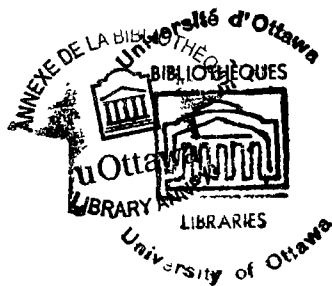


UNIVERSITÉ D'OTTAWA -- ÉCOLE DES GRADUÉS

THE EPIC NOTE IN  
THE POETRY OF EDWIN JOHN PRATT  
by  
Sister Saint Dorothy Marie, c.n.d.

[ie. D. Doyle]

Thesis presented to the Faculty of Arts  
of the University of Ottawa through the  
Department of English as partial fulfill-  
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of Master of Arts



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CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

Sister Saint Dorothy Marie (Dorothy Doyle) was born in Georgetown, Prince Edward Island, on December 31, 1911.

She was granted the baccalaureate degree from the University of Ottawa in September 1951.

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THE EPIC NOTE FOUND IN THE POETRY OF EDWIN JOHN PRATT

CHAPTER ONE

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

It is seldom possible to make just estimates of our contemporaries. At best we can only give opinions modified by our angle of outlook and colored by the atmosphere of our own times. Thus the passages found in the pages that follow will set forth simply and conscientiously, (and perforce too briefly) a very limited opinion of the true portrait of a poet found in the gallery of Canadian literature.

This paper wishes to present one of the few present day English speaking poets who has written several important poems which are in the epic tradition; and to evaluate the various aspects of epic treatment in the presentation of material and in the themes of these poems, both from the standpoint of the epic as a distinct literary genre in his greatest poem, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", and also to illustrate epic qualities by an inclusion of other poems.

Edwin John Pratt has not been sufficiently appreciated as a poet and as a craftsman of epic, narrative and lyrical poetry. His writings have covered a long period in twentieth century Canada. During this time he has raised the deeds of Canada's men to uncommon

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levels; he has given Canada's native tradition in literature a new impetus and life.

It is doubtful whether any figure in Canadian literary history has attracted more attention than Edwin John Pratt. Although some of his earlier writings have been acknowledged by himself, as well as by a critical public, to be of mediocre stature, there are, even in those primitive attempts, purple patches which seem to be of epic value, and it is these that the present thesis will seek out and strive to evaluate. No attempt will be made to set E. J. Pratt upon a pedestal, or to glorify him as a paragon of all that an eminent author should be. This appreciation will be free of extravagant claims and undue adulation.

Edwin John Pratt seems to emerge from the tight little compartment of nature poets, Canada's heritage thus far; he seems to be leaning upon the magnitude of the great epics of yore and pointing the way to future greatness for Canada in the field of literature; for he is seriously considered by traditionalists; he is admired by experimentalists; he is tremendously influential in academic circles; his poems are read by the ordinarily distrustful and indifferent public; and he is the first Canadian poet to attain international repute. Coleman Rosenberger, speaking of Mr. Pratt's ability has declared:

In vigor and sublimity, in the extent and

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originality of his poetic achievement, he is the first of contemporary Canadian poets; and one of the ablest poets writing in English today.<sup>1</sup>

While the work of this outstanding poet has been considered in units, the epic quality, the dominating one has not as yet been the subject and the object of a thesis, although such epic trends have been noted from time to time in his work by several critics.

This paper will present the research that the present writer has done on the narrative poetry of a great Canadian poet, and attempt to prove that Edwin John Pratt has epic traits in most of his longer poems and can, therefore, be considered as a contemporary epic writer.

As a writer for our own times he becomes a successful poet because he has the strength of a great realistic tradition behind him.. ..Hesiod, Homer, Lucretius and Virgil..... and the vision of a new age before.<sup>2</sup>

If the reader, upon having concluded the reading of the thesis agrees that in many points Pratt's narrative verse is of the epic strain, that it is modeled upon the acknowledged epics of a former age, then the thesis will have succeeded in realizing its aim.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosenberger, Coleman, in the Catholic Digest, issue of November, 1945, quoted by Will Lissner p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Wells and Klinck, Edwin J. Pratt, The Man and His Poetry, The Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1947, p. 194.

Until the present there has been a very slender output of criticism concerning the poetry of this eminent author. One book only has been written. Henry W. Wells and Carl Klinck have made the writings of Pratt a serious study, and working in collaboration, they have given to the world an informal appreciation of the writer and a friendly interpretation of his poems, in the small volume entitled: Edwin John Pratt, The Man and His Poetry. In this book a slight, comparative analysis is made of the technique, in order to ascertain the poet's literary status, or rather to introduce him to an unknowing audience. The first three chapters of the book present a fairly complete biographical sketch of Pratt, this is followed by a ten-chapter interpretation of several of his well-known poems. Although these authors deal with the heroic trend in the narrative verse and definitely acknowledge the unmistakable epic note and claim definite relation with such great writers as Homer and Tasso, they lay supreme emphasis upon masculine narrative value and stress exclusively the conflict and the heroism rather than evaluate the epic note not by comparison with acknowledged epics of a former age, but by definite poetical analysis, as the present thesis will attempt to do.

Dr. E. K. Brown in On Canadian Poetry, a critical

essay which shows how the masters of our poetry have achieved their success, has devoted one chapter to the poetry of E. J. Pratt, and in this short chapter has subscribed to the general opinion of Pratt's epic strength and scope, although he has not clearly defined Pratt's epic bounds, nor has he proved Pratt's epic reality. Speaking of Pratt's poem "Brebeuf, and His Brethern", E. K. Brown says:

To a Canadian.....that poem as a whole must have a special appeal. Brebeuf and his fellow-martyrs are the Canadian types of sanctity.  
.....

Theirs was a great role, perhaps the supreme role, in our heroic age--ton histoire est une épopée.  
.....

Nowhere are we closer to the epic level of Canadian life than when we stand on the rocky shore of the Georgian Bay where the Jesuits have built what is known as the Martyr's Shrine on the supposed site of Brebeuf's principal mission at Sainte Marie.<sup>3</sup>

John Sutherland writing in "Northern Review" has devoted two issues to the work of this poet. The subject of his article is, "E. J. Pratt, A Major Contemporary Poet", and in logical sequence he gathers data and brings forth arguments to show that Pratt is one of the modern major poets, that he ranks with Frost and Eliot and the small group of major poets of the century. This

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, E. K., On Canadian Poetry, The Ryerson Press, 1943, Toronto, p. 147.

illuminating article has provided many parallels which have been incorporated into and developed in the following thesis. This same author has also recently prepared a book entitled: The Poetry of E. J. Pratt, this manuscript has not as yet been published, but the author has generously made it available to the writer of the present thesis. Chapter two of this manuscript deals with the epic reflection found in Pratt's narrative verse and this context has also been very helpful as a base whereupon to build a proof that the epic note is strong and firm, that Pratt has affinities with the heroic tradition, that he is essentially an "heroic poet".

He celebrates the virtues of courage, of persistence, of loyalty, and of self-sacrifice. With the important exception of the last-named, these are, of course, the virtues which enter into the mold of the heroic vision.<sup>4</sup>

A very meager number of periodical reviews has appeared to date and these have for the most part, been concerned mainly with an effort to convince the public that Edwin John Pratt is a major poet, the leading poet of Canada. While these articles are critically appreciative of his rich imagery, his satirical vein, and his naive originality, there is also a column of space devoted to Pratt's refreshing optimism, which contrasts so

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<sup>4</sup> Sutherland, John, The Poetry of E. J. Pratt (unpublished manuscript) p. 15.

favourably with T. S. Eliot's frustration motif. Pratt, they would say, has no time for Waste Lands, he is too interested in men, monsters and machines.

There are some few periodicals and reviews that have tried to give him a place among heroic writers, and it is with these latter, as well as with the books mentioned above, that this thesis will buttress or refute as the case may be.

In spite of the fact that all critics who have touched upon his work at all seem to agree that:

In contemporary Canadian letters Pratt's place is unique.....Pratt's work and Pratt's personality help to make poetry and poets less alien to the people of this materialized universe.<sup>5</sup>

There has as yet been no serious Canadian or American attempt to evaluate Pratt's form and content in any systematic and significant manner. Nor has any thesis been as yet presented on any phase of his work.

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<sup>5</sup> E. K. Brown, op. cit., p. 151.

This thesis will attempt to justify the claim that Edwin John Pratt is outstanding as an epic writer of today. It will examine Pratt's work realistically against specifically critical backgrounds. No attempt will be made to equate the merits of our modern poet to the merits of the masters of the classical age--such would be a vain presumption--but if the writer succeeds in showing that Pratt, although not of the stature of his illustrious epic predecessors, is at least of their kind, then comparisons will not seem so disproportionate and the epic note found in his narratives will be more readily acknowledged.

The thesis will present the research that the writer has done on the progress of the epic throughout the ages, its sensibility, qualities, tradition and characters. It will attempt to show that although in the twentieth century the epic has declined in favour, because industrialism and the glorification of the common man destroys a respect for heroes; yet, in spite of this, there is a poet, Edwin John Pratt, who considers glorious deeds, magnitude of scope, and majesty of incident, to be of prime importance in poetry, and he, therefore, has raised ordinary deeds to extraordinary levels, his poems are in the epic tradition.

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## THE MAN AND HIS WORKS

While we are not primarily interested in the biography of Edwin John Pratt, nevertheless, this must be touched upon because it serves as the loom whereupon the narrative threads of his literary life are spun. The why and the wherefore of a man's actions and philosophy are ever linked with his personal and national background.

This eminent Canadian poet was born on February 4, 1884, at Western Bay, a small fishing village about twenty-five miles from Harbour Grace in Newfoundland. He was the son of a Methodist clergyman. From his earliest years he was in close and natural contact with the sea, and this influence was almost equalled by the intellectual atmosphere of his own home, and the books which he found in his father's library. The short hours he spent in the rural schools of that old poverty-stricken colony, also formed a portion of his almost informal education. The local schools did not claim the boy beyond the age of fifteen, for at that age he was obliged to go to work. For three years all literary pursuits had to be put aside, as the youth was obliged to help shoulder the family financial burden, then because he showed diligence and perseverance, help was given to him to continue his education, by a preliminary course of two years of high school work at the Methodist College in St. John's,

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## THE MAN AND HIS WORKS

Newfoundland.

In 1903, at the age of twenty, Pratt left St. John's to teach and preach in fishing villages along the Newfoundland coast. He studied the people with whom he came in contact. He noted their conflicts and their struggles, he mentally evaluated their heroic qualities. It is certain that his intimate and accurate knowledge of the mighty sea with its boundless coasts and uncertain moods was derived from his early experience while serving as a probationer for the Methodist ministry. His parishes were widely scattered and offered many a hardship. The somber side of the sea impressed the poet and evoked lyrical thoughts expressed years later in many of the verses found in Many Moods (1932).

In 1907 Pratt went to Victoria College, Toronto, to begin a glorious career, poetical and academic, which finds him after forty-five years a revered, respected and influential figure. During his first years in Toronto he lived and studied in a third floor room on Charles Street. Mission work for his church, during the months of summer vacation increased his meager income and made further studies possible.

He received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1911, his Bachelor of Divinity in 1913, and his Doctorate in

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## THE MAN AND HIS WORKS

Philosophy in 1917. All this post graduate study in theology was carried on while he was demonstrating and lecturing in psychology at University College. Some critics believe that the German philosophy then prevailing in Toronto unsettled this young man's religious views--we have no proof that such is the case--and we may believe that by deep thought and his delight in studying English, he came to realize that teaching rather than preaching was his vocation. He has ever showed faith in God, and sincere respect for his fellowmen, if they be sufficiently courageous to dare to live rightly.

From 1913 until 1923, E. J. Pratt seemed to be under the spell of Wordsworth and Tennyson. He composed and gave to the world Rachel and Newfoundland Verse. These early works were not his best, they did not embody his life's creed, that the value and glory of life is in the struggle.

They do not show Pratt at his best. The local, the dated, the occasional, the lesser inspirations of Newfoundland, had to be written out of him.....so that he might become something else--a Canadian.

What remained, and what made him an inimitable poet, was the sea, which washes these and many other shores. "The Cachalot," "The Roosevelt and the Antinoe," "The Titanic," and "Dunkirk" belong to Americans as well as to members of the Empire and the Commonwealth, to Elizabethans of all times and nations, to all who share the English tradition. And the heroism he celebrates belongs to

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all mankind.<sup>6</sup>

In 1925 Pratt wrote "The Witches' Brew", which is considered by many to be the beginning of modern Canadian poetry. The poem was written for his fifth wedding anniversary, it has a daring inconsequence which seemed to emancipate its author from the "Maple Leaf Forever psychology" and establish his reputation as a Canadian poet of to-day. It was Dr. Pelham Edgar who illumined the horizon of literature for E. J. Pratt, although without fearing to exaggerate we may state that Shakespeare, Bunyan, Hardy, perhaps Milton and certainly Francis Thompson and the early Yeats were remote, yet definite, influences.

Only three years later appeared "Titans", which some of Pratt's admirers even to-day set above everything that he has since written. The book begins with the short epic, "The Cachalot", in which the unique originality of our poet appeared in its full splendour, the book ends with another master epic, "The Great Feud", which but completes the promise of the former poem. It may be less beautifully proportioned, word pictures may not be so clearly outlined, but it is no less satisfying in texture.

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<sup>6</sup> Wells and Klinck, op. cit., p. 19.

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His "Iron Door", (1927) is an eloquent ode on his mother's death which in delicate, but unmistakable pathos, states that man must find a way of life even though the dove of peace really has no olive branch to offer; and it proves that Pratt's philosophy of life was always thoroughly and fundamentally Christian.

The pre-depression year (1929) and the post-depression year (1935) saw the composition of two sea epics: "The Roosevelt and the Antinoe", which tells of a rescue in mid-ocean, and dwells upon the terrible power of stormy seas that are matched by the quiet determination and heroic endurance of a man who does his duty during the rescue and then seemingly forgets his heroism, and continues with calm serenity his daily tasks, monotonous though they be; and also "The Titanic", whose foreground of heroism blots out the forces of the sea whose might and power is the cause of all marine disasters. In this tale of rescue Pratt approaches closer to Masefield than in any other poem, and it has become the custom of some critics to think of Edwin John Pratt as the Laureate of Canadian verse.

During the "thirties" Pratt, as a result of his ever growing fame, lectured from coast to coast. On these trips he witnessed the painful results of depression.

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Although Pratt is not at all a political or sociological mind, although his temperament is very unlike those of our tender leftist poets, he was agitated by the spectacle of a society in which scores of thousands of people had fallen into an abyss where life was grey and numb.<sup>7</sup>

His little collection of 1937, The Fable of the Goats, And Other Poems, reflects this disturbance in the social order. The fable is an allegory presented in a prehistoric setting, it recommends that the best defense against aggression is a gesture of non-resistance.

The disillusionment caused by the outbreak of World War II drove Edwin John Pratt to a quest for re-assurance of Canadian qualities. This Newfoundland-born poet, who had witnessed the struggles of a hardy race for existence, this man who had gleaned vast experience of human nature, both in missions connected with his church and also as he delved into his studies of philosophy and psychology, was well aware that sterling qualities existed in the Canadian people, but this knowledge did not find outward expression until 1943. How well he re-discovered, defined and gave to the public these traits is told in his lofty religious epic, "Brebeuf, and His Brethern". A decade has scarcely elapsed since its publication, and although as yet, one

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<sup>7</sup> E. K. Brown, op. cit., p. 146.

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## THE MAN AND HIS WORKS

may not evaluate its effect on universal interest, it certainly promises to exert a unifying effect on our national spirit.

It is a great Catholic epic written by a Protestant. It is a story of Frenchmen, written by an Englishman. The poem is of a movement rather than of a single person, for while the great personality of Brebeuf looms impressively throughout the stern drama, he is, more than anything else, a symbol for his loved and unconquerable brotherhood.<sup>8</sup>

Our Author's next work was the inspiring "Dunkirk".

The most widely acclaimed poem which E. J. Pratt has as yet produced is his "Dunkirk", an impromptu effusion of some four hundred lines giving a highly vivid and emotional impression of the actual combat on land, on sea, and in the air, whereby the English army was successfully evacuated from France in 1940.

.....  
In my own eyes it occupies among his narrative or longer poems approximately the same place....if smaller things may be compared with greater...which Henry the Fifth holds among the plays of the supreme dramatist.

.....  
To date among word pictures, of the actual spirit of an army, or a navy under fire, few if any, have rivalled Pratt's "Dunkirk".<sup>9</sup>

Pratt also wrote lyrics, many of which were inspired by memories of the mighty Atlantic bringing sustenance as well as disaster to his beloved Newfoundland,

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<sup>8</sup> Wells and Klinck op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Wells and Klinck op. cit., p. 117.

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these, although varied in theme, and quite numerous, are not considered important for his scope has little place for love and passion.

It is astonishing that in the robust world of his narratives, where his heroes and his monstrous animals are forever fighting and drinking and eating, sexual desire does not exist.<sup>10</sup>

There is little of Shelley and Wordsworth and Keats in Pratt for his descriptions of nature but serve as a backdrop whereupon to display the feats of his courageous heroes. Man is however, brought time and again into conflict with harsh nature, with a moving intensity which cannot but fail to impress the reader. It is the writer of the great narratives who rightly preoccupies us, for he, Newfoundland-born son of a Methodist minister has inherited from his hardy and staunch forebears those sterling qualities which beget epic greatness.

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<sup>10</sup> Brown, E. K., op., cit., p. 148

## DEFINITIVE ELEMENTS IN THIS THESIS

Fact does not become poetry, of course, in a purely mechanical way.....  
 .....The lines of the narrative must be strong and uncomplicated, and the action dramatic. His (Pratt's) longer poems are "dramatic epics". Conflict, chiefly physical, as in "The Cachalot"; chiefly mental, as in "Brebeuf," or a normal mixture of both kinds, is the core of all Pratt's poetic conceptions.<sup>12</sup>

If this thesis is to prove a point such as the above, that Pratt's poems are in the epic tradition, then of necessity the term epic must be clearly defined.

The word epic is derived from the Greek "epos", a saying or oracle. The term "epic" is generally given to some form of heroic narrative wherein tragedy, comedy, lyric, and dirge may be skillfully blended to form an immortal whole. Many of the formal definitions of the epic lack universality when tested by application to the great variety of epic literature, yet all scholars are agreed upon the following principles:

- a) The epic must depict a victorious hero, who represents a country or a cause which is triumphant in the hero's victory.
- b) It represents a great or noble action, and the characters are great or noble or impressive.
- c) There must be a certain elevation, an immense grandeur and dignity which pervades the whole poem.

