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the economy ... of ...



Wrote: Dr. Watson Kirkconnell

DR. WATSON KIRKCONNELL

Watson Kirkconnell, Ph.D., D.Litt., a past president of the Canadian Authors' Association, was recently honored by the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia for his contributions to literature. His scholarly writings first appeared in 1921 and have continued unabated to the present.

He was born in Port Hope, Ontario, in 1895, and was educated at Queen's University and Lincoln College, Oxford University. Before serving as the ninth president of Acadia University (1948-64), he had been a professor at the University of Winnipeg and at MacMaster University.

In 1928 he published *European Elegies*, a slim volume in which elegies in forty different languages were translated into English. An astonished publisher rejected the first draft noting, "We do not believe that there is any living man so intimately acquainted with forty different languages, past and present, as to be able to translate poems from those languages." Kirkconnell's scholarship was soon vindicated by a number of expert linguists.

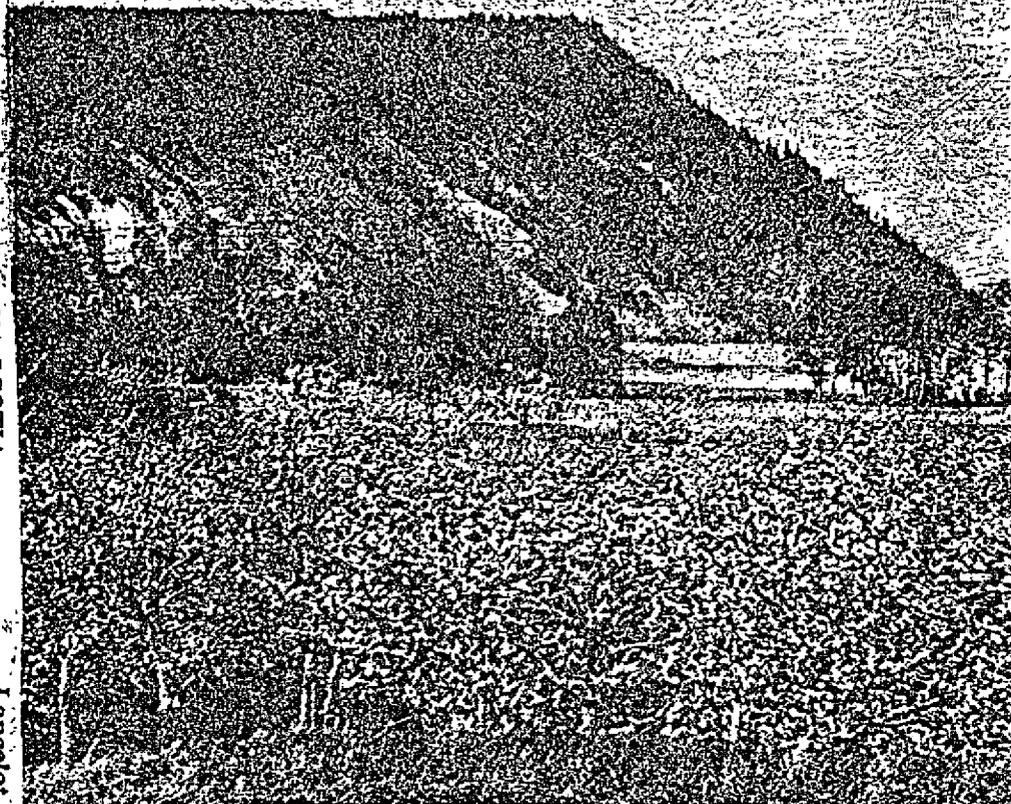
He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1936, and has also received scholarly honors from many countries.

Rest, Perturbed Spirit, the haunting story of a Canadian poet, was published by Lancelot Press in 1974.

THE FLAVOUR OF NOVA SCOTIA

By Watson Kirkconnell

Kirkconnell
THE FLAVOUR OF NOVA SCOTIA
Lancelot Press



Imaginative poems that reflect aspects of varied Nova Scotia

THE GLOOMY FOREST*

Despair besets me in the gloomy wood;
Bereft of joy, my thoughts can find no rest.
This place so hostile to all Nature's good
Has robbed me of all gifts I once possessed.
I cannot frame a song as once I could;
Whenever I begin, I grow depressed;
And I have lost the Gaelic's wonted ease
I once knew in the land beyond the seas.

My restless thoughts from all due order fly,
Though I could once endite a tuneful strain.
My sorrows are increased, my pleasures die,
Without some friend's good talk to soothe my brain;
Each day and night, at every task I try,
My heart turns ever back to seek in pain
The land I left beside the long salt sea,
Though in a glen my dwelling now may be.

It is no wonder that in grief I shiver:
Upon a mountain's back I dwell in care,
Deep in a wilderness on Barney's River,
With only scant potatoes as my fare,

*This is my translation in *ottava rima* of the most famous Gaelic poem written in Canada. John MacLean (1787-1848) was hereditary bard of Alexander MacLean of Coll (Inner Hebrides). In 1819, he migrated from Scotland to Nova Scotia and settled as a farmer in the primeval forest near Barney's River, Pictou County. Here he was dismayed by the hardships of a pioneer's life and furious at the deceptions of the emigration agents who had lured him into making the move. The outcome was this grim and bitter poem on "the gloomy forest" (*a' choille ghrumach*) in which he found himself immured.

