. Kitchener is a good man for the job. Sweet Peas are a delightful flower. The Rose is my favourite. Germany has made a false move. I think Socialism will prove to be the only way out of the present muddle, what with the labour problem and one thing with another. Never dug a bit of ground in me life.” My neighbour has gone down town. He was wearing a large bunch of red Sweet Peas; this is rather unkind to his nose, between which and the Sweet Peas there is active rivalry. (24-5).

One of the peculiarities of the Nasturtium is to grow away from the sunlight. It seeks shade and it insists on throwing its trailing grace inside the verandah rail instead of out, so the trailers should be pushed outward and some little stones tied to them where they will not show, the result being that these gay troubadors will grow where they are desired to.

This goes to prove that the moral faculties of plants, like those of human beings, are always amenable to reason — if reason be backed up by other things. The most moral people of my acquaintance are of that manner of flesh. Dear saints, how hard they struggle towards heaven, eschewing the joys of this world not so much because they are wrong, as because they fear they cannot have both a good time in this life and heaven in the next. They tie weights on their souls to make them grow heavenward. If ever any sinners enter heaven, they'll have to keep mum or the saints will have pain in their celestial stomachs and suffer acute melancholia, thinking over the good times they might have committed on earth and yet have won heaven. I wonder if they’ll think the game is worth the candle? Anyhow I’m not going to refuse oranges and eat potato peelings this winter for the problematical sake of the peach next summer. I often think when I see the stupidly serious faces of some people going to church, the sotto voce tones, the laughterless lips, how long it will take them to get over their religious dyspepsia and learn to laugh after they get to heaven. I believe I’d rather be a happy sinner than a sad saint. I’d rather enter the next life with laughter on my lips, than enter with my eyes clouded with despise of earth. It would comfort me much more to hear the expectant young angels call, “Here comes another jolly good fellow,” than to hear them say, “Here comes another saint, boys, let’s beat it.” (112-114).

“Knowledge” from *The Immortal Dweller* (Murphy & Chapman, 1938).

The more I know the less I am myself;
The less I am myself, the more I am;
The more I grow into the Universe—
Into the hills, the seas, the clouds, the storms,
The sun, the skies and all the Infinite and God.

“Granville Street Bridge” from *The Immortal Dweller* (Murphy & Chapman, 1938).

The long, thin bridge, dusty from shuffling feet,
Noisy from traffic plied unceasingly;
Far out the sunset in the quiet sky
And glimpses of the blue unfettered sea—
And round me tired and frocked humanity
Reading the tawdry news, the novel light,
While through the open windows they might see
The silent mountains waiting for the night.

A.M. Stephen

“The Quest” from *The Rosary of Pan* (McClelland & Stewart, 1923).

Astral bells, ringing through the recesses of my brain—
Always, I hear the eternal, questing wail
Of humanity in travail. Disguised
As the search for happiness, I hear the murmur
Of human flies caught in illusion’s web.
Beneath the staccato notes of syncopation,
Lurking in the laughter of painted women,
Hushed in the eyes of successful men,
In the undertones of the city's maelstrom,—
Everywhere present, insistent as life, terrible as death,
I hear this plaint of myriads groping
Through a labyrinth of shadows.

Yet—it was but yesterday—a voice,
Exultant, vibrant with wonderment and joy,
Met my ear. The questing cry which haunted me
Was stilled. What had he found—this man,
Whose voice spelled peace and victory?
His whispered secret is no secret now.
“Last night, I worshipped at a holier fane
Than temples built by human hands. Within
The white enchantment of Love’s arms
My quest was ended.—God and I were one.”

“To Bliss Carman” from *The Rosary of Pan* (McClelland & Stewart, 1923).

*On the occasion of his visit to British Columbia, 1921.*

Why have you come to be with us—
You, who were heretofore a voice, resonant
with joy
And the freshness of the morning?
Is it, that being wiser than we, following
Our Western star, you come, bearing your gift of songs
To light on these great, pagan altars of the West,
The ancient flame of passionate love for beauty,
Knowing that here, where sunsets guard
Our gateway to the seas and red gods dwell,
Greek may clasp hand with Greek again?