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<sup>12</sup> Wells and Klinek, op., cit., p. 45.

d) The action, in comparison with the drama, is slow and episodic, and achieves no more than a diffused unity; the larger the scope of human interest and experience, the greater the success of the epic poem.

At the risk of stressing the obvious these qualities may be itemized so as to leave no doubt concerning the basis for the ensuing argument. Briefly summarized, the epic poem is a narrative record of the exploits of a single person or "hero"; it celebrates the strength and courage and honour of that hero in his victories over tribal or national enemies; it is "public" and extroverted in its expression, generally lacking in any subtleties of insight or of style; and finally, while it avoids didactic comment, it is governed by a humanistic faith in the ability of the hero to achieve his ends mainly without supernatural aid. The question is, how far or in what sense does this description apply to the poetry of Edwin John Pratt?

The following pages will strive to answer that question.

The epic must have faith in the system of beliefs or the way of life it bears witness to. Only when people have faith in their own age can they include the maximum of life in their vision and exert their will-power to its utmost capacity.<sup>13</sup>

The expressions "epic poetry" and "heroic poetry" are herein used interchangeably, in reality all epic

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<sup>13</sup> N. N. J. Tillyard, The English Epic and Its Backgrounds Chatto and Windus, London, 1954, p. 548.

poetry is heroic in all that that word connotes. True epic poetry is that form of verse which absolutely conforms to the rules outlined by Aristotle and which is based upon the Iliad of Homer, and concerns an heroic age. The heroic ideal of the epic is not attained by a process of abstraction or separation from the meannesses of familiar things. The magnificence and the aristocratic stature of the epic is conformable to the practical and ethical standards of the heroic age; that is to say, it tolerates a number of things that may be found mean and trivial by the academicians, but it never raises these to heroic levels by any unique, epical technique.

Thus one may trace the origin and the history of the great epic poems, one may evaluate the epic by using the criteria proposed by the master critics, and when this has been most carefully done, the conviction remains that epic poetry is not something of chance, or the result of a fleeting inspiration but it is that which has been skilfully and precisely developed by the greatest of writers in imitation of supreme models. That a faint gleam of this epic splendour is reflected in the narrative poetry of a modern poet, Edwin John Pratt, is the thesis this paper proposes.

According to Aristotle next to the fable and the characters in an heroic poem comes the sentiment, the spirit which pervades it, and this even in its subtlety is indicated by the lofty language. The sentiments in all epics are the thoughts and the behaviour which the author ascribes to the persons whom he introduces; these are just, when they are conformable to the characters of the personages; when they fittingly express the hearts' desires or the ambitions or the virtues of the truly heroic.

The sentiments have likewise a relation to things as well as to persons. The poet argues, explains, magnifies; raises love or hatred; or pity or terror; and he conveys these emotions to the reader in true epic style. The epic poem must be filled with such thoughts which are natural, and also with those which are sublime. It is required that the language in which the poem is expressed be lofty and dignified. Injurious sentiments cannot be conveyed in a poor vehicle. Aristotle has observed that idionatis style may be avoided and the sublime formed by the use of metaphors that are bold and beautiful. All this has been admirably summed up by Dryden in his Dedication of the Aeneid:

A Heroic poem, truly such, is undoubtedly the greatest work which the soul of man is capable to perform. The

design of it is to form the mind to heroic virtue by example; 'tis conveyed in verse that it may delight while it instructs. The action of it is always one, entire and great. The least and most trivial episodes, or under-actions, which are interwoven in it, are parts either necessary or convenient to carry on the main design; either so necessary that, without them, the poem must be imperfect; or so convenient that no others can be imagined more suitable to the place in which they are. There is nothing to be left void in a firm building; even the cavities ought not to be filled with rubbish which is of a perishable kind, destructive to the strength, but with brick or stone, though of less pieces, yet of the same nature, and fitted into the crannies. Even the least portions of them must be of the epic kind; all things must be grave, majestic, and sublime, nothing of a foreign nature or trifling, by which the reader is misled into another sort of pleasure, opposite to that which is designed in the epic poem. One raises the soul and hardens it to virtue; the other softens it again, and bends it to vice.<sup>14</sup>

One of the greatest of critical writers and the most diligent of translators speaks thus highly of the epic. Homer and Virgil gave the epic birth and the centuries have not dimmed its glory. Strong ties of kinship exist between the modern heroic poem with its gentle hearted and more spiritualized chivalry, and the epic poems of yore which often ended on a callously optimistic note that but secured temporary triumph after a vast horde had been slain in a seemingly righteous cause.

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<sup>14</sup> John Dryden, Dedication of the Aeneid, publication 1697, p. 22.

Although in art and in literature strict classification cannot ever be made, bounds may not ever be drawn, yet for purposes of comparative study it is convenient to speak of the classical and the folk epic; the epic of Homer, and that of Beowulf, as well as the epic of Virgil and that of Milton. It is generally granted that the greatest epics are the folk epics. These, too, are more rare than the imitative epics, although both are lofty in structure and elevated in style. With the aid of examples of unquestionable epical value this thesis will show that Pratt's epic poetry is on the folk epic scale.

National poetry--and the true epic is national poetry--is inspired and is 'born' only when there is a national spirit to call for it. The achievements of a nation, the aspirations of a person, are not written in their historical annals only. The unity which makes epic, is at once broad and closely knit. No mere tribe or clan can encompass it, it must rest upon foundations so wide that universal acclaim will be accorded to it.<sup>15</sup>

When the folk epic flourishes in an age, among the contemporary people, even among those who are not poetical, one finds something like an epic-frame-of-mind, a community of epic interests, an heroic imagination which has the power to impart to merely historical events

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<sup>15</sup> S. MacNeil Dixon, English Epic and Heroic Poetry, p. 58.

a glimmering of their epic magnificence. The 'multitude' in an heroic age interprets life heroically; and it is this common, vague sentiment of heroism that raises the poem and its hero beyond the bounds of the intellectual into its lofty eminence of folk epic tradition.

Throughout the centuries Ionian bards recited their heroic lays and through them Homer became the Homer we know. His epic is, therefore, an epic of growth. Among Teutonic peoples the Old English poem Beowulf approached most nearly to complete and finished epic. The author of Beowulf, dealing with somewhat the same type of material as Homer, carried his story to a different conclusion along a path of his own. As this thesis progresses similarities and contrasts between the Beowulf-type and the Pratt-type will be stressed. In the order of time nearly fifteen hundred years separate the two poems yet they have the same common denominator, "epic grandeur". The trend of folk epic is strong in both, for the centuries have not dimmed the epic dimensions. Homer's epics belong to the age of bronze, Beowulf to the age of iron, while of Pratt an able interpreter has said:

....and Pratt describes the heroism  
of men of iron fighting for the faith.  
They are Frenchmen with the clear visions  
and cherished traditions of their race.  
The iron strength of Pratt's lines  
therefore recall to the mind of the

sensitive or the philosophical reader that  
greatness of Christian, religious and martial  
folk epics.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Wells A. Finck, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

Homer in the Iliad gave his version to the whole Trojan war; Virgil through the adventure of Aeneas gave the outline of a whole pattern of culture. He imitated Homer in almost every detail. Where Homer and Virgil most differ is in their treatment of character, and of necessity this difference has its bearing on their poems' structure. There is nothing symbolic about Homer's characters, none of them sums up in his own person any of the values that Homer believed in. Achilles is the first fighter in the war, but he does not represent the value of valour. Virgil's main agents are symbols as well as persons and as such belong more closely to the plots than those of Homer. Yet, in spite of these differences, the confidence in human dignity and pathos, pre-eminent in Homer, was still powerful in Virgil, as he framed his poem on the "Master-copy".

The only great English poet in the epic tradition of the Virgilian epic was Milton. He went back to the Italian and Latin masters with whom the epic had originated. In "Paradise Lost" we find unity of construction comparable only to that of Milton's model, the Aeneid.

Milton's is far more than a national poem, it concerns all of Christendom and ultimately the whole human race. Adam, although not a mighty warrior or a

passionate lover or a magnanimous conqueror was pitted against immortals; he and Eve represent all mankind and were employed by the Almighty in working out the conflict of supremacy. "Paradise Lost" is a great imaginative conception, the verdict of time has been that its endenses are the most majestic and beautiful that have yet fallen upon our English ears.

Although we believe that for the most part the poetry of Edwin John Pratt is in the folk epic tradition, that his "Brebeuf and His Brethern" runs along lines that are parallel with the mighty Beowulf, yet this thesis will attempt to show that it is also to a certain degree of the imitative epic type and that certain of his narratives are classical and formal in style, while they are at the same time folk epic in content.

In summary of what has been outlined concerning the folk and the imitative epic it may be observed that,

whereas in such a work as Virgil, consummate art as it is, one perceives that the field of the author's personal experience is altogether remote from the shadowy land to which he guides us, and that he is trusting to his imagination to revive far-off forgotten things, merely to project a credible and pleasant fiction.<sup>17</sup>

and also that,

Both poets (folk epic poet and imitative epic poet) maintain a similar ideal in life; but they maintain it within conditions altogether unlike. The folk-spirit behind Beowulf is cloudy and tumultuous, finding grandeur in storm and gloom and mere mass-- in the misty lack of shape. Behind Homer it is, on the contrary, radiant and, however vehement, always delighting in measure, finding grandeur in brightness and clarity and shining outline. But where Homer and Beowulf, differ from Tasso and Milton is in the way the surrounding folk-spirit contains the poet's mind. It would be an idle piece of work, to choose between the potency of Homer's genius and of Milton's; but it is clear that the immediate circumstances of the poet's life presses much more insistently on the Iliad than on Paradise Lost. It is the difference between the contracted, precise, but vigorous tradition of an heroic age, and the diffused, eclectic, complicated culture of a civilization.<sup>18</sup>

Although some critics go to great lengths to differentiate the folk and the imitative epic trends,

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<sup>17</sup> W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Lucelles Abercrombie, The Epic, p. 23  
London: Martin Becker, (no date).

there is, in reality, no extensive margin between the two, for the epic, whether folk or imitative is a single form of art; but it is a form capable of adapting itself to the altering requirements of prevalent consciousness.

Hilton is as close to his subject, and Virgil to his, as Homer to Achilles or the Saxon poet to Beowulf. What is really meant can be nothing but the greater insistence of racial tradition in the "authentic" (folk) epics.<sup>19</sup>

Homer's chief concern was the fighting of heroes and the glory of a national struggle; Beowulf deals with kingship, a hero offering himself for his people and the purchasing of the security of that people with the ultimate surrender of the hero's life. Edwin John Pratt is not remote from epic tradition, his close alliance to it is proven when he narrates the pioneer adventures of Brebeuf who sacrificed his very life that the pagan tribes of an infant colony might be given the Light of life; and also when he tells the story of "Dunkirk", in whose accurate portrayal one may discern the genuine heroism of warriors who triumph in the defeat, and of the steadfast endurance of those on the beaches and the glorious volunteer workers, who readily pay the supreme price,

For England  
By forty miles divided from her brood.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Lascelles Abercrombie, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> E. J. Pratt, Collected Poems, "Dunkirk" Toronto: The Macmillan Co. 1944 p. 1.

The poetry of Pratt is of an epic stature that even the most severe, critical analysis cannot disclaim.

This thesis will include an analysis of, Pratt's sea poems: "The Titanic", and "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe", and attempt to prove that they have epic traits.

In both these poems the poet is close to his subject, he deals with heroism in every detail and he raises the ordinary of life to extraordinary levels by acknowledged epic techniques.

Most critics of the poetry of Edwin John Pratt have referred to it as "heroic", using the term rather loosely, and considering that heroic poetry deals with verse of lofty stature or with characters who might definitely be labelled heroes. This thesis will endeavour to prove that Pratt's narrative verse conforms in almost every detail to the tenets of epic poetry.

a) EPIC STYLE

The art of the epic poet is the art of deliberate amplification. To retain and heighten our interest without satisfying it he will check his step, he is skilled in delays, in the creation and management of suspense.....  
 ....He (the epic poet) will take no count of time while he enriches and decorates his theme, sweeping as into a treasure house all that lies within the wide horizons of human experience.<sup>21</sup>

And does not Pratt enrich and decorate his theme while ever being very faithful to accurate details and while keeping within the bounds of human experience? Pratt found in Francis Parkman's The Jesuits of North America the following brief account of the culmination of the missionary endeavors of Father Antoine Daniel:

Daniel had just finished the Mass,  
 and his flock still knelt at their devotions.  
 It was but the day before that he had

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<sup>21</sup> W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 23.

returned to them, warmed with new fervour from his meditations in retreat at Sainte Marie. Suddenly an uproar of voices burst upon the languid silence of the town. "The Iroquois! The Iroquois!" A crowd of hostile warriors had issued from the forest, and were rushing across the clearing, towards the opening in the palisade. Daniel ran out of the Church and hurried to the point of danger.

The hour had come for which he had long prepared himself. In a moment he saw the Iroquois and came forth from the church to meet them. When they saw him in turn, radiant in the vestments of his office, confronting them with a look kindled with the inspiration of martyrdom, they stopped and stared in amazement;.....a gunshot followed; the ball pierced his heart, and he fell dead, gasping the name of Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

This is the paragraph that Pratt found in the annals of Canada's story; and thus in faithful accuracy has the poet in epic fashion re-told the same:

Mass had just been offered,  
When the war yells were heard and Daniel came  
Outside. Seeing the panic, fully knowing  
Extinction faced the town with the invasion,  
And that ten precious minutes of delay  
Might give his flock the refuge of the woods,  
He faced the vanguard of the Iroquois,  
And walked with firm selective dignity  
As in the manner of a parley. Fear  
And wonder checked the Indians at the sight  
Of a single dark-robed, unarmed challenger  
Against arrows, muskets, spears and tomahawks.  
That momentary pause had saved the lives  
Of hundreds as they fled into the forest,  
But not the life of Daniel.

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It is lines like these wherein accuracy governs each

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<sup>22</sup> Francis Parkman, The Jesuits of North America,  
George N. Morang Company, 1899, p. 460.

<sup>23</sup> E. J. Pratt, op. cit., p. 85.

stark detail that cause the hero, Antoine Daniel, companion of Brebeuf, to stand out supreme--an epic hero silhouetted upon the brighter days that have followed; days in which the pagan Indians have been subdued and days in which religious freedom is enjoyed in our fair land far more than it is in any other country of the world.

#### b) EPIC CONTENT

In the content also, of Pratt's great narrative poems the epic note may be discerned,

It was claimed by Dryden for the epic poem that it preceded drama and gave laws to it. Clearly it was so and clearly too its interests, like that of drama, is dependent upon action and character, upon the story and the persons. These two, upon either of which it might be imprudent to lay the major stress, are the pillars of epic.....of themselves great actions and great characters impart the dignity, the uplifting strain without which the poem lays no claim to epic honours; and a certain elevation of tone, proper to the theme and the conduct of the theme.<sup>24</sup>

Dryden an authority on epic writing tells us very specifically that action and character give the epic its note of value and Pratt follows this rule with precision but also with originality.

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<sup>24</sup> W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 22.

To achieve such great actions, and to introduce such great characters Pratt presents men as workmen. He dwells upon their active and laborious life both in war and in peace. This modern age is an era of Industrialism, therefore to create respect man must be a worker as well as a hero and when he is the highest, and greatest, and loftiest of hero-workers then and only then is he an epic hero.<sup>25</sup>

The severe epic world of Pratt's poems proves largely strenuous and little playful. Yet, he elevates the strenuous, the difficult, and the burdensome by making it the chosen task of eminently great men who have scorned to count the cost but who have allowed Duty to be the measuring rod of success. Pratt in "The Roosevelt and The Antinoo" does not permit emphasis to be placed upon the sensational heroism of the rescuers but upon the sobering and truly majestic thought that all this, and much more besides, lies merely in the day's work, the work that makes a man into a hero.

Swung out the Sound, with her day's work  
well done,  
And in an hour was on the Channel sea.<sup>26</sup>

In "Dunkirk", the most stirring of war poems, after the vivid description of the valiant rescue stress is placed upon the return, as though with deliberate strokes

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<sup>25</sup> Wells & Klinck, op. cit., p. 183.

<sup>26</sup> E. J. Pratt, "The Roosevelt and the Antinoo", p. 162.

the artist would bring out the truly epic qualities of the mighty heroes not by noise of praise, but by quiet contrast:

They steamed and sailed and rowed,  
Back to the roadsteads, back to the piers,  
Inside the vigilant booms,  
Back to the harbours,  
Back to the River of London, to England,  
Saved once again by the tread of her heels.<sup>27</sup>

These few examples prove that although many centuries separate Edwin John Pratt from the writers of world-acclaimed epics, he has kept touch; a link that is sure and strong connects the epic note of our poet and that of his great literary ancestors.

With "Brebeuf and His Brethern" Pratt has certainly established himself as the finest poet of his own generation.....Here at last is a Canadian poet with a definite architectonic sense of the proper construction of a great narrative poetry. The epic strain was basic in the man. Carefully banking his Promethean fires, he became an objective artist.<sup>27(i)</sup>

To summarize what has been said in this chapter, it may be repeated that in order to justify the word "epic" of the thesis title the writer has herein given a brief but complete general definition of the epic, as well as a list of principles by which epic strength may be measured.

It has been noted that the epic poem must be filled

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<sup>27</sup> E. J. Pratt, "Dunkirk", p. 11.

<sup>27(i)</sup> Benson, N. A. "Brebeuf and His Brethern", review in Canadian Poetry Magazine of Toronto, Vol. 5 No. I, Sept. 1940, p. 40.

## PRATT AND THE EPIC TRADITION

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with such thoughts as are natural and that these must be expressed in lofty and dignified language.

The terms "folk epic" and "imitative epic" have been dwelt upon, and then to bring that which is abstract into clearer perspective examples have been mentioned of each type of epic.

Let it be noted that although the epic authors, Homer, Virgil, Milton and the author of Beowulf have been mentioned, and their poems cited as models, the intention of the writer has been that these writers be considered as model epic authors only, no parallel whatever was intended; for the great epics are great beyond the bounds of comparison.

It is the purpose of the thesis to prove that the narrative poetry of Edwin John Pratt has an epic note even though it is written in a modern age. Finally "Brebeuf and His Brethern" has been mentioned as being Pratt's greatest poem and the one in which the epic trend is most dominant.