Before my tillage can a crop deliver,
The wood must be uprooted from its lair.
The strength of my right arm will soon be seared
And fail before my family is reared.

This is a country in which toil is vast:
A fact to those who came here quite obscure.
Evil have mischief-makers on us cast,
Persuading us to come, by lying lure.
If they make profit thus, it will not last,
It will not help them greatly, I am sure.
From every quarter where their victims spread,
Each wretch will send his curse upon their head.

It will be grand, the story they will say:
This place's reputation will wax great;
They will be bragging that your friends are gay,
Wealthy and unrestricted in estate.
Every deceitful story of our stay
Seeks to allure you on to share our fate.
If you arrive here safely, you shall see
New hardships worse than ancient poverty.

When agents come, prospective settlers seeking,
It is with lies their project will be sped;
Without a word of truth they will be speaking,
The heart condemning what the mouth has said;
Everything here with praise they will be sleeking
As the most rare on which the sun is shed.
Yet when you come here, little will you spy
But soaring forests shutting out the sky.

When winter comes, the season of rough weather,
The snowdrifts towards the boughs mount ever higher;
Over the knees you sink in altogether;
Though trousers may be strong, they still require
Thick double stockings, moccasins of leather,
And leather thongs to tighten such attire.

A wild beast's fur completes our new - style suit,
Torn yesterday from off the slaughtered brute.

If I am careless in my dress of winter,
My nose and mouth are frozen without fail
By the North Wind, a bitter blast, imprinter
Of wounds upon my ears, grown chill and pale;
In such a fearful frost, the axe will splinter,
The sharpness of the steel will not avail;
Unless one warm the head, its use is through;
The smith must mend it or it will not hew.

When summer comes, and in the month of May
The sunshine's sudden heat my strength impairs,
It stirs up ardour in the beasts of prey
That drowsed all winter in their savage lairs.
Amid my hapless flock now come to slay
Black, hungry brutes of just awakened bears;
While the black fly, envenomed, fleet of wing,
Wounds me unceasingly with sharpened sting.

Their bites upon my face grow worse and worse;
I cannot see the ground on which I tread;
My eyes are swollen by this insect curse,
So potent is the poison that they shed;
I cannot tell the number in my verse
Of each obscene new beast that rears its head.
As many plagues are in this country found
As once with Pharaoh, till at last he drowned.

The world sees many changes, much distress;
Back home of old, the fact escaped my grip.
It was my thought, on fire for success,
That I should prosper if I came by ship.
With every change, I profited the less;
I crossed the sea on a mistaken trip
To the dark forest where I am not free,

Cowless and sheepless in stark misery.

In many a step I shall be deeply mired
Before I own the land I work for now;
With hopeless toil my body will be tired
Before I make a clearing for my plough;
Piling burnt log on log, I have perspired
Until my very loins are racked, I vow,
And every part of me is grimed so deep
That I am brother to a chimney-sweep.

Fine tales they told the Scot who might migrate
But in experience they prove untrue.
I shall not see blue dollars circulate,
Though they are here supposed to greet the view;
When we would sell, in vain for coin we wait;
They will not even name the money due;
If in the shops a bargain should be made,
The settler is with flour and butter paid.

I shall not see a market nor a fair,
Nor driving forth of cattle on that day,
Nor anything that might our loss repair;
The people are in hardship every way.
When they must sell their holdings in despair,
Their grievances no comfort can allay;
While creditors expect, with heart of ill,
To jail the man who does not pay his bill.

Before the cases come before the court,
So that in justice double may be spent,
The law allows, by jurymen's resort,
The plundering to proceed with dark intent.
Through all the land the sheriff may extort,
Pursuing and demanding settlement.
I am most anxious lest he come to me:
He would not pity my extremity.

My griefs the measure of this verse exceed;
I cannot in poetic form devise
All that of which I'd have my friends take heed
Back in the land that heard my infant cries.
Understand reason, all of you who read,
And do not listen to the boaster's lies.
For tales to tempt you, by false prophets told,
Are careless of your good. They seek your gold.

Although I should be diligent in writing,
I should require a month of toil or more
Before my mind could finish its enditing,
Before my mouth could empty all its store.
A secret sadness is my spirit blighting,
Far harder to express than aught before.
In this dark wood, I little know but pain,
Where no man calls on me to sing a strain.

Far other was it when my days began,
When I could join in jest at every table:
A hearty, courteous company I'd scan
And all the chorus rang with carefree babel.
Alas, I left you all, a wistful man,
And to control my tears, I was not able,
On Thursday morning, beyond Caolas going,
With sails set and the off-shore breezes blowing.

A BALLAD OF SAINT ANDREW

Saint Andrew was a fisher, and he lived beside the sea;
His brother's name was Simon and his father's name was John;
And he loved to take the herring just as well as you or me,
And to talk about his catches in the seasons that were gone.

Saint Andrew met the Baptist and was taken to the Lord.
He took the Lord out fishing, and a storm came on the sea;
But Jesus checked the tempest in his love for all on board,
And a calm as sweet as heaven fell on heaving Galilee.

Saint Andrew gave up fishing for the herring in the deep;
He fished for men for Jesus as he'd fished for cod before;
Till the Devil's servants took him as he lay in holy sleep,
And they hung him like a haddock on a cross beside the shore.

His deeds are lost in legend, but of this we may be sure:
His spirit still is homesick for the smell of net and line;
His heart is with all fishermen in all that they endure,



The Minas Channel, Tide in flood
(W. H. Bartlett, 1840)