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Postlude to an era  
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*Postlude to an Era*

PAMPHLETS

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erna Loveday Harden

Verna Loveday Harden,  
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# Postlude to an Era

By

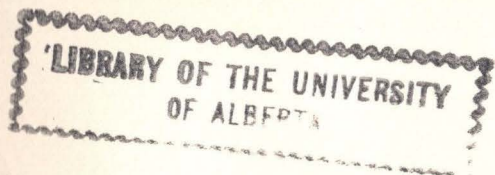
Verna Loveday Harden



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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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*English*

#### FOREWORD

IT IS indeed a privilege to write an introductory foreword to a poet's first volume, especially when the poet in question possesses the authentic gifts that are Verna Loveday Harden's. Although **Postlude to an Era** is her first published volume of poems, she has been before the Canadian reading public for a number of years as a poet of unquestionable talent and scrupulous artistry. Her poems have appeared in almost all leading Canadian publications that welcome definite poetry. She has won a number of literary honors and has appeared on the list of prize-winners in almost every notable literary competition held in recent years in the Dominion.

Yet even these distinctions are beside the point in comparison with the certain talent that is undeniably hers. She is that *rara avis* among women poets, a poet who can think lucidly, compactly, and undeviatingly in verse. Many women are dowered with a true lyric gift, but beyond the miracle of the singing word, they achieve nothing that is remembered save for its haunting sound or melodious turn of phrase. But Verna Loveday Harden is different. In poem after poem, all of them metrically correct, even in quite intricate stanzaic patterns, she reveals not only the authentic gift of song, but the penetrating power of thought. Strong, sharp, incisive and highly articulate, she has not chosen, as so many women poets have, to "turn hell itself to mere prettiness." This is indeed a hard world now in which to simulate the nightingale—it has become one in which the raven himself is hoarse.

The poems of Verna Loveday Harden are neither pessimistic nor persiflaginous. They are strong, clear, and forthright, and often in the manner resembling that of the last of the grand English realists, A. E. Housman. Her meanings are always stated clearly and powerfully. She has looked on life, and has had the

vision to see that much of it is anything but good, and the fortitude to say just that in memorable words. Nice old ladies and willowy lovers of all that is sweet in poesy, all threaders of metrical dewdrops and such sensitive souls who bring the art of Shakespeare and Milton perilously close to tatting and china-painting had better not read Verna Harden's poems, or they will receive a rude jolt.

In closing, may I stake my critical esteem on the statement that, while we may have known many a sweeter singer among our Canadian women poets, we have not yet had as clear and potent a thinker operating in her chosen vehicle. Few of our women poets have carven more arresting thoughts in more compelling language. And it should be remembered that she is only beginning—**Postlude to an Era** is her first volume. Her passionate sincerity of utterance and her unfaltering artistry in getting these strong and vivid thoughts down in a form that is unspoiled and compressed should, if she continues, eventually place her among the poets of Canada whose works will endure by the single virtue of their own excellence.

**Nathaniel A. Benson**

## O, NOW ARE ALL THE LOVELY THINGS

O, now are all the lovely things of earth  
More precious while destruction's ugly flame  
Is leaping avidly, its hungry tongue  
A scourge to blot out Beauty's very name.

The winds of spring have never been so sweet,  
So sweet with breath of hyacinth and fern;  
Our hearts have never known such gratitude  
Because the song-birds made a safe return.

The frailest flower is a miracle  
We never paused to praise in other years,  
But now, the wonder of its blossoming  
Can move the over-burdened heart to tears.

Shall these be ever common-place again,  
When hate has ceased to burn and blood to  
flow?  
Will we, at peace, forget this poignant spring  
And walk the careless ways we used to go?

## MARTYRS, 1940

**F**ORGIVE us, Lord, if we should fail  
To praise, the while, Thy saints of old,  
The martyr band who followed Thee  
Nor flinched from suffering untold.

Oh, not that we revere them less  
Who walked, from choice, the thorny way,  
But that our hearts are torn for those  
Who bear the martyr's cross today.

They hunger, Jesu, and they thirst,  
Their limbs are torn, their blood is shed;  
They see their little children slain  
And have no place to lay their dead.

Their homes are blasted stone from stone,  
They call on Thee with failing breath,  
For there is none to shelter them  
And skies are dark with wings of death.

For these, Thy newest saints, we pray:  
Oh, let them know that Thou art near. . .  
That he who walks in fear of Thee  
Has nothing else on earth to fear!

## TO ENGLAND IN DANGER

**W**HEN danger threatens England I who have  
not known  
Her velvet downs beneath my feet, her mist upon  
my face,  
Have sudden hunger for her shores, her cliffs of clay  
and stone;  
The little sea-girt island is a hallowed place.

The calm of her cathedrals calls me from afar;  
The storied halls where heroes dwelt are holy to  
me now;  
The heart's own home is where the heart's revered  
traditions are,  
And England's past is in my veins, her scars are  
on my brow.

## RE-ARMED

**B**RUISED, and with aching heart  
The world laid down its arms;  
Battered, and bleeding still,  
War's hideous alarms  
Still shrieking in its ears,  
The world laid down its arms.

After the smoke had cleared,  
The troubled years of peace;  
Mothers of laughing sons  
Who prayed that hate would cease;  
And wealth, and want, and fear—  
The troubled years of peace.