"Brebeuf" is then in some respects Mr. Pratt's best work, though by no means illustrative of his manifold talents. It is not so well integrated as the "Roosevelt", nor as individualized, nor as emotionally full. Its climax is more satisfactory but still, as in his other narratives, it falls somewhat short by being too intensely anticipated. But "Brebeuf" is eminently faithful to its heroic aim which is to exalt a group of suffering and undaunted human beings against a background of

medieval France and barbarian Huronia.<sup>27(ii)</sup>

In "Dunkirk", Pratt gives an account of the famous English retreat of the last war; and in the sea epics, "The Titanic" and "The Roosevelt and the Antinoe" he describes in the one, a familiar tragedy involving the loss of the Cunard Line's flagship; and in the other the majestic heroism of duty well done. Pratt does not in any way manipulate these historic events to suit the imagination, rather he adheres strictly to certifiable facts. He is heroic in this respect; and he is heroic as well in his keen interest in stirring incidents that have attracted wide popular attention.

To this has been added a brief justification of the claim that according to definition the epic note is certainly found in the poetry of Edwin John Pratt, that in style and in content it has epic proportions.

That the reader will concede and accept Pratt's epic scope and then evaluate his epic quality according to the principles and definitions contained in this thesis is the hope of the writer.

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<sup>27(ii)</sup>

Birney, Earle, Canadian Poem of the Year,  
article in Canadian Forum of Toronto,  
Vol. 20, No. 236, Sept. 1940, p. 181.

THE EPIC STYLE AND PHILOSOPHY OF EDWIN JOHN PRATT  
IN  
BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN

The purpose of this chapter is to place the greatest poem of Edwin John Pratt within the epic framework that has been agreed upon and fashioned by literary scholars throughout the ages, and thus to convince the reader that the poem is heroic in style and structure and content; that the characters are mighty, that the theme is of momentous importance in the political and religious life story of the infant colony, New France; in a word, to justify the title of the thesis which states that there is an epic note in the narrative poetry of this modern poet. The chapter will deal with the magnitude and scope of these factors as they were considered by Francis Parkman, "the most eloquent of American historians"<sup>28</sup> who relying upon the Jesuit Relations has written The Jesuits in North America; and also as they were considered by Adam Shortt and Arthur G. Doughty editors of Canada and Its Provinces. These men wrote of epic times and portrayed heroic characters which Edwin John Pratt has used as source material and which he has translated into narrative verse.

The supremely epic chapter in the history of Canada to the present time is unquestionably that of the Jesuit missionaries and pioneers

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<sup>28</sup> Wells and Klinck, op. cit., p. 90.

THE EPIC STYLE AND PHILOSOPHY OF EDWIN JOHN PRATT 38  
 IN  
 BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN<sup>REN</sup>

who opened the heart of a continent, carried idealism to heights almost fantastic and blazed the trails of a nation with the fires of martyrdom.<sup>29</sup>

Anyone, who seriously ponders the struggles and suffering of the early missionaries, cannot deny that they were of epic dimensions, and that it may be said of them as it has been said of "Beowulf" and "Roland",

.....they emanated from races which never felt the compelling pressure of Greek ideals, and they represent far other conditions of national life. Heroic poetry is one; whether of the East or West, the North or South, its blood and its temper are the same, and the true epic wherever created, will be a narrative poem, organic in structure dealing with great actions and great characters, in a style commensurate with the lordliness of the theme.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Wells & Klinck, op. cit., p. 90.

<sup>30</sup> W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 24.

## BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHEEN

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This thesis proposes to prove that there is an epic note in the narrative poetry of Edwin John Pratt. In order to establish this truth, a workable definition has been gleaned from the various definitions that literary critics offer and the principles that may be applied to test the epic values have been stated. More critics than one have referred to the epic scope in Pratt's greatest poem "Brebeuf and His Brethern". In his review of "Dunkirk", Earle Birney spoke thus of the former poem:

Compared with "Brebeuf" the new poem (Dunkirk) is not only shorter, but more episodic, less a rounded and serene whole. Yet it has many of Pratt's virtues missing from the Jesuit epic of last year.<sup>31</sup>

While Birney has emphasized the epic note of "Brebeuf", others have discountenanced it:

No critic, of course, imagines that the term "heroic poet" applies to Pratt in a strictly formal sense. The heroic poet of tradition has always written of the wars of his people, whether they were wars against the "monster" or against the human enemy; and he has celebrated the feats of national heroes; Pratt has produced only one poem--the short narrative Dunkirk--which could possibly be labeled heroic in this sense, and it is notable that Dunkirk describes the retreat of a beaten army before a vastly superior force.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Earle Birney, "A Distinguished Canadian Poem", feature in Canadian Forum, December 1941, p. 278.

<sup>32</sup> JOHN Sutherland, "E. J. Pratt; A Major Contemporary Poet" feature in Vol. 5, Nos. 3 & 4, issue of April & May, 1952, p. 37-1-64.

## BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN

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These views seem to be conflicting, therefore the following pages of the thesis will try to justify statements such as the former, "Brebeuf" is a Jesuit epic poem; and to refute the latter, that the term "heroic poet" does not apply to Pratt in a formal sense.

In refutation of this opinion of Mr. Sutherland the writer would like to insist that any struggle, be it spiritual, mental or physical; and any victory if it be of sufficient magnitude and scope, may be considered as the fabric of the epic. The war<sup>of</sup> weapons is incidental to the epic not essential. The epic location need not of necessity be a <sup>glory</sup> battlefield. Indeed this same author seems to change his viewpoint when at a future time he again analyses the heroic technique of E. J. Pratt:

Landscape is always the background of his work; and war has been the theme of nearly all his narrative and longer poems.<sup>32(i)</sup>

The acknowledged heroic poet wrote of wars of one kind or another. Brebeuf showed a constancy, a determination and a courage, equal to if not superior to any hero of a former age. Brebeuf unflinchingly advanced to meet "the monster", the Indian prey. His struggle to dispel the darkness of paganism and to cause the Light of Christianity to illumine a benighted land must most surely have been a national feat of no small importance. Why

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<sup>32(i)</sup> (John Sutherland, The Poetry of E. J. Pratt, unpublished manuscript, p. 101.)

should one belittle the retreat of a beaten army from a superior force when such stark tragedy evoked the mighty effort and undaunted strength of the valiant volunteers.

If this great religious poem has the fundamental traits of epic poetry then it is in the epic tradition, and again it must be repeated that no attempt is herein made to suggest a comparison in merit with the great epics of yore. It is the intention to indicate the scope of Pratt's achievements and the kind of traditions and standards to which his poems belong, and by which they should be judged. The prime purpose of the thesis is to prove that there is an epic note in the narrative verse of John Edwin Pratt and then to evaluate that note.

The epic in general, ancient and modern, may be described as a dispassionate recital in dignified rhythmic, narrative of a momentous theme or action fulfilled by heroic characters and supernatural agencies, under the control of sovereign destiny. The theme involves the political or religious interests of a people or of mankind; it commands respect due to popular tradition or to traditional ideals. The poem awakens the sense of the mysterious the awful, and the sublime; through perilous crises it uplifts and calms the strife of frail humanity.<sup>33</sup>

The great poem "Brebeuf and His Brethern" does not fall short, if it be tested by standards such as Gayley has outlined.

It is a dispassionate recital, it is calm, and free

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C. M. Gayley and Benjamin Putman Kurtz, *Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism*, Boston, Ginn, 1920, V-911 p.

## BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN

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from emotion or prejudice. It was not written by the eye witness of an heroic act, who in the first flush of enthusiastic interest was so carried away by his subject that the boundary lines between truth and exaggeration have become blurred by emotion. On the contrary, this narrative poem was written approximately three hundred years after the real act took place. It was not written by a religious fanatic, or by one who was carried far beyond reason by excessive urgings either of a religious or of a patriotic nature. The author of this poem is a Protestant, the son of a Methodist minister, his theme is the account of the work done for Christ and souls by the pioneer Jesuit priests, who laboured in Canada in the years between 1625 and 1650. These priests were from France yet their story is recounted by an Englishman, who neither enhances it by exaggeration nor belittles the cause or the victory on account of national prejudice. A modern critic has spoken thus eloquently of "Brebeuf and His Brethern",

It was inevitable, of course, that the writing of a tragic epic about a Jesuit saint would impose sharp limitations, and it is one of the revealing things about Mr. Pratt, and about this Canada we live in, that it should have been written at all, let alone so well, by the son of a Methodist minister and a professor in a Methodist college. Yet the devoutest Catholic will surely read it with pleasure and certainly without offense, though he may find that the religious motivations and experiences of the Huron missionaries are at the best romantically and energetically apprehended rather than emotionally realized.<sup>33</sup>(1) Birney, Earle, Canadian Poem of the Year,

article in Canadian Forum of Toronto, Vol. 20, No. 236, Sept. 1940,

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This poem can, therefore, certainly be considered as a dispassionate recital.

It is in dignified, rhythmic style. That which is worthy, noble or stately can, without doubt, be considered dignified. "Brebeuf and His Brethern" can be considered such in its theme, as well as in its style and content:

In "Brebeuf and His Brethern", Pratt's heroes are saints; their deeds are all but unbelievable. For them their daily bread is the bread of the spirit. The poem responds sensitively to these changed conditions. It exhibits a totally new movement, texture and tone. It affords the sole specimen of traditional English blank verse in Pratt's Collected Poems; and if, in the climax, the lines lengthen and assume an even deeper and more oceanic movement, this in no way violates the traditional epic spirit.<sup>34</sup>

The theme or action is momentous, none could be more so. It is most certainly the noble decision of a man who had pondered well the words, "Greater love than this no man hath, than that a man lay down his life for his friend",<sup>35</sup>...and who had resolved to prove his love by sacrifice, even by the supreme sacrifice, if that were necessary.

According to the principles stated the characters must be heroic, the agencies supernatural, and they must act under the control of a sovereign destiny. Brebeuf was a mighty figure in the religious and political life story of Canada. He worked until death to change hostile Indians

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<sup>34</sup> Wells & Klinck, op. cit., p. 91.

<sup>35</sup> St. John, Chapter XV, Verse XIII.

## BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN

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from pagan tribesmen into Christian and loyal citizens upon whom the new colony might count, citizens of New France in time, and prospective citizens of a heavenly kingdom in eternity. The lines found in the very first section of the poem confirm our belief that supernatural agencies were inspiring Brebeuf's noble resolve and furthering his every effort:

It brought to earth the prophets and apostles  
Out of their static shrines in the stained glass.  
It caught the ear of Christ, revealed his hands  
And feet, bidding his marble saints to leave  
Their pedestals for chartless seas and coasts  
And the vast blunders of the forest glooms.<sup>36</sup>

The theme involves both the religious and political interests of the Huron tribes, for the crucial years wherein a new land is settled and a new society established invariably call forth a patriotism too vast to concern the personal, too strong to circumscribe the temporal, a patriotism that even the most egoistic are forced to regard as heroic.

Thus the supremely epic chapter in the history of Canada to the present time is unquestionably that of the Jesuit missionaries and the pioneers, who opened the heart of a continent, carried idealism to heights almost fantastic, and blazed the trails of a nation with the fires of martyrdom.<sup>37</sup>

The epic commands the respect due to tradition. Since the dawn of civilization the story of the conqueror, unflinching and fearless; and of the explorer, intrepid

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E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern" in Collected Poems, p.37. 37 Wells & Klinck, op.cit.p.90

and tireless, has been lauded. That the exploration, herein narrated, penetrates the gloomy depths of the forests of New France, rather than some old world empire; and that the conqueror fights beneath that standard of Loyola, in a spiritual army, and that the hostages of whom he is in quest are pagan souls, should not belittle our esteem for his exploits nor minimize his physical labours.

Gayley's principles state that epic poetry awakens a sense of the mysterious, the awful and the sublime. No thoughtful reader can ponder the words of the poem and remain unmoved, for the question, whence came the strength for such endurance? must seek an answer, and Edwin John Pratt with fine discernment has outlined for the reader what that answer is.

In "Brebeuf and His Brethern" Pratt chose one of the most sublime and moving stories in Canadian history or any other, the epic of the Canadian saints and the Jesuit missions into old Huronia from 1620 to 1650. He tells the tremendous stories of the superhuman labours and sufferings, of the glorious lives, and martyrdom of Fathers Jean de Brebeuf, Gabriel Lalement, Isaac Jogues, Daniel, Garnier, Chabanel, Bressani, and Lay Brothers Goupil, de Lalande, Couture, and Eustache.

These sublime stories of the love of men for God and for their fellow-men have never been told as movingly and powerfully as this great Canadian poet tells them. It is not likely that they will ever be told as majestically again, for Pratt approaches his theme with a reverential attitude for its enormous spiritual significance; he lets his scholarship, his detailed study of the period, his all-embracing poetic power, and his sense of narrative construction fashion again these compelling, almost incredible sagas of immortality, the stories of these deathless god-

like lives of long ago.<sup>37(i)</sup>

In the account of the missionary efforts of Father Isaac Jogues we come upon these criptic words, which reveal and yet conceal the source of mighty strength:

.....his last letter to his  
Superior read: "I will return  
Cost it a thousand lives. I know full well  
That I shall not survive, but He who helped  
Me by His grace before, will never fail me  
Now, when I go to do His holy Will.<sup>38</sup>

The theme of the epic Gayley points out, must involve the political or religious interests of a people or of mankind. The theme of "Brebeuf and His Brethern" is the martyrdom of an heroic Jesuit priest and of his companions, that a new nation may be born, and the realm of France be extended in the New World; that the ferocious Iroquois may be curbed and converted; and that the less hostile tribes, the Hurons, the Algonquins, the Mohawks and others be won to the ways of civilization and to spiritual regeneration; that tribal security be far surpassed by national supremacy. The apparent failure of the Jesuit missions and the martyrdom of the priests does not make the theme less noble:

With the fall of the Hurons, fell the best hope of the Canadian mission. They, and the stable and

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<sup>37(i)</sup>

Benson, N.A., "Brebeuf and His Brethern", review in Canadian Poetry Magazine of Toronto, Vol. 5, No. I, Sept. 1940, p. 42.

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E. J. Pratt, Collected Poems, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", P. 76.

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populous communities around them had been the rude material from which the Jesuit would have formed his Christian empire in the wilderness; .....

In some measure the occupation of the Jesuits was gone. Some of them went home, "Well resolved," writes the Father Superior, "to return to the combat at the first sound of the trumpet."<sup>39</sup>

The epic theme continues to unroll. Withdrawal did not mean defeat, the labours and sufferings of Brebeuf and his companions were on behalf of the religious interests of the pagan tribes with whom he worked, the question now is, did these heroic labours contribute in any way towards the political life of the new colony?

If human glory were all that the Huron missionaries sought, they did indeed obtain it through martyrdom. Brebeuf, Lalement, Daniel, Garnier, Garreau, Buteux, Chabanel, had all been slain and many lay brothers had fallen victims. Others such as Chatelain, Chaumonot and Bressani had suffered tortures worse than death. But they were trained to despise human glory as unsatisfactory and ephemeral and to seek only the beatifying glory of God.

From this view-point the Huron Missions were not a failure.....

.....The results are eternal. Deathless, too, is the vitalizing examples of the apostles who died for the love of Christ. "The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians."<sup>40</sup>

Although Nature with her amazing rapidity of movement virtually obliterated the traces of human habitation

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Francis Parkmen, The Jesuits in North America, op. cit., p. 446.

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Adam Shortt & Arthur G. Doughty, "Editors" Canada and Its Provinces, Vol. II, Toronto, Glasgow, Brook & Co. 1914p.408

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after this tragic event, nevertheless, (to use Pratt's image) the fires of Fort Sainte Marie lit the torches of the future and blazed the trail that has led from the forest glooms to Canada's mighty cities of to-day. The religious interests were poetically thus described by Pratt:

Here is the sevice  
Of joy, that we will take whatever God  
Ordains for us whether it be life or death.  
The challenge was accepted, for the spring  
Opened upon the hardest tragic blows  
The iron of the human soul could stand.<sup>41</sup>

That it involved the political interests of the young colony may be learned from the pages of history:

Father LeJeune, in his Relation of 1651 made a strong appeal to the king: 'A troop of savages.....has reduced New France to the extremity. May it please you, Sire, listen to her broken voice and her last words'. The state of affairs was a desperate one and the worst of it was that it might have been avoided. A comparatively small well-disciplined force of soldiers could have saved the great Huron nation and kept back the Iroquois scourge from New France.

The appeal of LeJeune was at length heeded and when the Carignan-Salieres regiment arrived in Canada, the energetic action of de Tracy gave the Jesuits an opportunity of extending their labours north and west and even into the haunts of the Five Nations.<sup>42</sup>

From words such as these it may be clearly seen

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41

E.J.Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern" p. 86.

42

Adam Shortt & Arthur Doughty, op. cit., p. 408.

that the struggle so vividly recounted by Edwin John Pratt was of major consequence from a religious and also from a political standpoint and it has ever been of such materials that epic tales have been woven.

The world knows of a vast stock of epic material scattered up and down the nations.....  
Epic material is fragmentary, scattered, loosely related, sometimes contradictory, each piece of comparatively small size, with no intention beyond hearty narrative. It is a heap of excellent stones, admirably quarried out of a great rock-base of stubborn experience. For this to be worked into some great structure of epic poetry, the Heroic Age must be capable of producing individuality of much profounder nature than any of its fighting champions.<sup>43</sup>

The material Pratt found in Canada's primitive history, the unsurpassed suffering of that little army of soldier-priests who gave their all that Canada might live, was certainly epic material; fragmentary it was, scattered by the winds of Time. What could be more contradictory than that man should seemingly place so small a price on life that he should unhesitatingly offer it on the altar of Iroquois fires, whereas in reality he was bartering a temporal life that many should possess life eternal.

Although the poem portrays most vividly the gruesome details of martyrdom and death; although a sense of doom

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43

Lascelles Abercrombie, op. cit., p. 17-18.

and failure pervades the entire scene, yet the poet pen with masterful strokes is able to communicate the peace and tranquility of the victory and the joy that is really the success of failure. The poem opens with one of those beautiful, calm passages, strong in very simplicity, and a fitting prelude to an epic story:

The winds of God were blowing over France  
 Kindling the hearths and altars, changing vows  
 Of rote into an alphabet of flame.  
 The air was charged with song beyond the range  
 Of larks, with wings beyond the stretch of eagles.  
 Skylines unknown to maps broke from the mists  
 And there was laughter on the seas.<sup>44</sup>

"Brebeuf and His Brethern" is a religious epic from which the qualities of stoicism, courage, and faith, of the Jesuits come back to sustain a world in the holocaust of World War II. In order to grasp at the core of tragedy in the poem it is necessary to accept the idea that religion in "Brebeuf" is not the gentle manna of faith, hope and charity; but the burning flame of courage and zeal. The priests in this poem are as much in the tradition of soldiers as of martyrs, for Loyola was ever militant; the symbolism of the cross in the Brebeuf-epic parallels the iceberg symbolism in the Titanic-epic. In order to preserve the meaning of the cross the contending

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44

E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 367.

## BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN

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elements of human nature were as potent and unyielding as the physical elements.

As soon as the Hurons were won from their savage pursuits, and as soon as they had adopted the ideas of comfort and ease, the savage Mohawks and Senacas, unfettered by any civilization swept them away and devastated the Jesuit domain. Little remained of the missions and the missionaries. The tragedy is the tragedy of worldliness, the futile effort to preserve both the body and the soul ever falters. That the result of missionary work was to provide a new life for the natives in which they could prosper materially was the ironic belief of the Hurons. "Brebeuf and His Brethern" emblazons the truth that the only daily bread that counts is the spiritual daily bread. To require of the poetry of an heroic age that it shall recognize the historical meaning and importance of the events in which it originates, and the persons whose names it uses, is entirely to mistake the nature of it.

For it is not in events as they happen, however notably, that man may see symbols of vital destiny, but in events as they are transformed by plastic imagination. Yet it has been possible to use history as the material of great epic poetry.<sup>45</sup>

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45

Lascelles Abercrombie, op. cit., p. 46.

## BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN

51(a)

The nature of the poetry of an heroic age is to find or to make some drama played by kings or heroes and if this be faithfully portrayed the historical framework will take care of itself. It is true that the link between epic poetry and history is real, and that history is a fitting subject for epical inquiry, but this lies behind the scene. The epic poem is cut loose and set free from history and soars on its own lofty flight, a flight that can span defeat and failure and finally reach a goal of ultimate success. "Brebeuf and His Brethern" measured by all and each of the mentioned criteria proves undeniably to be a poem of epic proportion ably written by one of the few English speaking poets of heroic narrative verse of to-day.

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Having suggested its relation to the epic tradition and outlined in some detail the validity of its claim to being in the heroic narrative style; having made a clear distinction between the historical facts upon which the poem must rest, and the epic strength of its progress and culmination; it is now necessary to place the poem, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", in its own class. It is the belief of the writer of this thesis that this narrative poem fits more neatly into the niche of the folk epic.

The folk epic has also been called the "authentic" epic; the other class of epic being the "imitative" epic, which has also been designated the "literary" epic. There is no essential difference between the two, except that the folk epic in response to its surrounding needs, has a simple and concrete subject and the closeness of the poet to this subject is, therefore, more obvious than in the imitative epic, which has been forced to take for its subject some abstract idea and display it in a concrete form: Homer sang of fighting heroes, of adventure, and its consequent longing for safety and for home; and Beowulf tells of kingship, and of the gigantic hero who subdues the monstrous forces in life. These subjects were near the people and the prime interest of

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the people. These were matters which the people, 'the folk' could understand, and of such material is the folk epic made. But in times less primitive the scene changes. For a Roman the chief matter for an epic poem would be Roman Civilization; for a Puritan the interests of the kingdom of God and the relationship between God and man.

The writer of the folk epic accepts, and with his genius transfigures, the general circumstances of his time.

To do this he takes some great story which has been absorbed into the prevailing consciousness of his people. As a rule, though not quite invariably, the story will be of things which are, or seem to be, so far back in the past, that anything may credibly happen in it; so imagination has freedom, and so significance is displayed. But the materials of the story will have an unmistakable air of actuality; that is, they come profoundly out of human experience.<sup>46</sup>

Into such a framework of folk epic the poem, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", will fit. Granted that it does not possess the vast magnitude of an "Iliad" or of a "Beowulf"; granted that it is of minor symbolism and scope, it yet has folk epic traits that cannot be denied. Some critics claim that the folk epic depends entirely for its identity upon unknown or doubtful authorship

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46

Lascelles Abercrombie, op. cit., p. 39.

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and upon the assembling of many lays into one composite whole. Of this Abercrombie says:

There are poems that have the look of epic at first glance but have nothing of the scope of epic intention. These resemble the "lays" out of which some people imagine "authentic" (folk) epic to have been made. But the lays are not the epic.<sup>47</sup>

The folk or authentic or national epic may have been written as one composite whole or it may have been amassed from fragmentary lays, adopted nationally, and then having been considered the best finally welded together by a master poet and made to form a poem whose authorship may be disputed, because he derived inspirational aids from various sources. This poem, however, will be by universal acclaim, known as the narrative epic poetry of the people.

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47

Lascelles Abercrombie, op. cit., p. 84.

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STYLE

Among Teutonic peoples the Old English poem "Beowulf" approached most nearly the complete and finished epic. In no stage in its history was the people from whom this epic sprang welded into a political unity, but there is a background of war, of clan feuds, of heroic enterprises and "Beowulf" was indebted to the lays which preceded it. In order to study "Brebeuf and His Brethern" and to justify its heroic claim we must look at "Beowulf" in a comparative light.

"Brebeuf and His Brethern" does not depend upon lays of unknown origin, but it does depend upon Francis Parkman's Jesuits in North America, and this in turn was gleaned from the Jesuit Relations. These Relations were the Community Annals which represent the voice of the men who were working among the Indians.

Although the productions of men of scholastic training, they are simple and often crude in style, as might be expected of narratives hastily written in Indian lodges or crude mission-houses in the forest, amid annoyances and interruptions of all kinds.

.....Modest records of marvellous adventures and sacrifices, and vivid pictures of forest life, alternate with prolix and monotonous details. 48

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STYLE

Although the Relations hold a high place as authentic and trustworthy documents; they were not originally intended for an historical basis--they were the voice of the people, the unconscious criticism of the men who worked among the people and as such, may be considered as comparable to the ancient lays which preceded other folk epics, that is, if one believes that a foundation of scattered lays to be all-important for the genuine epic.

Side by side with the folk epic "Beowulf" will be herein given the epic trends that the writer of this thesis believes to exist in "Brebeuf and His Brethern". If the reader finds that while making generous allowances for the lapse of centuries and also for the vast differences caused by location, climatic conditions, and cultural habits, if in spite of all these a comparison may be drawn, then the reader will have subscribed to the epic claim that critics have been hinting at, when they speak of the "heroic" narrative verse of Edwin John Pratt.

Although for many a century in their own northern lands the German races must have climbed from primitive savagery to a civilization that contained noble elements, the long and painful progress is a matter of inference rather than of recorded fact. It is for this reason that "Beowulf" even were it not an epic of high dignity and poetic worth, must rank as priceless

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STYLE

--an historic picture, of a world, long  
departed and irrecoverable.<sup>49</sup>

In like manner "Brebeuf and His Brethern" gives us the historic picture of a nation whose progress and path to triumph and security was blazed by a trail of savage warfare and torture, even by the death of its foremost warriors. This tragic ending does not dim its splendour but on the contrary makes its achievement more glorious.

But now cunning might do  
What fear forbade. A brace of Huron runners  
Were sped to the Neutral country with rich tribes  
To put the priests to death. And so Brebeuf  
And his companions entered the first town  
With famine in their cheeks only to find  
Worse than the Petun greetings--corn refused,  
Whispers of death and screams of panic, flight  
From incarnated plague, and while the chiefs  
In closest council on the Huron terms  
Voted for life or death, the younger men  
Outside drew nearer to the priests, cursed them,  
Spat at them, while convulsive hands were clutching  
At hatchet helms, waiting impatiently  
The issue of that strident rhetoric  
Shaking the cabin bark. The council ended  
The feeling strong for death but ruled by fears,  
For if those foreign spirits had the power  
To spread the blight upon the land, what could  
Their further vengeance not exact?<sup>50</sup>

Is this not a <sup>tale</sup> ~~trail~~ of savage warfare and primitive

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49

W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 51

50

E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern" p. 66

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treachery like unto the one by which the Germanic tribes climbed to civilization?

Beowulf illuminates the vast dim tract  
of an unknown human story.<sup>51</sup>

"Brebeuf and His Brethern" re-creates for modern man the world of New France before civilization and Christianity had had time to impress any cultural stamp; moreover, it gives meaning and content to the bare outlines provided by historians and by chroniclers. To the struggles of the pioneers, to the suffering of the missionaries, to the cruelty of the savages, it adds a real and living interest.

Of the poem "Beowulf" it has been said:

From this poem alone, taken with the remains of ancient German civilization which the museums have preserved for us, is possible at least a partial reconstruction of a society which endured many a hundred years, and yet is otherwise almost wholly beyond our ken, a society whose features, however unconscious of it we may be, are still represented in the political and social order of our islands.<sup>52</sup>

A thoughtful study of "Brebeuf and His Brethern" will also do much to reconstruct for us the picture, made

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51

W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 51

52

Ibid., p. 51

## BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN

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dim by the passage of time, of the early Canadian days. Pratt's effort has not been in vain, herein we see our race in the vigor of its prime; in this mirror we catch reflections of our national features which have been chiseled by pain and then worn smooth by famine and penury; for a moment the curtain is raised upon scenes of a long-forgotten life when our infant continent was shared with pagan possessors, a day when valiant men spared neither limb nor life to win souls for Christ and to win a nation for posterity. Edwin John Pratt has the power and the courage in his epic tale to paint in colours so bright that the picture of that long gone day lives again in mind and memory:

"Herein I show you what you have to suffer.  
I shall say nothing of the voyage--that  
You know already. If you have the courage  
To try it, that is only the beginning,  
For when after a month of river travel  
You reach our village, we can offer you  
The shelter of a cabin lowlier  
Than any hovel you have seen in France,  
As tired as you may be, only a mat  
Laid on the ground will be your bed. Your food  
May be for weeks a gruel of crushed corn.

.....  
I have not told  
You of the Iroquois our constant foes.  
Only a week ago in open fight  
They killed twelve of our men at Contarea,  
A day's march from the village where we live. 53

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OF STYLE

And thus on and on the story is told by Brebeuf in his famous letter, a letter to seek recruits to aid the missionary work but a letter that does not minimize the toils and hardships.

The dead Homeric hero, like Beowulf, is placed upon a funeral pyre and the ashes when the body is consumed placed in a like burial mound or barrow. For both a dirge is sung and like ceremonies take place around the tomb.<sup>54</sup>

It was thus that peoples who lived before the days of civilization respected and honoured their fallen warriors. Tribute was paid to Brebeuf also, and by its very contrast brings out the value of a spiritual victory over a physical triumph.

Where was the source of his strength,  
The home of his courage, that topped the best  
of their braves,  
And even outfabled the lore of their legends?<sup>55</sup>

Pratt asks the question not that his reader may wonder, but that he may give the answer, a fitting reply, and a fitting epic tribute.

Not in these was the valour or stamina lodged;  
Nor in the symbol of Richelieu's robes or the seals  
Of Mazarin's charters, nor in the stir of the lilies  
Upon the Imperial folds; not yet in the words

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54

W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 52

55

E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 92

## BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN

61

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Loyola wrote on a table of lava-stone  
 In the cave of Manresa--not in these the source--  
 But in the sound of invisible trumpets blowing  
 Around two slabs of board, right-angled, hammered  
 By Roman nails and hung on a Jewish hill.<sup>56</sup>

Edwin John Pratt has, then, been able to take the amassed material which he found in the chronicles of early Canada, to recognize their epic value and relying on tradition he has produced an epic poem.

It is what the poet does with the tradition he falls in, which is, artistically, the important thing. He takes a mass of confused splendours, and he makes them into something which they certainly were not before; something which, as we can clearly see by comparing epic poetry with mere epic material, the latter scarce hinted at. He makes this heap of matter into a grand design; he forces it to obey a single presiding unity of artistic purpose.....  
 .....  
 There is only one thing which can master the perplexed stuff of epic material into unity; and that is, an ability to see in particular human experience some significant symbolism of man's general destiny.<sup>57</sup>

A recent critic recognizes this epic trend in Pratt's poetry and expresses his analysis thus:

There are heroic elements in Pratt's conception of his materials and in his view of the world around him. He accepts and sings life; he shows us reality as he finds it, believing as he does that the uglier strands of experience are ultimately an integral part of the whole weave.<sup>58</sup>

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56

E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 92

57 Lascelles Abercrombie, op. cit., p. 17

58 John Sutherland, *The Poetry of E.J.Pratt*, p. 7  
 (unpublished book)

## BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN

62

A FOLK EPIC WITH CLASSICAL ELEMENTS  
OF STYLE

In the Beowulf story for twelve winters a dreadful peril had assailed King Hrothgar, bringing him sorrow and shame. Far and wide the evil news was bruited among the adjoining peoples till it came to the ears of Beowulf, a thane of the realm of Hygelac, the Geat, lying to the north of Daneland.

With fourteen chosen companions, he  
stoutest of heroes, set forth to bring  
succour to the harassed monarch.<sup>59</sup>

In the Brebeuf story also, a dreadful peril had fallen on the Christian world.

The story of the frontier like a saga  
Sang through the cells and cloisters of the  
nation,  
Made silver flutes out of the parish spires,<sup>60</sup>

and at Bayeux, a young neophyte, heard the clarion call, weighed well the cost, and then unhesitatingly heeded the summons. He, too, gathered chosen companions for the perilous adventure.

The vows were deep he laid upon his soul.  
"I shall be broken first before I break them."<sup>61</sup>  
.....  
The first clauses of the Jesuit pledge  
Were honoured when, embarking at Dieppe,  
Brebeuf, Masse, and Charles Lalement,

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59

W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 58

60

E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 37

61

Ibid, p. 38

## BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN

63

A FOLK EPIC WITH CLASSICAL ELEMENTS  
OF STYLE

Travelled three thousand miles of the Atlantic  
And reached the citadel in seven weeks,<sup>62</sup>

Edwin John Pratt has conformed to the epic tradition  
in more than the bare essentials.

The epic hero is always a fighter, a soldier in some  
good cause. In the medieval French epic he is the champion  
of the true Faith against the Saracen; in Beowulf he is  
engaged in a no less holy war with the powers of darkness,  
the enemies of the whole human race. It is not a war of  
heroes with other heroes, it is a conflict of man with the  
powers hostile to men. Nothing can be clearer than that  
Beowulf belongs to an age in which nature was felt as  
unsubdued, and in which the elements were unfriendly.

Pratt has captured these very same traits in his  
epic poem, Brebeuf is not engaged in a war with equals  
but in a spiritual war in which the powers of darkness  
are allied with pagan warriors to overthrow the cause of  
God and to stamp out the last vestige of civilization or  
rather to prevent any trace of it entering a land still  
benighted in savage superstitions.

With the spirit  
Of Christ, Eustache then in the fire entreated  
His Huron friends to let no thought of vengeance

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62

E. J. Pratt, Collected Poems, "Brebeuf and His  
Brethern", p. 39

## BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN

64

A FOLK EPIC WITH CLASSICAL ELEMENTS  
OF STYLE

Arising from this anguish at the stake  
 Injure the hope for an Iroquois peace.  
 Onnonhoaraton, a youthful captive  
 They killed--the one who seeing me prepared  
 For torture interposed, offering himself  
 A sacrifice for me who had in bonds  
 Begotten him for Christ. 63

In epic verse, each line of which thrills with the glory of adventure in a supreme cause, Edwin John Pratt renders the stark details contained in the account of Father Jogues' capture and enslavement. Heroic poetry of this order has small concern with ideas; unlike the chivalric epic, it is desperately occupied with doings. What Dixon has said about Beowulf could be said with like justice about Brebeuf.

In this society each group is supporting itself with difficulty against famine, the untamed forces of nature, the raids of rival clans, each individual preserving his existence, at the spear's point. These men--"Fierce in their native hardiness of soul," are laying the foundations of civilization and social order. The nerve of the narrative, the heart of its interest lies therefore in the vivid presentation of a real struggle against deadly odds. 64

63

E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 72

64

W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 71

## BREBEUF AND HIS BRETHERN

65

A FOLK EPIC WITH CLASSICAL ELEMENTS  
OF STYLE

This picture also mirrors the epic narrative "Brebeuf and His Brethern" and it is this that the critics mean when they say:

A living and an ardent creation, this devout epic has both a soul and a body, an inner and an outer reality, to each of which in almost equal measure its strength is due. Thoroughly aware of the ascetic core in Jesuit thought, Pratt has declared that the germ of his poem lies in the Cross, and that in all its parts his chief aim has been to give fullness and body to his basic conception.<sup>65</sup>

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65

Wells & Klinck, op. cit., p. 94

## A. SEVERITY IN FORM

66

It is not only in content that the epic reflection is detected in "Brebeuf and His Brethern", the form also may be traced to the great epic example that has been chosen for this chapter. Concerning "Beowulf" it has been written:

The story falls into three sharply defined parts each of which is concerned with an heroic exploit. In the first Beowulf slays a monster, which has terribly harassed a Danish king, Hrothgar; in the second he slays a second monster, the mother of the first come to avenge her son. After these triumphs the hero returns to his own land, becomes king of it and rules for fifty years, and in his old age battling for his people, slays but is slain by a dragon, who has ravaged his realm.<sup>66</sup>

"Brebeuf and His Brethern" also falls into three distinct and easily detected sections. In the first part, the reader is introduced to the young seminarian who has heard the clarion call to fight for souls in the far flung lands of New France, conscience bids him heed that call because:

He knew by heart the manual that had stirred  
The world--the clarion calling through the notes  
Of the Ignation preludes. On the prayers  
The meditations, points and colloquies,  
Was built the soldier and the martyr programme.<sup>67</sup>

An interior battle was fought within his soul, God alone being witness of the conflict, and the spirit was triumphant.

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 66

W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 56

67 E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 38

## A. EPIC SEVERITY IN FORM

67

The fingers of Brebeuf were at his breast  
 Closing and tightening on a crucifix,  
 While voices spoke aloud unto his ear  
 And to his heart--Per ignem et per aquam.<sup>68</sup>

A second conflict must be fought within the soul of this young soldier-priest. Four years in France could not abate his zeal but it could and did make the spirit falter, as ever and anon he pondered and weighed the vast differences between his two homes, "in one was peace within the court, the ecstasy of unmolested prayer"<sup>69</sup> which peace, could not have been unattractive to the young priest; but throughout these months of spiritual renewal he frequently thought of another home;

Pere de Brebeuf would at times forget Rouen and the college and find himself dreaming of the broad St. Lawrence, the canoe beating against the rapids, the thunder of cascades, the crinkled surface of the Great Lake, the tree--crested islands, the voices floating through the forests, the rough bark of the cabins fires, odors, naked backs, wrinkled old men haunching mischievous olive-skinned children, sorcerers, dances, feasts, orgies, captives tortured--dreaming till he again woke up in his walled room in the College of Rouen.<sup>70</sup>

A second time he must make a decision--could he stay--should he go--with his own blood he wrote the history of the victory:

<sup>68</sup> E.J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 38

<sup>69</sup> E.J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 44

<sup>70</sup> Francis Xavier Talbot, Saint Among the Hurons, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1949, p. 89.



