

CANADIAN AUTHORS

By WINNIFRED EATON REEVE,
Author of "Cattle," Etc.

MERRILL DENNISON

With the possible exception of Harvey J. O'Higgins and Willard Mack, both of whom have achieved international reputations, Canada has produced no dramatist or playwright of especial note. During the past year, however, the work of a young Canadian author, Merrill Dennison of Toronto, has made the literary and theatrical world of the east "sit up and take notice" of the fact that a new star is rapidly arising.

Mr. Dennison has produced a book of plays of singular originality and power, entitled "The Unheroic North." In a former article I briefly mentioned this book and it was my intention later to give an extended review.

Plays are not, as a general rule, as easy or as interesting to read as are stories. The playwright is intent upon working out the dramatic technique of his play, or getting his values and effects across the footlights, rather than to charm the reader with literary sentences.

Two of the one-act plays in this volume have been put on with great success by university and community players in the east, and there is a likelihood that "Marsh Hay," a play in three acts, will be put on this season by the Provincetown Players of New York City. It is said that the plays in "The Unheroic North" act much better than they read, when the characterizations have been ably done. This has not always been the case, as on a couple of occasions the plays were produced with actors who had been trained in the English diction, and the result was absurd, since the characters in Dennison's plays are of the type peculiar to the small town, the back woods and the poor farm regions of Ontario.

"The literary quality of my plays mean less than nothing to me," writes Merrill Dennison. "The only important thing about them is—how they act."

This is, of course, a good point of view for one who intends to write plays. Nevertheless these plays have not only an acting value, but a literary flavor. They are piercing, photographic studies, done with a sharpened pen and the keenest kind of a gift for getting under the skin of things. Mr. Dennison possesses an uncanny and intuitive knowledge of human nature. He shows us weak, strong, erring, loving, hating men and women, all more or less affected by their environment.

The lines brim over with wit; a strain of ironic humor runs throughout, and always we are conscious of the eternal pathos of life in a small, drab, shut-in community. Often this immense pathos trembles upon the verge of dire tragedy. "The Weather Breeder" is, in a way, a masterpiece. "Brothers in Arms," a humorous sketch with remarkable characterization; but the best of the plays is the last, and the longest in the book, "Marsh Hay." Here we have a study of shiftless, lazy adolescent youth which finds its outlet in seduction and perjury. Disparagingly, yet dramatically, the worst drama is unfolded. Strangely enough though the scene is laid in a backwoods community, we all know and have met the types.

The action is swift, the situations come at the right time, and there are tenebrously drawn moments of real drama.

When Wilson MacDonald was in Calgary, I told him that I had "discovered" a Canadian dramatist of great talent. I had never heard of him before. When I mentioned the name, MacDonald looked up in surprise and said instantly:

"Merrill Dennison! The most original genius in Toronto."

I was pleased to have my judgment confirmed, and also pleased to learn more about this clever writer, who is a friend of Mr. MacDonald. Mr. Dennison is 30 years of age. He was educated at Toronto public and high schools and the universities of Toronto, Pennsylvania and in Paris, as an architect. After the war, in which he served in three armies, at one time or another, he became associated with Roy Mitchell of the Hart theater, Toronto, as art director. They had advertised a bill of three Canadian plays, and could only find two tragedies. (This gives an idea of the shortage of original dramatic material in Canada. There were no comedies available, and the exigencies of the situation demanded that they should find one or write one. It had to be Canadian, played inside two other acts, cast three men and women, last 15 minutes and be funny. It was up to the "art director," and he accordingly sat down and wrote "Brothers in Arms." The play went across with a whoop, much to the astonishment of the author, who thereupon decided that his forte was writing and not art "directing" or architecture.)

Mr. Dennison writes swiftly. His "Marsh Hay," a play in three acts, was written in 17 hours. He finds playwriting much easier than novel writing, though at the present time he is engaged upon the writing of a novel in collaboration with Arthur Heming, another Canadian writer of deserved fame. The two authors are "hibernating" as they call it, at Bon Echo, where Mr. Dennison owns a large estate and inn.

The author of "The Unheroic North" declares that his mother has been the "stimulating influence" in his life. "A brilliant and forceful woman, with a fine intelligence and the soul of a crusading radical. She belonged to the pioneers of the feminist movement and fought a valiant battle in Canada at a time when it was the stagnant backwater of the world's ideas—although it is no Niagara even yet. It was she who bought Bon Echo, and dedicated its tremendous rock as a monument to Walt Whitman, and it was during the 30 summers I spent

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here, that I came to know to be a
"mystery."

This is the infinite Merit's "mystery"
pays to the reader. If fame comes
to him, he wishes not to have a share
in the credit.

During the last few weeks we have
been contemplating the possibility of
beginning the "Theater" movement
here in Calgary and I have been asked
to undertake something in the di-
rection. We may in the not far distant
future find ourselves started with a
company of amateur players. There
is undoubtedly dramatic talent in this
city and we should be able to attract
well-known original plays by Canadian
authors to make the thing worth seeing
and worth while. The idea will be
of Merit's "mystery" offer a few
opportunities for the amateur play-
ers to put on something new and of
typically Canadian interest. Then we
shall see them doing so in the
Calgary players.