Mayhap, when you are gone, our eyes, unsealed,
Shall see more clearly by the light you leave;
Shall see Marsyas by our woodland rills;
May glimpse thy children singing by our sea,
Or hear Pan piping from our fir-clad hills.

“Preserver” from The Land of Singing Waters (J.M. Dent, 1927).

An age has passed. Its idols in the dust
   Of long-forgotten things lie impotent.
Through the gaunt fragments of its storied lust
   Whisper the wastrel winds on rapine bent.
There, in the ruins, wistful-eyed, the throng
   Seeking, forlorn, among the mouldering clods
The echoes of some old, familiar song
   And dear, remembered faces of their gods,
See One who, heavy-laden, patient, slow,
   Hath garnered here a line and there a hue
Of passing beauty, distillate of soul—
   The broken truths whose shattered temples strew
The earth beneath His feet. Behold, anew,
   The warp is woven of the seamless whole!

“My Canada” from The Land of Singing Waters (J.M. Dent, 1927).

My Canada is still unborn—
A breath of springtime on the morning wind,
A hint of greatness, bright but undefined,
An undertone of some clear choral song
The eager soul can sense at times
In pages of our bards' prophetic rhymes.

The lark that soared in English lanes
Found light no stronger than the vivid gleam
Which gilds the pinion of our singer's dream,
And yet, the too-familiar strain has led
Us like a scarlet hunter's horn
By meadows and by hedges trimmed and shorn.

We bind our children with the chains
Of these old legends of a sainted past,
Blind to the vision of a day more vast
Than that which dawned on Shakespeare's inner sight
When, in the name of Liberty,
Drake's guns made sure the Empire of the Sea.

My Canada is yet unborn.
Our child within the pregnant womb of years,
Formed from the chastening soil of fire and tears
On Europe's battle mounds, of iron and flame,
Her soul is pledged to mastery.
She guards the message of an Age to be.

“While Hearing a Lecture on Oriental Mysticism” from Brown Earth & Bunch Grass (Wrigley, 1931).

Sick at heart, I turn
from the pink seas of sentimental slush,
the billing and cooing of the “libido”
that expresses the pale grey desires
of penitential spinsters,
who worship Truth
only when it wears the turban
and flowing robes of an Eastern yogi.

I remember that Truth
sat with publicans and sinners,
who did not prattle about being spiritual.

I remember that Truth
defended the woman found in adultery.

I remember that Truth
was strong and vital enough
to raise the dead to life.

I remember that Truth
walked unknown through the streets,
and was condemned by the magistrates,
and was crucified by the pious
who talked much about their souls.

Looking about me,
I see the starved features of women,
whose aching bodies long for the touch
of warm human flesh.
“A Poem — Which You May Not Understand” from Brown Earth & Bunch Grass (Wrigley, 1931).

Here is a bridge
in Golgotha,
the place of the skull.

Some have seen it
as a cross of flame.

Upon this bridge,
above the pit
of darkness and death,
the Creator ascends and descends.

Descending,
his body is received
by the two Mary’s,
mother and mate.

Ascending,
his spirit is received
by their angels.

Annie Charlotte Dalton

Excerpt from “Flame and Adventure” from Flame and Adventure (Macmillan, 1924).

I.
I wandered through the market-place
and saw
One holding forth unto the folk the
Law,
And much I marvelled how he knew
so well,
The fall of man, the potency of hell.

II.
I watched the many eyes suffused
with tears,
The parted lips, the lips re-curved to
sneers,
The patient faces, drawn with toil
and pain,
Pleading for hope, and pleading thus,
in vain.
III.
The harvest-moon looked down and blessed the throng;
The shimmering sea renewed its even-song;
The fragrant breezes blew a gentle gale;
Harshly discordant waxed the gloomy tale.

IV.
“Repent!” the preacher cried, “Repent and lose
No time—offended God or Hades—choose!”
Why should they choose? What means this threat of hell
To us, who groped from primal ooze?
and well,

V.
We were the men—abortions of young Time,
Spewed from th' abhorred, the world's ensanguined slime,
Hated, and hunted forth from bog and pen,
Naked and homeless—God! and we were men.