## A. EPIC SEVERITY IN FORM

69

The family name was known to chivalry-  
 In the Crusades; at Hastings; through the blood  
 Of the English Howards; at the castle breaches;  
 Proclaimed by heralds at the lists, and heard  
 In Council Halls;--the coat-of-arms a bull  
 In black, with horns of gold on a silver shield.  
 So on that toughened pedigree of fibre  
 Were strung the pledges.<sup>74</sup>

The mighty strength of Beowulf is made known when  
 we are told;

Not with the sword, then, to sleep of death  
 his life will I give, though it lie in my power  
 No skill is his to strike against me,  
 my shield to hew though he hardy be  
 bold in battle; we both, this night  
 shall spurn the sword, if he seek me here,  
 Unweaponed for war. Let wisest God,  
 sacred Lord, on which side soever  
 doom decree as he deemeth right.<sup>75</sup>

And the mighty strength of Brebeuf is legitimately inherited  
 from His God, from his noble lineage, and from his fearless  
 determination, "Tedo and to dare".

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 74

E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 39

75

Charles W. Eliot, Epic & Saga, "Beowulf" Vol. 49,  
 Book 10. New York, P. F. Collier & Son, p. 24  
 (no date)

## EPIC GRANDEUR IN CHARACTERIZATION

70

The poet of "Brebeuf and His Brethern" shows his consummate skill in the characterization of the hero. It is through his deft pen-pictures of human life that the spirit of the poem is revealed. After the introductory lines which almost mark off the boundaries of Christendom, the poet proceeds to speak of the clarion call, that has been sounded from a far-flung land.

The story of the frontier like a saga  
Sang through the cells and cloisters of the nation  
Made silver flutes out of the parish spires,  
Troubled the ashes of the canonized.<sup>76</sup>

This far outpost, this frontier, would be included in God's kingdom on earth,---Although the point should not be pressed too far, the emphasis on the magnitude of the task, and on the world-wide spread of the kingdom is probably an indirect means employed by Edwin John Pratt to characterize his epic hero--only a man mighty in bodily strength, as well as in spiritual vigor could compass this task. After this fittingly built-up prelude the hero is introduced, in lines whose quiet impressiveness prepare the reader for a great action, which will terminate in agony and suffering; and this will purchase, as did the "first crucifix" peace and the spiritual patrimony.

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 76

E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 37

## EPIC GRANDEUR IN CHARACTERIZATION

71

The fingers of Brebeuf were at his breast,  
Closing and tightening on a crucifix.<sup>77</sup>

Brebeuf is a strong man, the fact that his physical prowess is unsurpassed is repeated time and time again throughout the poem. Furthermore, the poet makes it clear that Brebeuf is ever ready to put his strength to good use.

A year's delay of which Brebeuf made use  
By hardening his body and his will.<sup>78</sup>

The strength of Brebeuf was such that it overawed even the fearless and bloodthirsty Indian chiefs. Pratt is frequently accused of glorying in "conflict and heroism-spirit matched against force"<sup>79</sup> but in this poem at least there is not glory in the conflict, but in the triumph of failure.

The natives protested when they saw Brebeuf  
High as a totem-pole. What if he placed  
His foot upon the gunwale, suddenly  
Shifted an ounce of those two hundred pounds  
Off centre at the rapids!<sup>80</sup>

After this great fear was conquered the Indians, like frightened children, had come to know the Great White Father. Brebeuf's very name spelled strength to them, for did they not in their primitive dialect call him "Echon", he who pulls the heavy load?

<sup>77</sup> E.J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 38

<sup>78</sup> E.J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 40

<sup>79</sup> J. Bartlet Brebner, in Foreword to Edwin J. Pratt

<sup>80</sup> E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 41.

## EPIC GRANDEUR IN CHARACTERIZATION

72

Three years he had been there, a friend  
 Whose visit to the tribes could not have sprung  
 From inspiration rooted in private gain.  
 He had not come to stack the arquebuses  
 Against the mountains of the beaver pelts.  
 He had not come to kill. Between the two--  
 Barter and battle--What was left to explain  
 A stranger in their midst? The name Echon  
 Had solved the riddle.<sup>81</sup>

Several lines in the recruiting letter Brebeuf sent to the Jesuit novices tell, in no uncertain terms, what must be endured by those who would work among the pagan tribes--and between the lines we read that Brebeuf had strength to endure all this, else he would not have urged others to do that from which his own spirit recoiled:

And in the fall and winter  
 You tramp unbeaten trails to reach the missions,  
 Carrying your luggage on your back.<sup>82</sup>

Again when pagan tribesmen, ever vacillating between what they deemed friendship and open hostility, when their new-born respect had been distorted to distrust and hatred, it is Brebeuf's strength and mighty stature that is the cause of the suspicion:

Was not Echon Brebeuf the evil one?  
 Still, all attempts to kill him were forestalled,  
 For awe and fear had mitigated fury:  
 His massive stature, courage never questioned,  
 His steady glance, the firmness of his voice,  
 And that strange nimbus of authority,  
 In some dim way related to their gods,  
 Had kept the bowstrings of the Huron taut  
 At the arrow feathers, and the javelin poised  
 And hesitant.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>81</sup> E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 49

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 57

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 66

## EPIC GRANDEUR IN CHARACTERIZATION

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Then as the supreme sacrifice of Brebeuf is near at hand,  
Pratt in priceless phrase again underlines the courage  
and strength that must first be broken before Death  
triumphs and claims its victim.

For here at last was trapped their greatest  
victim Echon. The Iroquois had waited long  
For this event. Their hatred for the Hurons  
Fused with their hatred for the French and priests  
Was to be vented on this sacrifice,  
And to that camp had come the apostate Hurons,  
United with their foes in common hate  
To settle up their reckoning with Echon.<sup>84</sup>

As the torture and very martyrdom progressed, over and  
over again these forest savages marvel at his courage.  
These natives of whom it is written: "endurance is a  
code among the braves, and impassivity."<sup>85</sup> are thrilled  
to the core of their being by the unheard of endurance of  
Brebeuf.

Why did not the flesh of Brebeuf cringe to the  
scourge,  
Respond to the heat, for rarely the Iroquois found  
A victim that would not cry out in such pain--yet  
here  
The fire was on the wrong fuel.

.....  
Where was the source  
Of his strength, the home of his courage that  
topped the best  
Of their braves and even out-fabled the lore of  
their legends,  
In the hunch of his shoulders which often had  
carried a load  
Extorting the envy of guides at an Ottawa portage?  
.....Was it the blood?  
They would draw it fresh from its fountatin.

<sup>84</sup> E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 91  
<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 56.

## EPIC GRANDEUR IN CHARACTERIZATION

74

Was it the heart?  
 They dug for it, fought for the scraps in the  
 way of the wolves.  
 But not in those were the valour and stamina  
 lodged;<sup>86</sup>

This is indeed an epic hero. Courage and endurance such as the braves possessed would have been understood, would have been ordinary in their regard, but this is endurance raised beyond, far beyond, their conception of strength, this is epic strength and this is an epic hero.

Christianity may have weakened the epic, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" cannot co-exist with Christian charity. Granted that this modern Christian epic is weaker, yet it is more noble, more exalted, and not less truly 'epic'. Of Beowulf it has been written:

He is an ideal rather than an individual, and this, too, is right; he is the highest conceivable in an heroic age, a man of vast bodily strength, wise in council, yet adventurous, hungry of fame, not content to guard but to gain, friendly to his own people and their protector to the point of death, terrible to his enemies. He had need of all his valour and resolution for helper he had none. There is no divine cloud to hide his weariness, to shield him from the exultant foe, no good fairy by his side, no heavenly voices to cheer, no miraculous wells for the healing of wounds. If he conquers, it is well; if he fails, he dies. Vae Victis! Nor in death is his heart comforted by the hope of recovering lost friends in the other world; with life he leaves all that was dear to him, kindred and folk, hall-joys and pleasant glee-wood, and the praises of valour. Sorely, unwillingly he departs he knows not whither.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 92

<sup>87</sup> W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 76.

## EPIC GREATNESS OF CHARACTERIZATION

75

This tribute of epic greatness to the Beowulf hero might, in its first few lines, apply to Brebeuf, also. He, too, was a leader such as men gladly followed, a chief whom they proudly served. He was the ideal of his brotherhood, rather than an individual, he was wise in council yet adventurous--but the adventure was a Crusade. He was hungry for fame, he wanted his name enrolled in the Book of Life, his history written in the annals of Heaven. He, also, was not content to guard but to gain. He would have protected the Indians, with life itself if need be--but that protection and that affection could not satiate his thirst, he would gain their souls for Christ. Here the parallel ends, for our hero goes to meet death, comforted by the thought of Eternity, and fully convinced of the truth of the words:

Unless the grain of wheat falling upon the  
ground dieth, itself remaineth alone.<sup>88</sup>

This is in truth an epic hero whose heroic qualities cannot be dimmed; an epic age upon which the light of Christianity has dawned; an epic material that has been won from its primeval and crude condition by the saving hope of Redemption.

Finally, and it logically follows from what has

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88

St. John, Chapter 12, Verses 24-25.

## EPIC GREATNESS OF CHARACTERIZATION

76

already been stated by the poet that Brebeuf is highly regarded by his own countrymen; by his brothers-in-Christ, those who fought side by side with him under the standard of Ignatius in the wilds of New France; and by his Superiors, those men of discerning vision who had studied his aptitudes, weighed his worth, and respected his ambitions. Their choice of men for an hazardous task is never left to chance--it is ever the result of very meticulous selection. Brebeuf was chosen, therefore, Brebeuf was of the stamina of heroes and of saints.

And the first clauses of the Jesuit pledge  
Were honoured, when, embarking at Dieppe,  
Brebeuf, Masse and Charles Lalement  
Travelled three thousand miles of the Atlantic.<sup>89</sup>

Many an ardent apostle has set out on a great adventure and later faltered as monotony or toil pressed too heavily upon a weary spirit. In this epic tale, on the contrary, the hardships of the forest served but to enkindle anew the flame of Brebeuf's courage, and daily edified his Superior "who was the shepherd-priest,"<sup>90</sup> and who like a kind father was solicitous about the health, spiritual and physical, of the young priests, who had been entrusted to his care.

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89

E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 39

90

Ibid, p. 85

## EPIC GREATNESS OF CHARACTERIZATION

77

Three years of that apprenticeship had won  
 The praise of his superior and no less  
 Evoked the admiration of Champlain,  
 That soldier, statesman, navigator, friend,  
 Who had combined the brain of Richelieu  
 With the red blood of Cartier and Magellan.<sup>91</sup>

If this praise were meted out by religious superiors, only, one might detect in the words a superlative note that perhaps would not ring true when tested by standards more severe, or rather by standards less rigid and more flexible; in this case however, we read that Champlain, himself a mighty warrior, an eminent statesman, was friend to Brebeuf--Champlain would not admire, much less condone any but sterling qualities in any person, be he priest or layman. All these are proofs that Edwin John Pratt is portraying an epic hero, one who is of the people, "of the folk"--yet ever raised above them in merit. For it is an epic requirement that the hero must be great, and that the ordinary, the every-day, be raised to epic levels. Words that have been written concerning the Beowulf-hero might with equal truth and justice be applied to Brebeuf, provided that the reader substitute in thought, for the word "Fate" its Christian equivalent "the Will of God."

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 91

E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 43.

## EPIC GREATNESS OF CHARACTERIZATION

78

The hero of this epic knows that the day will come when fate will be stronger than he, as it has been stronger than his fathers and kinsmen, when all will seem "too wide for him, the fields and the homestead, "and he reflects that the bravest must, in the end, sleep "the iron sleep of death". The Beowulf temper is that of the born fighter, the man born never to yield. It was the temper of that long roll of Englishmen, soldiers, sailors, adventurers, explorers, to whom retreat was more bitter than death, who rather than turn back from the task undertaken, challenged the fates themselves--to pluck how often, glorious success from the very heart of failure. Beowulf itself does not end as it is sometimes demanded the epic should end upon a note of success and triumph. Or if it end upon a note of triumph, it is triumph touched, as are all human triumphs, with a sense of the invincible hardness of the world.<sup>92</sup>

In the characterization of Brebeuf, delineated so magnificently by Edwin John Pratt one sees a combination of the blending in the hero (and in the poem) of the warrior renowned for physical strength; the Christian knight revered for his spirit of helpfulness; and the Jesuit priest whose credo both spiritual and physical is the Ignatian code.

To give and not to count the cost,  
To fight and not to heed the wounds.<sup>93</sup>

Thus far the poet has characterized Brebeuf indirectly by stressing the magnitude of the work he is to accomplish in the vast forest depths of Canada; and

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92

W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 73  
93 St. Ignatius --- Prayer

## EPIC GREATNESS OF CHARACTERIZATION

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directly by referring to his physical strength, his spirit of helpfulness and his reputation among his countrymen. Brebeuf is a great hero, whose greatness does not make biography but makes instead an epic narrative and of this poetry E. K. Brown has discerningly remarked:

What is fundamental to Pratt's interest in the story is suggested by his remark that he began the composition of the piece, with a quest for "a simile for the Cross which would express alike shame and glory, something strongly vernacular set over against cultivated imagery and language. Two slabs of board--nails--Jewish hill, contrasted with lilies and robes....Brebeuf is a symbol; there in nothing complicated in him. He belongs to epic poetry."<sup>94</sup>

And again the same author says:

Brebeuf and his fellow-martyrs are the Canadian types of sanctity....Theirs was a great role, perhaps the supreme role, in our heroic age--ton histoire est une épopée.<sup>95</sup>

If the reader of this thesis can detect a ray of epic splendor reflected but assuring, if the foregoing arguments carry conviction; if to him Brebeuf becomes an epic hero, of that heroic age when New France was in its infancy, then the aim of the thesis will have

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<sup>94</sup>

E. K. Brown, On Canadian Poetry, op. cit., p. 145

<sup>95</sup>

Ibid, p. 145

## EPIC GREATNESS OF CHARACTERIZATION

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been realized and the epic note proven.

It is of man and man's purpose in the world that the epic poet has to sing; not of the purpose of gods. The gods must only illustrate man's destiny; and they must be kept within the bounds of beautiful illustration.....

96

For true epic greatness is thus expressed:

The epic has a severe task and an impressive one. It has not to say, Life in the world ought to mean this or that; it has to show life unmistakably being significant. It does not gloss over or interpret the fact of life, but re-creates it and charges the fact itself with the poet's own sense of ultimate values.<sup>97</sup>

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96

Lascelles Abercrombie, op. cit. p. 55

97

Ibid, p. 43

## CHAPTER IV

81

## PRATT'S SEA EPICS

## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

The purpose of this chapter is to consider two of the sea poems of Edwin John Pratt in order to ascertain if they, too, have an epic note. The study in the previous pages revealed that "Brebeuf and His Brethern" dealt with genuine epic material, that it was written about an heroic age, a primitive age, and that its hero was, without doubt, of epic stature. Is Pratt's epic ability confined solely to Canada's early days; to heroes of giant stature both spiritually and physically; and must pages of history be turned back, or the annals of a country unroll its ancient parchments to find wars and heroes worthy of epic narratives?

To answer these questions, to seek and find the epic note in "The Titanic" and in "The Roosevelt and the Antinoe" and having found it to evaluate it is the purpose of the following pages. A modern author speaks thus of the sea poems of Pratt:

At present "Brebeuf and His Brethern" seems to be the favourite (of the long narrative poems) but for the present writer this poem has two defects: the poet has had to work with recalcitrant matter and has not been able, because of the very abundance of martyrs and material, to mould it into a perfect form; and secondly, the very loose blank verse tends at times to break down into rhythmical prose. For the present writer "The Roosevelt and the Antinoe" and "The Titanic" contend for first place, the former because of its simple majestic mass, and the second because

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## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

of the poet's almost successful attempt to impose a Greek conception on the story, and both because they show the nobility of the common man when a great crisis faces him.

97(i)

Much has been written in prose and in verse of "The Titanic" disaster which occurred in 1912 when war was threatening the world, this seems to prove that the age in which industrial power produces wondrous abundance and precipitates self-destructive wars is certainly heroic. Concerning "The Roosevelt and the Antinoe" this chapter will attempt to prove that the stirring narrative of the rescue of a freighter's crew in mid-ocean during the celebrated storm of 1926 is decidedly in the epic tradition. It is in its stark simplicity that "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe" obviously enters the high seas of epic poetry. The poem commemorates a heroism conceived according to the natural law and dedicated to mankind--a heroism in which the actors of a real-life drama consider the heroic as a mere triviality in their round of daily duty. That it is a small ship instead of a large one, that the heroic struggle is related to the more primitive communal epic rather than to the sophisticated epic in which dramatic characterization is advanced to a height of refinement by no means undermines its epic value.

97(i) Martin, Burns, Collected Poems, review in Dalhousie Review, of Halifax, Vol. 24, Jan. 1946.

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The poetic value of a poem consists in its inner value, its spiritual value, thus an epic scene upon an ocean should prove a fitting stage whereupon to display a struggle with storms and Arctic ice; and should prove that the essential value of the struggle lies in the courage and the endurance of the participants as they wrestle with the elements. It is thus that works, dissimilar because of their subject matter, may still be fundamentally alike. Courage in the essence is always the same, although it may be manifested in countless different ways. There are those who become intoxicated by the stimulus of valour, they laud their own deeds, hoping thereby to urge a weaker comrade to join in the fray; and there is a courage also, none the less sincere, that spends itself in eloquent silence. In these sea epics this very silence stands out as heroic.

