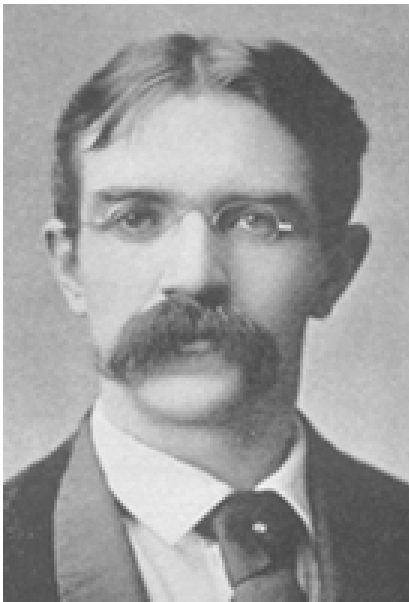




the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

CHARLES G.D. ROBERTS (1860-1943)



Charles G.D. Roberts. 1893.
Photograph. Wetherell, J.E., ed.
Later Canadian Poems.
Toronto: Copp, Clarke, 1893.
92-93.

Charles George Douglas Roberts was born on 10 January 1860 in Douglas, New Brunswick, Canada. Because his father was a clergyman in the Church of England, his family led a somewhat nomadic existence. Shortly after Roberts was born, they moved to Woodcock, New Brunswick, where the nearby Tantramar Marshes at the head of the Bay of Fundy provided the inspiration for such poems as “Tantramar Revisited” (1886) and “Ave! (An Ode for the Shelley Centenary, 1892).” When he was fourteen they moved to Fredericton, where he studied at the Collegiate School under George Parkin and at the University of New Brunswick, from which he graduated in 1879.

In the autumn of the same year, Roberts published his first substantial collection of poetry, *Orion, and Other Poems* (dated 1880). The book won him immediate acclaim in Canada and gave him the impetus to assemble the group of six Canadian writers who would become known as the Confederation poets. In the ensuing year, he married Mary (May) Isabel Feherty, with whom he would have four children.

After brief stints as a schoolmaster in Chatham, N.B. and then as a headmaster in

Fredericton, Roberts had an even briefer stint in Toronto as the editor of *The Week*, a new periodical owned by Goldwin Smith, whose view that Canada would inevitably be annexed to the United States was at odds with the fervent nationalism that soon drew Roberts into the imperialist fold. In 1885, his fortunes turned decidedly better with an appointment as Professor of English and French at King's College, Windsor, Nova Scotia, where he built the large house, Kingscroft, that would be the family home for the next twelve years.

During those twelve years Roberts, who was a consummate self-promoter, made numerous contacts with influential American writers and editors such as Charles Leonard Moore, Richard Watson Gilder, and Edmund Clarence Stedman. He also published three more collections of poetry: *In Divers Tones* (1886), *Songs of the Common Day* (1893), and *The Book of the Native* (1896). In addition, he published several historical romances, two guidebooks, a translation, an anthology, a history of Canada, and a collection of short fiction, *Earth's Enigmas* (1895), consisting largely of animal stories in the symbolist mode.

Both before and after moving to Windsor, Roberts had affairs with a number of women, and as time went on he became increasingly unhappy in his marriage. During the summers in the early 1890s, the presence at Kingscroft of Roberts's cousin Bliss Carman, Richard Hovey (the co-author with Carman of the *Vagabondia* series [1894, 1896, 1900]), and Hovey's companion and later wife Henrietta Russell did nothing to quell the growing rumours of indiscretion that did much to precipitate Robert's resignation from King's College in 1895, the year in which "Earth's Complines" was published in *The Yellow Book*.

In 1897 Roberts left his family in Fredericton to join Carman in New York, a move long anticipated by two jaunty poems entitled "La Belle Tromboniste" (1886) and "The Poet is Bidden to Manhattan Island" (1886). For financial reasons and because of a shift in American taste away from lyric poetry, he turned increasingly to fiction. Concentrating initially on historical romances and realistic animal stories, he eventually focused almost entirely on the latter, a

genre greatly in favour in the United States during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) and for many years thereafter. In 1907 Roberts was one of the writers accused by Roosevelt of being a “nature fakir” whose animal stories were “fairy tales” lacking in accuracy, a charge to which he capably and publicly responded (see Pomeroy 177-82).

Roberts did not stop writing and publishing poetry, however: two sequences of love poems, *New York Nocturnes* (1898) and *The Book of the Rose* (1903), mark a departure from the classical themes and Nature poems that predominated in his earlier volumes to lyric paeans on the sanctity of erotic love that derive to a great extent from the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his successors. Collected editions of Roberts’s poetry, both entitled *Poems*, appeared in 1901 and 1907.

Geography dictated that Roberts’s principal literary connections were in Canada and the United States, but this does not mean that he lacked contact with British writers of the *fin de siècle*. In 1882, he spent what he claimed were “several evenings, or properly nights,” with Oscar Wilde during his tour of Canada (*Correspondence* 49). Later he would pronounce Wilde’s *Ave Imperatrix* “fertile soil” because of its “very rankness.” In 1888, he published *Poems of Wild Life* in the Canterbury Poets series edited by William Sharp, and in the summer of the ensuing year he hosted him in Windsor. Earlier in 1889, he had written in a local newspaper that Sharp was “the strongest and most genuinely inspired” of England’s “younger singers” (qtd. in Bentley, *Confederation* 93n.). After his move to New York in 1897, Roberts became close friends with Richard Le Gallienne. Indeed, he briefly emulated Carman, Hovey, and Le Gallienne by growing his hair long, a bohemian affectation that resulted in the four being dubbed “The Angora School of Poets” (see Pomeroy 170-71).

In 1907, Roberts left New York for Europe, spending time in France and Germany. He gravitated to London in 1912. At the outbreak of war, he enlisted in the British Army, but then transferred to the Canadian Army, serving both at

home and on the front. For some six years after the Armistice he travelled and lived in Europe and North Africa before returning to Canada in 1925 and settling in Toronto. Primarily because of his leadership of the Confederation group of poets, but also because of his numerous historical romances and his seminal role in the development of the realistic animal story, he now became known as the “Father of Canadian Literature.” Several lecture and reading tours in Canada and various organizations such as the Canadian Authors’ Association occupied much of Roberts’s time in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He did not abandon his philandering, however, but, on the contrary, became notorious for it. During these years he published various editions and selections of his work and a new collection of animal stories entitled *Eyes of the Wilderness* (1933). He also produced several collections of poetry, the most notable – for its attempt to be modern – being *The Iceberg and Other Poems* (1934). Of the many awards and honours accorded to him after his return to Canada, none can have been more significant than the knighthood conferred in 1935 for his services to the Dominion and the Commonwealth.

In October 1943 Sir Charles G.D. Roberts married Joan Montgomery, who was fifty years his junior. He died in Toronto on 26 November of the same year. He was 83.

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