VI.
No rare or pleasing Paradise we found,
A dismal shambles held the teeming ground,
And evil creatures hunting night and day,
By turns became the hunter and the prey.

VII.
It was a world of terror and disgust,
A world of ceaseless carnage, deep distrust;
And beauty lurked, her loveliness a
snare
Of sudden death, or torture and
despair.

VIII.
What old and monstrous god reigned
there, supine?
Stamped earth his winepress, quaffed
her blood for wine,
Brutish with drunken orgy, senseless
play,
Flung hearts and bodies like squeezed
grapes away?

IX.
We blame not Thee, great God, for
all amiss,
Nor shalt Thou blame us either—tell
us this:
For all this dread mischance, who
shall atone?
We blame not Thee, great God, let
us alone.

X.
Let us alone, for life is grim and
harsh,
And death our friend—the monsters
in the marsh
Who fought so well, who took so long
to die,
Heaved their great bulk and bellowed
to the sky,

XI.
Why, why, and why? Again the little
ape,
Springing for joy, heeds not yond
hideous shape
Trailing him there—Ah! hear that
piteous yelp—
Fear everywhere, and nowhere any
help.

XII.
Why, why, and why this blood forever
Is this Thy hell for us, and we unknowing, 
Earning Thy price for heaven ere yet we own 
The power to frame Thee on Thy awful Throne?

XIII. 
Repent, repent—Dear God, dost Thou repent 
The doubtful currency we have ill-spent? 
Have we not risen from all this slime and smother, 
To hunt, to slay, to batten on our brother?

XIV. 
The fish, the reptile, and the mammal formed 
The bridge o'er which our youth arid ardour stormed, 
With many a fearful slip or flying leap, 
To blunder up Life's cold and treacherous steep.

XV. 
To blunder up and down—a sorry tribe 
Breeding through centuries, and ne'er a scribe 
To limn for coming generations how We followed ape and bear into the slough.

XVI. 
Then to our little world of small desire, 
Came the Entrancing One, the Holy Fire; 
Solaced and awed, we knelt upon the sod, 
And there, and thus, with joy created God!
H. Bromley Coleman

“One Morning” from *Vagabond Thoughts in Rhythm* (J.M. Boyd, 1923).

I remember—one hour
On the brink of morning,
I saw a woman
Swaying toward a tenement
Drunken with despair;
I saw a man
Whose eyes were harbors
Of hate and hunger;
I saw a little child
Searching the garbage
Like an eager sparrow;
I saw daffodils
On a market wagon
Swaying in the breeze,
While the clean breath of ocean
Swept along the street
As a clear benison.
Then I remember
A miracle of dawn—
That touched the hair of the woman
With madonna gold,
That lent to the man
The mystery of Lucifer,
That surrounded the little child
With a garment of splendor........
The yellow daffodils were not as beautiful
As these bruised human flowers.

Edwina Winter


Oh God, I am tired of body and soul,
Of the stifling heat of the city’s streets
Of the smallness of life ’twixt office walls,
And the seeking of baubles a fool might prize.
Sick of the days with their dread routine,
Tired of the struggle ‘gainst heavy odds,
Petty cares that burden the soul
And take the mind from higher things.
The day is past, and I would, dear God,
It were the last of that endless chain
Of empty tasks, till my heart grows numb
And I wish for that which I cannot name,
Until I am naught but a soulless slave,
Weary and dazed of body and mind.

And yet, oh God, on the beach tonight,
The spell of thy great sea holds me fast,-
As a mother clasps her child to her.
Oh, I had forgotten the boundless stretch
Of waters, under the vast, clear sky;
Forgotten the pathway of molten bronze
Set at my feet by the sinking sun,
Seeming to whisper the spirit of me
The radiance of Eternity.
The purple hills in the evening haze,
And a drifting gull across the sky.
Oh, I had forgotten the song of the waves,
Soothing the fevered brow of me.
Telling me that I had sought to know,-
Of a life that is fair as the crested waves,
Of a life that is glad as the mighty sea,
As broad and free as God’s open sky,
As sweet as its mystic call to me.
Would I might answer that call tonight -
In thy arms forever, Eternal Sea!