In any theoretical discussion concerning the epic it is well to recall that replete as the best-known epics are with war and patriotism, such themes are incidental rather than essential to the epic genre. War proves in reality a less important factor than the tendency of all major epics to embody the cultural essence of a race or a tribe.<sup>98</sup>

The Titanic disaster occurred in 1912, in those dark days when the threat of war was already evident. The

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<sup>98</sup> Wells & Klinck, op. cit., p. 105

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## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

poem written some years later by Edwin John Pratt recounts in resonant and vibrant phrase this sensational disaster that had shaken a world;- a world that seemed to have been lulled into lassitude by its smug assurance of security. The disaster horrified the nations--and the poem awoke the peoples, "the folk", to a realization that although this was not a prophecy of the destruction of a modern society, it did depict the age of industrial triumph which must, just because it is built upon a shifting substance, upon inanimate insecurity, precipitate its own downfall; man and nature must always be superior to the machine, no matter how complex or even how perfect be the construction of the latter. This narrative story is very much more than that of the sinking of the largest, and probably the fastest, of the great ocean liners of the time, the poem should be read as an illustration of man's traditional struggle with nature.

The human force represented by the ship, struggles with and is defeated by the natural force represented in the iceberg--so much is indicated by the assertion in the final lines that the berg is 'still the master of the longitudes.'<sup>99</sup>

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 99

John Sutherland, The Poetry of E.J. Pratt,  
op. cit., p. 37

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## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

And out there in the starlight, with no trace  
 Upon it of its deed, but the last wave  
 From the Titanic fretting at its base,  
 Silent, composed, ringed by its icy broods  
 The grey shape with the paleolithic face  
 Was still the master of the longitudes. 100

In the poem already studied in this thesis, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", the author built up his epic hero to magnificent stature by placing great emphasis upon his strength, his courage, his lineage, the confidence that his Superiors had placed in him and his sanctity. Here was a leader whom it would be normal to suppose might be invulnerable. Surely he could plan his attack and shape his devices and his plans so that he would not be overpowered by a primitive pagan race whose ignorance and inefficiency could easily account for defeat--yet from the very first introduction of the hero, until he passes from the earthly scene, phrase after phrase, sentence after sentence, forecasts the final doom. The reader is always aware that the pagan force will conquer, that the hero will fall. Thus it was in the folk epic "Beowulf" and thus it is in "Brebeuf and His Brethern" and thus it will be in the sea poems, for this is a folk epic trait.

This epic trait, this premonition of the hero being defeated, the leader being destroyed, this sense

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 100

E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 128

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## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

of fatality, is thus explained by a student of the Beowulf epic, and the application may quite readily be made here.

Everywhere in this poem we have the sense of a savage and menacing world--in the scenery, in the stormy seas, in the sombre forests, in the wild unpenetrated country of the interior. Heroic poetry of this order has small concern with ideas. Life is wholly strain and pressure, governed by the simplest emotions. It (the epic) reads throughout like a stern record of a painful but necessary undertaking. In this society each group is supporting itself with difficulty against famine, the untamed forces of nature, the raids of rival clans; each individual preserving his existence at the spear's point.....

The hero of this epic knows that the day will come when fate will be stronger than he, as it has been stronger than his fathers and kinsmen when all will seem "too wide for him, the fields and the homestead." And a natural melancholy tinges the poet's mood when he reflects that if not to-day then to-morrow in the battle the chief goes the fated way, that the bravest must, in the end, sleep "den eisernen Schlaf des Todes," the iron sleep of death. 101

Final defeat in these epic poems comes to the reader accompanied by no surprise, the hero from the very outset, although he is strong and mighty, seems to be marked by fate.

In order to show more clearly the epic strength of the verbal links of doom foreshadowed that bind the three poems of the present study they are herein itemized:

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101 W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 71, 72

## PRATT'S SEA EPICS

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## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

1) Brebeuf and His Brethern

smoking bivouacs  
 fiery stake  
 I shall be broken first  
 the martyr program  
 trampling the body under  
 a touch of omen in the warning  
 drowned by the natives  
 the choice of death  
 the prologue to Huronia  
 and to die snow-blind  
 directed like a battery  
 steel would clash on steel  
 famine closed this chapter

2) The Titanic

whatever fears stalked with  
 her  
 collision with an iceberg  
 forward holds aleak  
 caution was absurd  
 the grind of ice  
 a sloping spur  
 tapered to a claw  
 an omen struck the thousands  
 a double accident  
 was it just suction or  
 fatality  
 The Titanic passed above its  
 grave  
 portents hidden in the natal  
 hour  
 a waning moon

3) The Roosevelt and The Antinoe

the tacit lottery of the sea----to take the luck ahead with  
 its warning light----the double lines of life-boats the sea  
 hurled the body of a wave--full of dark conjecture the  
 world was carried to the void----above the sea to the  
 uninhabited sea----undecoded human cries----the sounds  
 grew fainter, faded out tossing like a chip upon the  
 crests----the fever pulses of its own distress----in life-  
 death finger action.

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## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

It may be noted that the doom foreshadowed by these verbal links in "The Roosevelt and the Antinoe" are not as dark, not as deathly, as those in the former poems, this may be accounted for by the fact that the latter poem is one of the glorification of the heroic, without the annihilation of the hero.

Abercrombie gives the name of Heroic Age to that period

Before the hot racial elements (of the nations) have been thoroughly compounded, and thence cooled into the stable convenience of routine which is the shape of civilization-- before this has firmly occurred, there has usually been what we call an Heroic Age. 102

The preceding chapter proved that such a designation could be applied to the heroic age of "Brebeuf and His Brethern". At first sight it might seem that "The Titanic" was not dealing with an heroic age, that this was not an age before, but seemingly an age after industrialism had reached the zenith. But more careful scrutiny will disclose that this very sensational disaster at sea took place in 1912, just before the dawn of World War I, that is "before the hot racial elements (of the nations) had been thoroughly compounded; before the chaos and the confusion that overwhelmed a weary world"; therefore, it

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102

Lascelles Abercrombie, op. cit., p. 7

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## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

can most certainly be considered an Heroic Age.

Abercrombie goes on to state that "the heroic age is apt to be the hottest and most glowing stage in the process;" Was not that period just before the World War broke the hottest with hate? Pent-up fury was not yet let loose. Lest some reader of the thesis may think that the point is pressed a bit too far, in this passage Abercrombie seems to back-up the analysis by stating:

Homer and these northern poems (Beowulf, etc.) are what most people have in mind when they think of "authentic" (folk epic). But decidedly Heroic Ages have occurred much later than the latest of these cases; and they arose out of a state of society which cannot roundly be called savagery. 103

If the Moslem era was sufficiently dark to be called heroic why cannot the Kaiser regime be termed such also?

In "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe" the Appellation is less clearly discerned, the 'heroic century' less clearly defined. Nevertheless the following analysis removes any shade of doubt.

The poem has the wisdom of a profound innocence, the nobility of an austere simplicity. It clearly carries us back to the masterpieces of old and to substantial works of the less rather than the more brilliant periods of culture. We stand closer here to the light which shone upon the folk of the Dark Ages, than to that illuminating the sea kings of Crete and Mynenae. 104

103-L.Abercrombie, op.cit., p.8--104-W.&Klinck, op.cit., p.105.

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To state the case more briefly, more simply, and in a manner more fittingly suited to this poem, the Heroic Age must be that in which heroism is celebrated and in which it becomes the outstanding feature. The rescue herein celebrated, the heroism, almost unbelievable, the conflict of man against the elements, must be the product of an heroic age---an age which can produce a hero such as Captain Fried. That his struggle was against almost overpowering tempests and that he met with calm determination the dash of angry waves instead of the clash of flashing steel, does not make this saga of the sea less heroic in vein than the epics of war; the war of weapons is incidental to the epic not essential. A contest of any nature whatsoever, be it spiritual, mental, or physical is a war; the epic location need not necessarily be the gory battlefield, it may just as truly be the crushed and broken spirit of man, courageously fighting on to the very limit of endurance.

There is a kind of Heroic Age which occurs quite locally and on a (seemingly) petty scale, with causes obscurer than ever.....  
 .....This is the case when the heroes are so little removed from common folk, that celebration of individual prowess begins among the latter, not, as

## PRATT'S SEA EPICS

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## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

seems usually to have happened, among the social equals of the heroes. Doubtless there are infinite grades in the structure of the Heroic Age.<sup>105</sup>

Abercrombie would tell us that critics, even the most discerning, must use great caution if they would decide which is an Heroic Age, and which is not. Homer used with unsurpassed skill a double theme. First his heroic age was apparently one of household conflict, and in this the poet seems to be far removed from, and even in contempt of, war; next it seems that the poet despised petty home quarrels and gloried in public valour; finally, in the ninth book, he blends both themes into one strong current of epic value.

Achilles slaved for honour laying waste twenty-three cities in the Troad for little return and Agamemnon had robbed him of his honour. And so he proposed to go back on his choice and return home to live to old age.<sup>106</sup>

This illustration from Homer is merely to prove that peace may be the theme of the epic, or war, or the combination of both. Dogmatic tenets lay no restrictions on the epic. It is too grand, too mighty for that. In this heroic age must be found heroic material, because the

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<sup>105</sup> Lascelles Abercrombie, op. cit., p. 11-12

<sup>106</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, The English Epic and Its Background, London, Chatto and Windus, 1954, p. 26

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epic narrative is too lofty to be impeded by trivialities. Epic material may be fragmentary, it may be loosely scattered, it may even seem to be somewhat contradictory, but it is such that one who has epic skill may quarry these particles and erect a structure, an epic poem whose value we cannot doubt. Upon occurrence and upon creative genius the epic poetry depends. In Homer the scattered materials were: the sacking of cities, the bridal procession, the torchlight dance, the ploughing and the vintage, Achilles sinned against and sinning, and petty fighting which led to the Trojan wars. These are particles, of seemingly contradictory elements, gathered from various sources, and employed in making the Iliad structure, whose epic fame has never been dimmed.

In the Beowulf epic we find a vast tract of unknown human story, a great hero, a monster, armour, jewels, ornaments, moats and mounds, a race in the vigour of its prime, a mighty hero whose glorious career ends on a funeral pyre, and whose ashes were placed beneath a burial barrow. These, too, are epic fragments which when fitted and cemented into place result in the Beowulf poem.

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## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

In "The Titanic" the fragments may seem too petty to merit literary notice, levers, telegraphs, the arches and the spires of the iceberg, pails of lobster coral and even peppercorns, the Masquerader's Ball, a mummy from The Valley of the Kings, a poker game, no material could seem less likely to fit together for an epic structure, yet when all has been collected and worked upon with Prattian skill there results the poem that tells the world that the forces of nature will seemingly conquer and hurl into the depths the marvellous devices of man. To stress the perfection of the luxury liner Pratt says:

her proud claim

On size--to be the first to reach the sea,  
 Was vindicated, for whatever fears  
 Stalked with her down the tallow of the slips  
 Were smothered under by the harbour cheers,  
 By flags strung to the halyards of the ships.  
 Completed! Waiting for her trial spin--  
 Levers and telegraphs and valves within  
 Her intercostal spaces ready to start  
 The power pulsing through her lungs and heart.  
 An ocean lifeboat in herself--so ran  
 The architectural comment on her plan.<sup>107</sup>

Yet the mighty ship "unsinkable" and "unthinkable" is at length conquered by an iceberg "that gored it to death."<sup>108</sup> The poet, Edwin John Pratt, would tell us that

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107

E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 98

108

Ibid, p. 115

## PRATT'S SEA EPICS

94

## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

the product of man's mind, the workmanship of man's hand, however complete, is not supreme and will sooner or later be overcome by the forces of nature--just as the epic hero, Beowulf, was slain by the enemy; and Brebeuf, of gigantic strength, was broken by the primitive people whom civilization had not yet subdued.

In "The Roosevelt and the Antinoe" the theme runs along other lines. The poem has strong moral energy. The hard but glorious pathway to duty is illumined by epic courage that nothing can daunt---courage, whose base is modesty; all-in-the-day's-work seems to be the attitude of Captain Fried and the gallant comitatus as they "stick to their posts", and perseveringly accomplish an heroic rescue and then swing out into the channel.

Swung out the Sound, with her day's work well done,  
And in an hour was on the Channel sea. 109

These are meager words but freighted with meaning too deep to find expression.

High courtesy becomes part of the moral code in the heroic poem. Above the storm and strife, within the hero's breast, are quiet, calm, assurance, and grace. 110

Edwin John Pratt gives to the world one of the finest of sea epics---a story of courage saved from any romantic

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109 E.J. Pratt, "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe" p.162  
110 Wells & Klinck, op. cit., p. 107

## PRATT'S SEA EPICS

95

## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

verbiage by the accuracy of technical skill.

Friday evening with Cape Race reporting,  
Big seas with thickening fog followed by snow  
Barometer still falling, very low.  
Morning of Saturday, the gale now rising  
To the dimensions of a hurricane,  
With gusts that boxed the compass of a vane  
Sweeping around the headlands to contest  
The arrogated highway from the West.<sup>111</sup>

No details could seem more prosaic or less likely to be epic material; the bald, the shorn, the stark facts bring out into clearer brilliancy the epic traits of character. This is a drama of the greatest heroism because it is the tale of genuine bravery compounded with efficiency and with resourcefulness wherein tense spectators witness a deed of daring.

The operator meantime on the wreck  
Had left his room and crossed the slushing deck,  
Reporting to his captain.<sup>112</sup>

The subordinate worker, near at hand, saw the determination and the heroism of his superior officer. Others at a distance must also have noted and silently lauded. The courage and strength of those who effected the rescue are balanced by the energetic determination not to give in, which the crew of the Antinoe showed. Heroic in stature are the participants acted upon, they are determined not to give up the ship, they will persevere to the very last;

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<sup>111</sup> E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 137

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 142

## PRATT'S SEA EPICS

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## THE TITANIC AND THE ROOSEVELT AND THE ANTINOE

and heroic in stature are those acting, they struggle with fury of the angry winds and waves. This is duty raised to heroic levels.

## B. THE SEA EPICS ARE TRUE FOLK EPICS

Having endeavored to prove that those sagas of the sea reflect an age which may be termed heroic; reflect a period of "wars and rumours of wars" in the case of the 1912 disaster; which reflect an age when man can so completely forget self and self-preservation, in the case of "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe" that,

To take advantage of the liner's bulk,  
As windbreak for a life-boat, and forestall  
The second disappearance in a squall,  
is an affair of daily life;---in fine to run a race  
For a crew's life with the storm laps in advance;  
To outstare Death to his salt countenance,  
Made up the grim agenda of his face.<sup>113</sup>

and made up, too, an heroic age, the legitimacy of which one cannot doubt. For it is only in an heroic age that such heroes are begotten; and having shown that out of the most unlikely of scattered materials: modern gadgets of invention, brilliant electric lights, the "Capitalistic" menu in the ship's salon, the poker game, of these is the epic structure of "The Titanic" fashioned; and out of a

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113

E. J. Pratt, "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe"  
p. 146

## TRUE FOLK EPICS

97

northern gale, the icy waters, the ritual of sea burial services, is the epic fortitude of "The Roosevelt and The Antinoo" erected, the foundation for the epic credence of these sea sagas has been laid. The following section will be devoted to the placing of these narrative poems in their proper epic class--the class of the folk epic.

The folk epic deals primarily with that which can be most nearly identified with the people of the time.

The "authentic" (folk) epic in response to its surrounding needs has a simple and concrete subject and the closeness of the poet to this subject is, therefore, more obvious than in the "literary" epic.<sup>114</sup>

and again the same author tells us:

The poet takes some great story which has been absorbed into the prevailing consciousness of the people.....  
They (the elements of the story) come profoundly out of human experience.<sup>115</sup>

Abercrombie would, therefore, class "The Titanic", the narrative of man's traditional struggle with nature as folk epic. This tragedy had indeed been absorbed into the prevailing consciousness of the people. The world was shocked by this disaster and even those uninitiated in the political problems of the hour seemed to see in this stark reality the faint outlines of approaching

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114

Lascelles Abercrombie, op. cit., p. 38

115

Ibid, p. 39

## TRUE FOLK EPICS

98

doom.

Man with all his cunning and skill of invention cannot rely upon the works of his hand, nature will conquer, the monster, the pagan or the primitive will succeed where the refined will fail. This is of the people "of the folk". It is true that the epic traits in these two poems may seem weakened because of a lack of historical perspective that the centuries might lend. These two poems are seen at such close range that epic strength cannot be appreciated to the full, yet the heroic value...the folk value, cannot be ignored.

In the first lines we are reminded of a furious competition (described in martial terms) between the British builders of the Titanic and the German builders of the Imperator to be the first to have their ships afloat. Again, in this passage near the end of the poem, as the passengers begin to grasp the danger we can see an oblique reference to the community of suffering produced by war:

.....The sheer  
And formless undulation of the swell  
Might break in meaning on those diverse races  
And give them common language.  
There is a suggestion of the world wide scope of the approaching war. Pratt stresses the varied racial origins of the passengers and the national identities of the ships in the area of the collision.<sup>116</sup>

No subject could touch more intimately the people of that day--war clouds were hanging low, national pressure was high, and man, the industrial king, was relying upon  
<sup>116</sup> John Sutherland, The Poetry of E.J.Pratt, op.cit., p. 46

## TRUE FOLK EPICS

99

the false strength of the machine. In this is "The Titanic" in the tradition of the folk epic.

The prime material of the epic poet, then, must be real and not invented. But when the story of the poem is safely concerned with some reality, he can, of course, graft on this as much appropriate invention as he pleases.<sup>117</sup>

The source material used by Edwin John Pratt is certainly real. Actuality is the very foundation stone of his work and accurate detail almost its trade mark. Upon prosaic fact this poet's inventive skill and originality fashions the folk epic narrative.

The S. S. Titanic was considered unsinkable. It was sailing on its maiden voyage. The passenger list included many illustrious names. All this augured well for success and pleasure but too much trust was placed in the mechanical devices that men deemed reliable and disaster struck. These are the bare outlines of fact and upon these Pratt's epic inventive skill set to work and with his originality he saw in the tragedy a picture of widespread ruin causing man's confidence to be shaken. The primary interest of civilization at that time may be deduced from such passages as,

Then let the ocean roll and the winds blow  
While the risk at Lloyd's remained a record low.<sup>118</sup>

People were placing undue confidence on the false and

<sup>117</sup> Lascelles Abercrombie, op.cit., p. 44

<sup>118</sup> E.J.Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 99

## TRUE FOLK EPICS

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futile security of national prestige and mechanical efficiency. This mirrors perfectly the attitude of the masses in the World War I era.

## White Star

Is out this time to press Cunarders close,  
Got them on tannage--fifty thousand gross.  
Preferred has never paid a dividend.  
The common's down to five--one hundred par.  
The double ribbon--size and speed--would send  
Them soaring.

Speed is not in her design  
But comfort and security--The Line  
Had never advertised it--'Twould be mania  
To smash the record of the Mauretania.  
Sherry!

"The rumour's out".

"There's nothing in it".

"Bet you she docks on Thursday night."

"I'll take it".

"She's hitting twenty-two this very minute."

"That's four behind--she hasn't a chance to  
make it."

Brook trout!

## Fried Dover Sole! 119

These short almost machine-gun like sentences, which tell of the pride of possession and the greed for the comforts of the body give meaning to such bare outlines as are provided by historians and chroniclers. They in their short and broken thoughts show the tense state of the mind of humanity. The desire to excel, the anxiety to finish the business of the moment and be about other things, the desire for food, drink and luxury which is never satisfied, and the bet, the wager, the game of chance, that seems to supercede every nobler sentiment;

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119 E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 107

## TRUE FOLK EPICS

101

all this, and very much more may be read into these lines. In the years to come an effort will be made to reconstruct the social picture of to-day. Critics will turn to "The Titanic" and read in it a beginning of the chaos that has followed the 1912 days; the beginning of a national strife that has shaken, not a continent, but a world; a beginning of industrial and inventive genius that with rapid stride has advanced from the arrow to the chariot, from the spear to the cannon, from the submarine to the air-craft, from the machine-gun to the atomic discoveries. "The Titanic" is prelude to all this. There is no security in the ship although it is so apparently safe, there is no sincerity or depth of personality to be found in the passengers, who frittering away their time, sail on to their doom. The entire personnel of the ship sinks into a fatal ease. All this gives a perfect picture of the people "the folk" of these pre-war days. All this is folk epic. Just as in the Brebeuf epic the fall of the mighty hero is almost passed over in silence, because silence is eloquent when words are too futile to convey the proper intensity, so in "The Titanic" the collision hardly makes a shock, even the commanding officers cannot believe that their ship is sinking,

( As leaning on her side to ease a pain,  
The tilted ship had stopped the Captain's  
breath,

## TRUE FOLK EPIC

102

The inconceivable had stabbed his brain,  
 This thing unfelt--her visceral wound of death?  
 .....

The carpenter's

Second report had offered little chance,  
 And panic--heart of God--the passengers,  
 The fourteen hundred--seven hundred packed  
 In steerage--seven hundred immigrants!120

There is epic intensity here, the words are vibrant yet almost hushed with dread and anxiety.

No call from bridge, no whistle, no alarm  
 Was sounded. Have the stewards quietly  
 Inform the passengers.121

In "The Roosevelt and the Antinoo" the epic force is not stressed by conquest nor by victory but by the triumph of duty. This, also, is true heroism. It is not spectacular. It does not ring around a world that eagerly waits for stirring events, but it is heroism that endures.

The folk hero performs acts in a very physical world that are ultimately associated with the folk God.122

Just as in the long ago epics the myths mirrored the beliefs, so to-day, the heroism of the man, his social culture, and even his outlook towards Eternity add to the epic value, and especially to the folk epic strength.

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120

E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 115

121

Ibid, p. 115

122

Wells & Klinck, op. cit., p. 107

## BEOWULFIAN STARKNESS

103

Physical atmosphere as well as place and time have value in the three poems "Brebeuf and His Brethern", "The Titanic", and "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe". Heroic verse seems to be most easily begotten in a grim northern climate, on a rocky shore or headland, or upon a tempestuous ocean. In "Beowulf" we find this description as he faces his second labour.

The tracks of the demon are plain to see.  
 The reach, tracing them, at length the  
 joyless wood overhanging the grey crags.  
 The water below it stood blood-stained  
 and troubled. Sea-beasts lay on the  
 jutting rocks, dragon-like serpents  
 swan the deep.<sup>123</sup>

This description is stark, devoid of all romantic beauty, but it is thrilling, and it is gripping, in a word it is Beowulfian starkness and description such as this<sup>that</sup> finds its true place in the folk epic. The two sea epics studied in this thesis have similarities and contrasts that make each a great epic, in spite of minor weaknesses.

The scene of each is near Cape Race, Newfoundland, This is an ill-famed centre of ghastly storm. The opening lines of both poems convey a like feeling of power and security. In "The Titanic" we find:

The hammers silent and the derricks still,  
 And high-tide in the harbour! Mind and will  
 In open test with time and steel had run  
 The first lap of a schedule and had won.

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 123

W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 62

## BEOWULFIAN STARKNESS

104

Although a shell of what was yet to be  
 Before another year was over, she,  
 Poised for the launching signal, had surpassed  
 The dreams of builder or of navigator.<sup>124</sup>

Even in these less than a dozen lines the whole stage is set, the poem is going to be drear and stark, this thought is conveyed to the reader in: hammers, derricks, test, time, steel, shell, builder, navigator. As has previously been pointed out in this thesis the epic is too great to be occupied with the trivialities of life, it is desperately interested in the doings of real men....the words noted here vouch for its epic legitimacy. From these very first lines we know that work, men's work, had been going on; we know, too, that there was a competition: "Mind and will in open test with time and steel had run the first lap of a schedule and had won."<sup>125</sup> This contest for power is further illustrated in "Had surpassed the dreams of builder,"<sup>126</sup> These are the doings of men, this is epic starkness, no gentle prologue, no alluring introduction to crave the attention of the reader, but man's work and stark and plain truths. The ship so proud, so secure, with its majestic sweep sails through the ocean and meets its doom in collision with the iceberg in the Arctic waters off the rocky shores of Newfoundland.

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<sup>124</sup> E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 97

<sup>125</sup> E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 97

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p. 97

## BEOWULFIAN STARKNESS

105

In speaking of the iceberg no poetic words could be more expressive of hard and cold reality than Pratt uses,

Calved from a glacier near Godhaven coast  
It left the fiord for the sea--a host  
Of white flotillas gathering in its wake,  
And joined by fragments from a Behring floe,  
Had circumnavigated it to make  
It centre of an archipelago.<sup>127</sup>

Throughout the entire poem the description is hostile, a suitable backdrop for a sensational tragedy of epic scope.

No smoke  
Of steamships nor the hoist of mainsails broke  
The polar wastes--no sounds except the grind  
Of ice, the cry of curlews and the lore  
Of winds from mesas of eternal snow;  
Until caught by the western undertow,  
It struck the current of the Labrador  
Which swung it to its definite southern stride.<sup>128</sup>

The two descriptions given above can well parallel any description in Beowulf for bleakness and dreariness, no word, no phrase, no sentence relieves the stormy horizon of such poetry.

In the "Roosevelt and The Antinoe" the description is just as bleak and just as dark:

Abaft--the smoke came out, to be driven back  
In eddies low and fierce against the white  
Salt crust upon the surfact of the stack,  
Then, split in billows to the left and right,

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127

E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 99

128

E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 99

## BEOWULFIAN STARKNESS

106

Dispersed before it found a line of flight.  
 The double lines of life-boats lay like rows  
 Of mastodons asleep in polar snows.  
 Ahead--appeared under the steamer's light  
 Truncated day between two walls of night.129

By means of an atmospheric darkness and starkness the poet, Edwin John Pratt has been able to portray a desolate attitude of mind. It is in darkness and amid the greatest hardships that the men are rescued. Is not the poet intimating that it is in darkness of spirit and amid tribulations of a modern world that heroic qualities of soul emerge? A great hero stands out and towers above the rest of humanity not because his pathway to success has been smooth and easy to climb but because difficulties formed the stepping stones by which he mounted the steep ascent to fame and greatness. Each great action in the poem seems to be of such magnitude that comment or elaboration on the part of the poet would be unnecessary. Just as in "Beowulf" when the emotion is the greatest the poet explains very little.

The folk with tears crowd to the  
 shore where lies the dragon and their hero  
 slain beside their heaped and ancient  
 treasure. The body of the monster is pushed  
 over the cliff; wood is sent for to build  
 the pyre; and the body of the king is placed  
 upon a bier and borne away.130

There is no need for speech here, their hero is gone,

his sacrifice has been supreme and their gratitude over-  
 129 E.J.Pratt, "The Roosevelt and The Antioch", p. 138  
 130 W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 67

powers the thoughts of those who would do him honour, they cannot do more than face this big issue in life as if it were something very ordinary. What cannot be expressed adequately should be left to implication. In "Brebeuf and His Brethern" the terrible tragedy of martyrdom is met with silence.

The wheel had come full circle with the visions  
In France of Brebeuf poured through the mould  
of Saint Ignace.131

The sensational sea tragedy when man's perfectly made and perfectly equipped ocean liner sinks in its moment of greatest triumph is also expressed in scanty words, as though the poet is fearful of blunting the keen edge of the death stroke with any superfluous word.

And out there in the starlight, with no trace  
Upon it of its deed but the last wave  
From the Titanic fretting at its base,  
Silent, composed, ringed by its icy broods,  
The grey shape with the palaeolithic face  
Was still the master of the longitudes.132

No words could better express the cold reality of the epic action. The iceberg has conquered and remains silent and composed.

The stark realism of "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe" is repeated not only on the high seas but also in all spheres of daily life. The final note of the poem is not

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131

E. J. Pratt, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", p. 93

132

E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 128

## BEOWULFIAN STARKNESS

108

somber; for duty replaces doom.

The nation gave its thanks on board; and she,  
 Soon ready for completion of her run  
 Swung out the Sound, with her day's work well done  
 And in an hour was on the Channel sea.<sup>133</sup>

These sea poems are heroic in structure and in content. Their epic traits are very evident even though they fall short of true epic greatness in many details. They are too short to compete with the great epics and they harbour inconsistencies. The great epics were pagan, here the "Titanic" has its ultramodern paganism but there are Christian interludes: the sophisticated passengers, with never a thought of eternity sail calmly to their death; and yet, in spite of apparent indifference Christian virtues are in evidence:

At the sixteenth--a woman wrapped her coat  
 Around her maid and placed her in the boat.<sup>134</sup>

And after she had been offered a place in a life-boat,  
 she hesitated not an instant but returned to her husband,

Returned unmurmuring to her husband's side,  
 "We've been together now for forty years  
 Whither you go, I go."<sup>135</sup>

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133

E. J. Pratt, "The Roosevelt and The Antioe"

134

p. 162

Ibid, p. 123

135

E. J. Pratt, "The Roosevelt and The Antioe"

p. 123

## BEOWULFIAN STARKNESS

109

and also in such passages as,

A boy of ten,  
Ranking himself within the class of men,  
Though given a seat, made up his mind to waive  
The privilege of his youth and size, and piled  
The inches on his stature as he gave  
Place to a Magyar woman and her child.<sup>136</sup>

The Christian sentiments in "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe" are most evident in the church ceremonies for the dead;

.....Grant us we pray Thee....  
Who commandest the seas and they do obey Thee.  
Nigh unto all.....  
Our distresses and fears.  
A Father to the fatherless

This is then followed by fragments of great passages,

I am the Resurrection.....we.....  
.....commit.....bodies to the deep,  
Corruptible.....of those who sleep  
.....shall put on immortality.<sup>137</sup>

Immediately before his death Beowulf requested that he might be buried by the sea and asked that his monument should be a marker for wandering seafarers. Even in this epic, so strong in its pagan sentiment that even though it has been worked over by Christian translators their asides hardly even colour the stark pagan tale-- the mention of God just makes Fate stand out in clearer relief, so in the poems of Pratt. There is Beowulfian starkness although the social virtues, of kindness,

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<sup>136</sup> E.J. Pratt, "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe"  
p. 123

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, p. 150

## BEOWULFIAN STARKNESS

110

generosity, etc, and even deeply religious sentiments may be traced throughout.

Immediately before his death Beowulf requests that he may be buried by the sea and asks that his monument shall be a marker for wandering seafarers: 'Bid ye then who have fame in battle to work me a grave-mound that shall stand plain after my bale-fire on the headland jutting into the sea; and it shall be for a memorial to my people, towering high upon Whaleness, so that they who journey by sea shall afterwards call it Beowulf's barrow, when the high ships drive afar over the mists of ocean.' The poet expresses the sturdy temper of a people hardened by long wrestling with stormy waves. He, too, tells of heroic struggles unselfishly undertaken for a larger social good. In both poems ("Beowulf", and "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe") a strong moral element exists so obviously as to require no critical emphasis. Christianity appears about equally in the background of each, while a somewhat pagan view of the world dominates the foreground.<sup>138</sup>

It would be impossible to deal with the question of starkness like unto that of Beowulf without coming upon Fate which was so strong in the ancient epics.

Self-sacrifice, as such, plays a very small role in the heroic poetry (of the traditional poets) except in the Christian narratives written around the lives of martyrs and saints. The hero of the representative poem, if faced with insurmountable odds, is permitted to suffer a death which may bring him a greater glory in the end: but his sacrifice has nothing to do with an impersonal ideal

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138

Wells & Klinck, op. cit., p. 113

## BEOWULFIAN STARKNESS

111

and is strictly an action performed on behalf of the tribe. The heroic norm involves a glorification both of physical combat and of the strength of the hero's will and his good right arm.<sup>139</sup>

In the poetry of Edwin John Pratt self-sacrifice comes very prominently into the foreground. The poet seems ever to weigh the deeds of Time on the scales of Eternity. This does not mean that Fate is entirely divorced from his narratives. On the contrary his link with Beowulf is strengthened by the frequently recurring undercurrent of fate. Beowulfian starkness pervades the entire poem "The Titanic".

But the contest is more than a simple opposition of human and natural forces. If man loses, it is partly due to the unequal odds: he has to deal with other enemies who are in league with nature. In the first place he must cope with a false confidence that the victory will be his by default. The crew and passengers of the Titanic were so sure that their ship was unsinkable and so hypnotized by their sense of security, as to fall easy victims to the mortal enemy, nature.<sup>140</sup>

No wave could sweep those upper decks--unthinkable!  
No storm could hurt that hull--the papers said so.  
The perfect ship at last--the first unsinkable...  
And this belief had reached its climax when,  
Through wireless waves as yet unstaled by use,  
The wonder of the ether had begun  
To fold the heavens up and reinduce

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139

John Sutherland, The Poetry of E.J.Pratt, op. cit., p. 16-17

140

Ibid, p. 37

## BEOWULFIAN STARKNESS

112

That ancient hubris in the dreams of men,  
Which would have slain the cattle of the sun,  
And filched the lightnings from the fist of Zeus.<sup>141</sup>

Thus the presence of Fate is stressed throughout the poem, in such examples as these: the officers and the crew are intoxicated by pride because of the enormous power of their ship; the electrically operated doors seem a guarantee against sinking, yet, at the time of the collision all the doors are open and the apparatus to shut them instantaneously broken.

The iceberg looms clearly as symbol of an inexorably tragic universe cutting down the pride of man as surely as the earth not only permits grass to rise but withers it beneath winter snows. The hand of fate is heavy, resistless, inescapable. Moreover, an evil fate inevitably stalks mankind. Hubris may be combatted, but never permanently overcome. Such proves to be our human destiny.<sup>142</sup>

The author of the Beowulf poem has left a picture of the culture of the people of that day, their tools and their customs. In "The Roosevelt and The Antinoo" Pratt gives detailed pictures of the efficiency of machinery and the perfection of modern navigation. These pictures come to the reader not directly but by implication, through the actions of the commander and the crew in time of danger; or by the stress that is placed upon the success

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141

E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 98

142

Wells & Klinck, op. cit., p. 67

## BEOWULFIAN STARKNESS

113

of modern means of preservation:

And every hour in the wireless room,  
The shards of cries as by an incantation,  
Were joined to an Atlantic orchestration;  
Epic and drama rising to illumine  
Disaster--now the call and now reply;  
The Breman radio--still standing by  
The Laristan. Six rescued. Will resume  
At daylight.143

Among his many poetic gifts Edwin John Pratt has the power of adjustment. With skilful touch he can manipulate imagery, thought, and feeling to suit the mood of the moment and to portray to the future a picture that will be no less vivid than that left by the Beowulf poet.

The core of Pratt's poem is very old. It is as old as English literature itself, and far older still. Plain, unqualified heroism, the human desire to serve nobly and the human skill to employ intelligently and resourcefully whatever tools lie at hand, give him his theme. The singer of Beowulf would find much to marvel at in the fire-driven monster within whose body sailors cross the greatest seas, and in the mysterious keys carrying winged words through the air, but the heroism and the brilliance of the rescue by Captain Fried and his crew would be wholly clear to him, and, basically, Pratt's poem would be as intelligible and moving to him as his own poem is to us.144

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143

E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic", p. 152

144

Wells & Klinck, op. cit., p. 115

## EPIC WEAKNESS AND EPIC GREATNESS

114

In this chapter a careful study has been made of Pratt's sea poems, "The Titanic" and "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe" in order to ascertain if there is an epic note therein; and if so to what extent the heroic trend influences the poems.

First an effort was made to prove that the term "heroic" could really be applied to these poems, and it was seen that just as the mighty heroes Beowulf and Brebeuf were overcome by forces vastly inferior; so in "The Titanic" the ship, the masterpiece of man's intellect and hand, is overcome by the iceberg. Just as Beowulf and Brebeuf seem to have been doomforeshadowed, so, too, nature in "The Titanic" is allied to Fate, the balance is unequal, therefore, disaster is certain.

In "The Roosevelt and the Antinoe" the story of the courageous struggle against the winds and waves gives the poem epic proportions. In both these sea poems one can trace some little resemblance to the great epics.

The second and third sections of this chapter established the fact that the poems portrayed an Heroic Age and were compounded of Heroic Material. This Heroic Age is not the long gone past, but it is an age before racial fires were kindled and thus, according to Abercrombie, may be termed heroic. The materials of which

the poems are made, the mechanism of ships, storms at sea, social virtues in ultrapagan culture, religious ceremonies, do not seem to be of epic strength; but by means of such as these future generations will be able to reconstruct our modern customs and culture. In "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe" the heroism displayed, the exaltation of duty accomplished, is as old as, and as potent as that in the Beowulf poem.

It has been shown that both the sea poems studied are in the folk epic tradition rather than in the imitative style. The poet is close to his subject, he is intimately associated with the people and the deeds which he portrays. He gives a realistic picture of the people "the folk". There is Beowulfian starkness in atmospheric conditions, in the descriptive passages, and also in the Fate that seems to overshadow the whole scene and to render the doom inevitable.