Untitled Fragment from Vancouver Poetry Society fonds, City of Vancouver Archives.
Unpublished Writing of Members, 526-E-2, File 38.

They dislike the wind -
These pale faced women whom I work with,
(Wind that shakes the very building
    with its breathing)
And so I dared not tell them,
But oh, how I should love to be
Out under the wild sky,
Naked, racing against it.

Untitled Fragment from Vancouver Poetry Society fonds, City of Vancouver Archives.
Unpublished Writing of Members, 526-E-2, File 38.

They beat against the temple of my mind,
Those waves of mad, erotic thought
And lewd suggestion,
(How thick they crowd, dark, angry waves).
Had but the inevitable minds that sent them forth
Known health,
What a rare feast of beautiful, inspiring thought
Might have spread before me -
Wave upon sun-kissed wave.
Far from it -
These minds were sick to death.
(And I shall give them right to consort with my own,
And add to their vile product?)

H.J.T. Coleman

“The Poet Confides” from *The Poet Confides* (Ryerson, 1928).

Sometimes I write with the stub of a pencil
On the back of an old envelope,
Or an odd scrap of paper
That I fish up out of an inside pocket.
And sometimes I write on decent paper
With pen and ink.
But I always write (when I write truly)
With my heart’s blood.

And it is not I that write,
At least it is not the man
Who bears a conventional name,
And sometimes wears evening clothes,
And has a street address and a telephone number,
And is mentioned in Who’s Who.
The one who writes is a very different person,
He has been warmed by the suns of a million summers,
And chilled by the frosts of a million winters,
And gone naked in the jungle,
Arid followed dim trails through primeval forests,
And suffered indescribable agonies and experienced unimaginable joys,
Before streets or telephones or the banalities of publicity were ever thought of.

No! I am not the person you take me for,
But so different, indeed, that you might not care to shake hands
with me if you saw me truly,
Yet I hope you could pity me even if you could not love me,
For I am the soul of man.

Annie Charlotte Dalton

“The Ear Trumpet” from *The Ear Trumpet* (Ryerson, 1926).

Edith Sitwell
made a solo
of her auntie,
her rich auntie
and her trumpet,
such a trumpet
as old ladies
give to stranger-
folk to blow in.

Down the trumpet
scornful Edith
sang and chortled
her fine solo
of the Judgement-
day, and crack of
DOOM. ...

Auntie prattled
of her boy-scouts,
Edith roaring
of the Judgement-
day, still roaring
down the trumpet—

Some day Edith,
too, may need one,
How she’ll shiver
when she knows it,
thinking of that
scornful solo,
thinking of the
Day of Judgement;
of the solo,
of her laughter;
of her laughter
and the trumpet;
of HER dreadful,
dreadful trumpet
and the crashing
Trump of Doom!

Foolish, foolish
Edith Sitwell
sang a solo
of her auntie,
her rich auntie
and her trumpet,
such a trumpet
as old ladies
give to stranger-
folk to blow in.

“To Viola Meynell” from *The Ear Trumpet* (Ryerson, 1926).

I.

We were just saying—I had not thought
That anyone so moving tale could tell
Of those experiences too dearly bought,
That on them knowing hearts should care to dwell.

We were just saying—Have you thus said
With kindly gesture to a bursting heart?
Have you? … Then blessing be upon your head!
Like Mary, you have chosen the loving part.

We were just saying—Was that kind word
Once said to you waiting in silent pain?
And did you know the joy of hope deferred—
The joy of having some dear soul explain?

We were just saying—O simple thing!
But, ’tis the simple things that make life glad;
Deaf though the ears, birds in the heart can sing,
Thrice deafened are the ears when the heart is sad.

We were just saying—Strange tale well told—
How many hearts will bless the loving thought?
How many callous ones will fear the bold
Light, you have thrown on the havoc they have wrought.