In spite of these facts the poems are not great epics, nor can they be considered as being very closely related to the great epics. They have many weaknesses and inconsistencies. They are not comparable in length nor in scope to the great epics. Their style is uncertain. Passages of splendour such as the following:



## EPIC WEAKNESS AND EPIC GREATNESS

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Yet, in spite of these and other deficiencies the epic trend is sure and the epic note is true in each poem. The scene shifts easily from the salon of luxury to the iceberg of tragedy; from the frantic rescue hours to a return to daily duty. There is keen observation of nature and pleasure in good handicraft, and a Stoic creed of life and honour. All these are the firm and strong threads of which the epic fabric is woven. Of Beowulf it has been said:

There are utterances, pathetic and  
penetrating, moving reflections on human  
life and destiny that vibrate with truth  
learned in the harsh grip of experience.<sup>147</sup>

Of such is the epic; and of such, also, are the two sea poems of Edwin John Pratt. There is an epic note in each, that one cannot deny.

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147

W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 69

EPIC QUALITIES OF GRANDEUR, DEPTH AND HEROISM  
REFLECTED IN DUNKIRK

The purpose of this chapter is to prove that although the best known epics are replete with war and patriotism such themes are only incidental and in Edwin John Pratt's war poem "Dunkirk" the national element, which is present and potent, pales before the heroic element.

A celebration of heroism becomes one of the outstanding features of all epics, and probably the most prominent feature. The heroes exhibit valour, whether in wars or in civil or private life.<sup>148</sup>

Although war is not absolutely necessary in an epic poem Pratt knows its power in bringing to the surface heroic qualities. Speaking of Pratt's technique John Sutherland has said:

Landscape is always the background of his work; and war has been the theme of nearly all his narratives and longer poems. Dunkirk, The Submarine, Behind the Log, and Brebeuf and His Brethern contain descriptions of actual combat.<sup>149</sup>

Thus far the thesis has proved that the epic

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148

Wells & Klinck, op. cit. p. 105

149

John Sutherland, The Poetry of E. J. Pratt,  
p. 101

## EPIC QUALITIES OF GRANDEUR; DEPTH AND HEROISM 119

## REFLECTED IN DUNKIRK

note may be discerned in the pioneer struggles of Brebeuf, and in the marine efforts displayed in "The Titanic" and "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe". Chapter Five will attempt to show that the poem "Dunkirk" with epic force transcends locality and race and brings to the surface universal qualities. The thing that counts is the way a man reacts to his environment, and the moral and spiritual qualities that are evoked in the conflict. The battles must rage on no puny plane, if they are to have epic stature. This chapter will show that the grandeur of the scale of conflict surpasses any individual or personal heroism; it embodies a world struggle that is certainly of epic greatness. Although the epic poem is usually the record of the exploits of a single person or hero, in this poem, "Dunkirk", the British and French forces stand as a unit. They, as one, become the hero and they fight magnificently and perseveringly that their glorious heritage of faith and freedom may not fall into the grip of the Gestapo, or flag and fail before the odious apparatus of Nazi rule. This is an exploit of epic depth and strength--the united force fighting for right against might, is a hero surpassed by none, which lends grandeur and dignity to this noble narrative. The dimensions of

## EPIC QUALITIES OF GRANDEUR; DEPTH AND

120

## HEROISM REFLECTED IN DUNKIRK

the Dunkirk heroism are thus graphically outlined:

We shall go on to the end; we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender.<sup>150</sup>

"Dunkirk" is, therefore, of epic proportions in style, in structure, and in content.

This chapter will prove that "Dunkirk" is an heroic poem with a strong moral energy; and one that well deserves the following tribute:

To date, among word pictures of the actual spirit of an army or a navy under fire, few, if any, poems have rivalled Pratt's Dunkirk. It is a work red hot from the forge of war.<sup>151</sup>

And in another place the same author says:

Dunkirk celebrates a British army from a democratic point of view. It is, above all, the people of England with whom Pratt is concerned. He shows how conservatives and liberals, rich and poor, master and servant, Anglican and dissenter, join in one epic effort.<sup>152</sup>

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150

Winston Churchill, Speech, Into Battle.

151

Wells & Klinck, op. cit., p. 122

152

Wells & Klinck, op. cit., p. 127

EPIC QUALITIES OF GRANDEUR, DEPTH AND HEROISM 121

REFLECTED IN DUNKIRK

Therefore, the qualities of grandeur, depth and heroism  
make "Dunkirk" a poem of acknowledged epic value.

## POETIC CONCENTRATION AND UNITY

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## IN DUNKIRK

The ancient epics were lengthy and episodic in order that they might encompass the interests of the then known world. Pratt with epic skill gives to the modern world in "Dunkirk" a fine example of concentration.

Finally though Dunkirk is not so much a narrative as an approach to a narrative, which cannot yet be told, it is yet superior to all his (Pratt's) previous poetry in one important particular, poetic concentration. With the exception of the first half of the fourth section there is scarcely a place where a line may be cut without the wound showing; and there is scarcely a phrase which does not add to the poetic conception.<sup>153</sup>

The British forces, both those mustered on the beaches and those responding to the call for volunteers workers, exhibit a heroism that the valiant warriors of Troy, or the intrepid Beowulf does not surpass. In lines such as the following the epic strength may be weakened by condensation of actual facts, but the heroic brilliancy is not dimmed, nor the universal appeal minimized,

A call came from the Channel  
Like the wash of surf on sand,

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153

Earle Birney, A Distinguished Canadian Poem, "Canadian Forum" December, 1941  
p. 278





## POETIC CONCENTRATION AND UNITY

125

## IN DUNKIRK

strength of the British and French forces, the one unconquerable hero. Traditions borrowed from antiquity, even as distant as Caractacus and Boadicea, bring the past to meet the present in order that modern warfare may be blended with the most primitive and racial combats. With Prattian skill a link is forged that unites the virile tenacity of the rescued with the almost superhuman determination of the volunteers who,

in those hours

When Death was sweating at his lathe,  
 When heads and legs and arms were blown  
   from their trunks,  
 When the seventh day on the dunes became  
   the eighth,  
 And the eighth slumped into the dawn of  
   the ninth,  
 When the sands' crunch and suck under  
   the feet  
 Were sounds less to be endured than the  
   crash of bombs.  
 In that coma and apathy and horror,  
 It was then that the feel of a deck,  
 The touch of a spar or a halyard,  
 Was like the hold on the latch of the  
   heart of God. 157

The entire poem, a ghastly pageant of war, has compressed within its some four hundred lines epic grandeur that might rival the Homeric poem with its twenty four books;

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 157

E. J. Pratt, Collected Poems, "Dunkirk", p. 10

## POETIC CONCENTRATION AND UNITY

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## IN DUNKIRK

for it is not wealth of words, and it is not descriptive splendor, that makes a poem heroic, it is substance and it is valour and these abound in every line of "Dunkirk".

The plot of the epic is allowed a latitude in time that is denied to the tragedy, its only limit in this respect being the power of the human imagination to grasp it as a connected and completed development. 158

Edwin John Pratt has realized that the heroism displayed at Dunkirk---the stark tragedy and suffering, the mighty efforts and the bravery---limited though they were in duration have proven their own greatness. Within nine days this epic act was staged, for nature itself could not extend the bounds of so great an action. Such heroism could not be protracted nor prolonged.

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158

Upham, op. cit., p. 112

## EPIC MAGNITUDE IN DUNKIRK

127

The note of the Heroic Age, then, is vehement, private individuality freely and greatly asserting itself. This assertion is not always what we should call noble; but it is always forceful and unmistakable. There would be, no doubt, some social and religious scheme to contain the individual's self-assertion; but the latter not the former is the thing that counts.<sup>159</sup>

This vehement, private individuality, this self-assertion of heroic qualities can be detected over and over again in Pratt's "Dunkirk". The following selection is but one of the many examples which prove that the poem is fashioned of epic materials and portrays an epic age that equals, if it does not surpass the epics of pagan days. The Christian character of this narrative has not weakened its structure, for the modern warfare carried on in the skies, and in the seas is not less glorious than that waged single handed by the valiant Beowulf or the courageous followers of Achilles.

The proffered sword disclaimed by the victor,  
The high salute of the burial of a foe  
Wrapped in the folds of his flag,  
The wreath from the skies,  
Were far romantic memories.<sup>160</sup>

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159

Lascelles Abercrombie, op. cit., p. 12

160

E. J. Pratt, Collected Poems, "Dunkirk", p. 9

## EPIC MAGNITUDE IN DUNKIRK

128

While a somewhat pagan view of the world dominates the foreground in its scene of death and horror, Christianity appears in the background. It appears but it does not undermine the strength of structure. Therefore the following critical analysis of Beowulf might just as truly have been spoken of "Dunkirk":

To the makers of Beowulf, and to its original audiences, its recital was something far different from a mere tale of superhuman prowess; it was an incantation which made memory leap from its couch of slumber, and revived for its hearers in all its names and phrases a well-known world in which they and their fathers had borne a part.<sup>161</sup>

There is no justice in the claim that in a world wherein everything changes, that the forms of poetry should be forbidden to change, that the poet, a slave of the past, should be requested to conform the picture of his own age to a pattern outgrown, that battles should forever remain Homeric. "Dunkirk" is not of Homeric stature, it is not a great epic, but it is an heroic narrative poem whose grand and magnificent theme is silhouetted upon a backdrop

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161

W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 57

## EPIC MAGNITUDE IN DUNKIRK

129

of simple everyday experiences. No poetic lines could be more paradoxically beautiful and quiet than the couplet which precludes this poem of war,

The English May was slipping into June  
With heralds that the spring had never known. 162

Throughout the poem many are the phrases that tell of the little unnoticed things of life, trivialities which when accumulated build up the heroism of an unconquerable nation proudly and fearlessly resisting the despotic usurpation of tyranny.

In Beowulf we have vivid pictures of matters familiar in the heroic age of our forefathers, their daily concerns, the things that happened in every hour of their lives. Their ships and sea-faring, their offensive and defensive armour, their political methods and international civilities, their social doings, these are all spoken of with the utmost simplicity, truth and directness.

163

In "Dunkirk" we have a modern world and a modern warfare waged on land, in the seas, and in the skies. It is a great story greatly told. It is of epic strength, it raises the ordinary, to magnificent heights; it places the halo of victory upon the shadow of defeat.

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 162

E.J. Pratt, Collected Poems, "Dunkirk", p. 1

163

W. MacNeil Dixon, *op. cit.*, p. 60

## EPIC MAGNITUDE IN DUNKIRK

130

The temper of "Dunkirk" is,

the temper of that long roll of  
Englishmen, soldiers, sailors, adventurers,  
explorers, to whom retreat was more bitter  
than death, who, rather than turn back  
from the task undertaken, challenged the  
fates themselves---to pluck, how often,  
glorious success from the very heart of  
failure.

164

It is sometimes demanded that the epic end on a note of  
success. The story of "Dunkirk" is that of triumph touched,  
as are all human triumphs, with a sense of the invincible  
hardness of the world.

It is at best a losing battle  
in which mankind is engaged, and Beowulf  
is throughout his life the leader of a  
forlorn hope. But the clear-sighted  
philosophy of the old English epic,  
undimmed by any dream of hope, disturbed  
by no metaphysical consolations, has in  
it more than Roman fortitude that looks  
unflinchingly into the burning eyes of  
Truth.

165

Like unto Beowulf, "Dunkirk" portrays the fortitude of a  
defeated army the courage of a vanquished hero, and the  
almost superhuman valour of the gallant volunteers, who  
risk even life itself,

For England  
By forty miles divided from her brood.

166

164

W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 73

165 Ibid, p. 73

166 E.J. Pratt, Collected Poems, "Dunkirk", p. 1

## EPIC MAGNITUDE IN DUNKIRK

131

In no epic of a former age can be found prowess, heroism,  
and chivalry of greater magnifude than that displayed by  
the heroes of these 1940 days whose forebears,

Had stifled cries in the cockpits of Trafalgar.  
They had emptied their veins into the Marne.  
Freedom to them was like the diver's lust for air.  
Children of oaths and madrigals,  
They had shambled out of caves  
To write the clauses of the Charters,  
To paint the Channel mists,  
To stand hushed before the Canterbury tapers.

167

In "Dunkirk", the poet, Edwin John Pratt, becomes the epic  
historian of an epic age.

For epic values the act, as drama  
values it, knowing that in the act, and  
not in the emotion which may accompany it,  
the prompting of the god appears, that act  
and feeling may not coincide, that the  
bravest man may feel fear and disregarding  
it triumph the more, that human reluctance  
to undertake the great deed detracts  
nothing from the splendour when the deed  
is done.

168

We may note, in conclusion, that the epic traits in "Dunkirk"  
are sure and true. Its hero, the magnificent British and  
French army, possesses a gallantry that has not been  
surpassed even in ancient Troy. This indeed is a national

167

E. J. Pratt, Collected Poems, "Dunkirk", p. 3

168

W. MacNeil Dixon, op. cit., p. 168

## EPIC MAGNITUDE IN DUNKIRK

132

hero whose destiny controls the fate of a mighty nation. The poem opens in res medias, the struggle is well advanced, it mirrors the greatness of the nation's life story, and a far previous chapter of this tale has already been told by Caractacus, Boadicea, Alban, Alfred, Hawkins and Drake and many others whose exploits are mentioned in epic episodic fashion. The poem expresses one mighty action, to which all other actions become subordinate. Since great literature can hardly escape being influenced by the times in which it is created, it is not surprising that this epic poem renders a faithful picture of the anguished times of the war years and we feel certain that it will re-create for future generations an accurate picture of heroism that undaunted met defeat, that successfully met failure. This poem therefore, has epic scope, in spite of any weaknesses or shortcomings.

## THE CONCLUSION

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We have come to the end of this thesis. Its purpose was not to rank Canada's contemporary poet, Edwin John Pratt, among the great epic writers of yore, not to equate his writings with those of Homer, Virgil, Tasso, or Milton, but to examine his poems and by careful analysis and research to prove that despite some evident weaknesses, Pratt's greater poems, "Brebeuf and His Brethern", "The Titanic", "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe", and "Dunkirk", all have epic traits and in a greater or lesser degree reflect the grandeur of an epic age and raise ordinary, commonplace events to levels of epic magnitude.

The poems "Brebeuf and His Brethern" and "Dunkirk" show the author's strong reliance upon historic interest.

"Brebeuf and His Brethern" is a folk epic with classic elements of style. Its folk character appears in the process of its growth; its virility of spirit; its freedom from the improbable; its superiority over imagination; and its unique comprehensive unity. It is truly an epic in having one main action and one great hero, while the exploits of the comitatus are related in Homeric episodic fashion. Its hero, like the heroes of all great epics, is of aristocratic birth. The classic elements of this poem are found in the division into twelve sections, which is imitative of the scheme of twelve books, a sacred heritage from Aeneid; The

## THE CONCLUSION

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economy of invention, of which Virgil has set the standard has been adopted by Pratt; as is also the Virgilian method of emphasizing the exploits of a dominating hero who held in his destiny the fate of the nation. This poem is, therefore, the greatest of E. J. Pratt's epic narratives.

"Dunkirk" has epic traits. The British and French forces may be considered as the mighty hero, and the poet with epic skill raises an historic act to extraordinary greatness. It is the story of a retreat but the heroism it portrays is the more resplendent because it is etched upon such an unlikely background. It does not gloss over or interpret a fact of life, rather it re-creates it and charges the fact itself with the poet's own sense of ultimate values. This poem has epic grandeur built upon defeat and failure. Its glorious hero is supreme in overcoming all odds.

Of Edwin John Pratt's sea poems this thesis presents "The Titanic" and "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe". The thesis puts forth no claim that these are great epics, for in their accuracy of detail they seem almost prosaic and ordinary, but in spite of this they do reflect an age that is truly heroic; an age in which great heroes are begotten. The epic trends of these poems are weakened by their lack of perspective, this the centuries will probably lend, but

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they have magnitude of scope that belongs to folk epic tradition. In the years to come critics will turn to "The Titanic" and read in its glorification of mechanical devices the reason for the chaos into which the modern world has been plunged. The triumph of duty in "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe" is genuine epic material that has no need to resort to myths of primitive ages, because its folk epic strength and endurance proclaims to the world that the poetry of Edwin John Pratt has an epic note both in content and in structure.

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AN ABSTRACT OF

The Epic Note in the Poetry of Edwin John Pratt

by Sister St. Dorothy Marie

As the introduction states, this thesis purports to offer only one thing: a careful analysis of four of the major narrative poems of Edwin John Pratt, to ascertain if they may be said to contain an epic note, and if this epic note be found then to evaluate the various aspects of epic treatment in the presentation of the material. This is the first lengthy treatment of any phase of this author's poetry. Although a score of writers have acknowledged that he is a major contemporary poet, no one of them has offered any specific research, or substantiated the claims that he has ventured. One small volume entitled: Edwin John Pratt, The Man and His Poetry, written by Henry W. Wells and Carl Klinck, has given a friendly interpretation of the poems and an informal appreciation of the author's style but it does not contain a definite practical analysis of the epic quality.

Chapter I contains a brief biographical sketch of Edwin John Pratt, stressing those events in his life which seem to have had a slight bearing on his heroic poetry. Material for this section of the thesis has been gleaned from several sources, none of which seemed to be complete in itself.

Chapter II offers definitive elements

pertaining to the thesis and in addition to the necessary definitions in summary it contains brief outlines of the main principles which govern the style and content of the epic writing of such acknowledged masters as Homer, Virgil, the author of Beowulf, and Milton. These writers and their works are mentioned as supreme models only not in any effort to equate the narrative poetry of E.J.Pratt to the heroic verse of these "ancients."

These first two chapters are offered mainly for their "background" value. The essence of the thesis is found in the following chapters.

Chapter III, entitled "Epic Style and Philosophy of Edwin John Pratt in "Brebeuf and His Brethern," shows that this, deemed by the writer of the thesis to be Pratt's most important narrative poem, reflects the folk epic tradition and that it also has classic elements of style. This chapter is largely original; it attempts a detailed analysis of the literary techniques which are more easily perceived in this poem than in other poems by the same author.

The analysis presented in Chapter IV and in Chapter V is less detailed than that in Chapter III; for the poems herein reviewed, "The Titanic", "The Roosevelt and The Antinoe", and "Dunkirk", are of a more slender structure, a less vigorous style, and a weaker content than is the Brebeuf poem. Nevertheless in these poems

also epic traits are disclosed and heroic qualities pointed out.

E.J.Pratt's Collected Poems published in 1944 has been used as the reference book throughout, the writer has made an effort to illustrate all general statements by citations from this book and then to comment upon the merits and defects of each quotation by reference to works of acknowledged epic fame.

An Annotated Bibliography comments briefly on the content and value of several reference books relative to the epic theme, and on the periodicals and reviews that have used in the preparation of this thesis.

Presented in 1956 to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada, this thesis, submitted in the Department of English in view of obtaining a degree of Master of Arts contains 145 pages.