II.

They were just saying—
But you I may not tell,
’Tis such a dreadful story
It must have been thought out in hell.
The story of your father—
Who died;
The story of your mother too—
A guiltless homicide;
And you sit there in innocence,
In semi-silence, trustful ignorance,
The misery unheard!
Oh, not by a word,
Or ever a glance
Of mine, must pass
To you. ...
This frightful tragedy that was
Of one, the slain, and one that slew,
Two lovers to each other true.

They were just saying—
Nay! but those innocent eyes,
So eloquently praying
To share the eagerness, the great surprise
Upon their animated faces,
Pierce to my very heart—Ah! what sweet lies
Shall I call up to fill the places
Of those grim tales, so grossly nurtured, vile?
Dear lady with the wistful smile!
Ask me no more what the tart tongues say—
Cold, evil spite their speech debases,
And I—I can but pray,
“Ask me no more!”
Hot is my heart and sore,
Pure is the air without the door,…
Ah! come away,
The very furniture grimaces!

Dalton’s note: “‘To Viola Meynell,’ a poem in two parts; the first one addressed to the author of
a striking short story, entitled “We Were Just Saying,” illustrates that phrase, with which a
thoughtful person usually begins an explanation of a conversation to one who is partially deaf,
and which is always so welcome and productive of delight.
The second half of the poem portrays the thoughtlessness with which people so often discuss the
affairs of the deafened in their presence.
The story is included in Mrs. Meynell’s book, “Young Mrs. Cruse.” —Harcourt, Brace & Co.”
(8).
Dorothy Livesay

“Annie Charlotte Dalton” from *Saturday Night*, 29 January 1938: n.pag.

She held her three score years and ten
Like a bright cape or a bird’s wing:
Who then should mourn, that she took flight
Seeking, again, her northern spring?

Who, having heard heart’s utterance
From bursts of chiselled song
Could grudge the singer one more search
Whence mystery and words are sprung?

No battles made she with a sword,
No sacrifice on bloodied plain;
Watching the youth go out, she smiled
But stretched her quiet hands in vain.

Her struggle otherwise; to find
In crippled silence, music’s form
And in the barren night, release
For words’ wild avalanche of storm

“Shaped Like a Bugle” from *Full Tide* 3.1 (February 1939): 7.

Shaped like a bugle
My thoughts, swarming outwards
In phalanx exultant
Singing for these ones:

For you, young lover
Facing the chasm
And plunging head downwards
“I had not the courage”.

For you, girl crying,
For love has no wisdom
No warm sleep, jobless
No arms to build with —

For you, forerunner
Outstripping darkness
Your mind sharp as sunlight
Piercing our shadows.

For you, sea of faces
Uniform, solemn
Alert for the warning —
Whom hunger outpaces.

Shapes like a bugle
My thoughts split the framework
Of silence and weeping,
Arise, and send singing
This song to the sleeping.

Mary Elizabeth Colman


Hungry unnumbered since the birth of time
Question the dusty sky
In vain: no answer there.

Gone, gone, as darkness floods the day,
Fled, sped, unsatisfied—
Ashes to ashes; dust to dust.

(The scabbard falls, yet the bright sword
Guardian no longer
Speeds, speeds to the Horseman's hand.)

Still time arrogant, invincible, is armed with death;
Still the unregarding worlds roll on;
The universe expands—is dumb.

With no stone hunger be fed, but quickening bread
When tall-sceptered time at last
Is whipped, stripped, done and dead.

Hilda K. Wheeler

“Dawn Song” from *Full Tide* 2.2 (February 1938): 7.

Grey winds of the dawning,
Soft dusk on the hill,
(Oh, grief of my grief,
Will you ever be still?)
The note of the blackbird
At my heart to catch;
White shimmer of hawthorn -
Your hand on the latch.

Clara Hopper


Uncrowned but, truly, limited
    Till outward roved the weary eye,
Where rolled ten thousand leagues of plain,
    Arched fifty thousand leagues of sky.

Void, sixty thousand leagues, and trim
Save on the far horizon’s rim:
    A wee white horse stood stiff and stark
As a painted nag from a Noah’s ark.

Al Purdy


The fringing ice is a leaden weight -
Our bit of world wheels on,
A satellite or a city-state
From a younger Helicon;
And down the years from Marathon
The newer horsemen glide,
And one that reels like a stricken swan
To sink in a vaster tide.
Persepolis is a spark that died
A thousand dreams ago,
And salamis, where the triremes played -
A shade of indigo:
And over all like the genii fear
Ride God and I and the bombardier.


The worst of war is not the blood
And slaughter of the flesh,
But how the very soul of man
Is caught within its mesh.
And strange the sight of boyish eyes
New bitter on the street
With wisdom older than their years,
And youth no longer sweet.

How shall these hearts so lately young,
So soon of death grown fond
Find that which they forever lost
Ere they trek out beyond?

Find gladness, gaiety and youth
Unchanging down the years,
And inwardly to know at last
What happiness are tears.

Patricia Lowther


Not long ago we still believed in time,
Like slow diamonds, our nature would mature
Until our hearts were crystalline and pure,
And we were clearly what we meant to be.
Then we would love the land and seed the sea,
And life would have the harmony of rhyme.
But history refuses us that scope.
Men who believe the fantasies they talk
Would blast our diamonds into lava rock.
We have not grown to purity and strength,
But these flawed jewels are fitted to the length
Of our ambition, breadth of human hope.
Now, pulled in stretching fists, our time grows thin
To find a way of work, and to begin.


I

You with your cauterizing pencil,
Your bedroom papered with Tenniel drawings and old cartoons
I remember you making faces at year-round twilights.
I think of your clenched, white, joyous, desperate teeth,
Your one eye blue and timid and sad with love.
Thirsty incredulous supplicant, do you still laugh that exultant, bitter laugh?
Are there still tears in the abandoned socket of your eye?

II

Sardonic savage, reenactor of legend,
You hurtle endlessly downward through burning dark.
Amid shattered whiskey-glasses and insulted women
You rustle your Luciferean wings, to feel their power.
You draw in the world through innumerable journeys,
Branding with pride a myriad vibrant cities.
Dreaming of light and purpose, reaching in all the wrong
directions,
You saw me and shuddered and smashed things and ran away.

III

Compound of light and darkness, agonized glowing bowl,
You with the leaf-like hands and the sorrowing eyes,
Burst out your lungs on clifftops shouting Om,
Burnt out your heart in screaming twilit hells.
Full as the sea and nourishing, yet weak with woe,
You shrank from the world, grew barren, and died young.


Down in some green place,
Some wilderness not claimed by now,
He drew out ferns,
Plucked them from rainsoaked earth,
Black earth familiar to his hands.

With ferns in a bucket,
Sleepy-eyed, abstract, content,
Spitting salaal,
He brings the flavour of archaic idiom
Into the lighted continent of cafe.

Anachronism in the jukebox strain,
The determinedly lighted tension,
Small, shabby, old,
Round shoulders, casual moustache,
He daydreams over coffee.

Outside street lights burn blue,
Leaves blow, crisp maple leaves,
Incongruous, rare
As antique curiosities
Among the spinning tires.

Somewhere beyond this strident,
Dusk-denying intersection,
Where old man goes,
Where his figure vanishes
Down the lane of sight,

Ferns in a bucket swinging at his side,
Surely there is a place
Where vacant lots
Grow wild, horse chestnuts drop
In the grass, and somewhere there

Streetcars still gibber down their tracks
To take an old man home
Through autumn dusk
To parlour, rubber plants,
Wood fire, old wife, and tea.


What is the unthinking nature of birds—
Swift knife-thrown flight, all business,
Song without the applause of consciousness,
This is the claim we feel most bitterly denied.
In dreams we own air.
Regal as migrant swans, we sail obedient winds.
But man is a brittle perpendicular of bone
Supporting a glove of heavy, too valued for flight,
For that sweet uncomplexity—
And song is a long tormenting tension in his throat
And a heaviness of arms