Now, at aggression's threat,  
The world in arms again;  
Powder, and gas, and steel,  
And brave, bewildered men.  
Before its wounds are healed—  
The world in arms again.

## CHRISTMAS, 1939

**W**ITH God in His heaven  
And hell on earth  
We herald the gentle  
Saviour's birth.

The tanks labour onward,  
The bombers soar;  
We welcome the Prince of  
Peace once more.

With hate in abeyance  
We strain our throats  
To echo the angels'  
Joyful notes.

"Give peace in our time, Lord,"  
We pause to pray,  
While loading the cannon  
Christmas Day.

## THE EMPIRE ANSWERS

(The first Canadian Contingent arrives in England)

NOW the tides of hate run high,  
Bitterness is deep,  
Smoke obscures the sea and sky,  
Hours like eons creep.

Now the dreaded Horsemen ride  
Over half the earth,  
Beating down, with bloody stride,  
Faith, and youth, and mirth.

Now that hate is loud and strong,  
Love is stronger still,  
England's scattered children throng  
Home to do her will.

Wavers, now, the lightning thrust,  
Pause the belching guns. . .  
Fools who threatened England must  
Reckon with her sons!

## ZERO HOUR

(March, 1939)

IF ever man had need of God  
In the abysmal dark,  
Had need, before the deluge fell,  
To build a sacred Ark  
And call from apathy and fear  
The faithful who would hark;

If ever God had need of man  
In His own image made  
To walk with courage in a world  
Where justice is delayed;  
And freedom is a fragile thing  
And hope forlorn and frayed;

This is the hour . . . would we had heard  
The clear, apocalyptic Word.

TO AN IDIOT, SEPTEMBER, 1938

**H**APPY fool!  
You can sit on your door-step and grin  
As the harassed world goes by.  
The threats of dictators  
And the lives of little children  
Alike leave you indifferent.  
You can look to the sky at night  
And laugh at the twinkling stars,  
And have no fear that death  
Will be showered upon you.  
You have a peace that passes  
The wise man's understanding.  
O happy fool!

LOST AUTUMN

(November, 1938)

**I**N vain September wore her painted robes;  
Unseen her mists of mauve and grey upcurled;  
We had no eyes for beauty who had heard  
Jove's thunder shake our terror-ridden world.

We could not see the sumach's torch who watched  
The kindling brand of war with bated breath;  
Nor lift our eyes to southward-flying birds  
Who saw in them winged bombers dropping death.

There was small solace in the harvesting,  
For who could look upon the ripened grain  
Without the thought of China's hungry hordes  
And pity for the ravaged fields of Spain?

Only the cattle on the quiet hills  
Knew the contentment of those autumn days,  
Nor listened for a madman's frenzied word  
To set the tinder of old hates ablaze.

Only the cattle, and the very young  
Who knew no precedent of blood and tears,  
But dwelt apart in that enchanted place  
That grows remoter with the passing years.

Now winter seals the song of little streams,  
Drains the last color from the chastened hills;  
Now colder are the stars and stern the winds  
And all the forest a white silence fills.

And Autumn, whom we loved, has slipped from sight:  
Without farewell from us she went alone.  
Not all the perilled years of promised peace  
Shall lift above her sleep the indifferent stone.



## SPRING ON THE KING'S HIGHWAY

**N**OW a veil of tender green  
Like a mist of fairy sheen  
On the maple trees is seen.

In the orchards, left and right,  
Cherry blossoms gleaming white,  
Robins piping with delight.

Tulips, militant and gay,  
Brave in red and gold array,  
March across the lawns all day.

Marshes wake reluctantly  
To the trembling O-ka-lee  
Of the red-wing's litany.

Children leap and laugh and run  
Coatless in the kindling sun. . .  
Winter's last restraint is done.

## RAPTURE

**L**ET us be artless, love;  
Only the wise enquire:  
Why should we tremble thus,  
Filled with a strange desire?

Let us be simple, love;  
Rapture was never sane;  
If we should waste this hour  
Would it return again?

Let us be foolish, love,  
Dreaming of priceless things,  
Putting the winter by,  
Filling the air with wings.

## THE POET

**N**AY, do not call the poet clever.  
He cannot tell you, ever,  
How beauty dripped  
In jewelled fragments from his pen;  
Nor ever clasp again  
The sacred moments that have slipped  
Far past him to some dim  
Eternity. To him  
It is a holy mystery  
No more to be unsealed  
Than that, still unrevealed,  
Of how the Maid of Galilee  
The Mother of Very God could be.

He only knows he must have leapt  
Beyond the bounds of thought; or crept  
Far out some precipice  
Of unimagined height  
And there beheld the flight  
Over the deep abyss  
Of awful wings, wide-spread and strong,  
That laid on him the gift of song,  
Then swiftly did depart.  
And dazed, and humbled, reverently  
He bares the gift for men to see. . .  
But wonders, ever, in his heart,  
Why he was chosen for the part.

## THAT YOU MIGHT KNOW

I would be beautiful for you, beloved,  
And move with grace when you are at my side,  
And gather to me blossom after blossom  
Like summer garlanded to be a bride.

I would be music wrought for your enchantment  
On silver strings that stretch from star to star;  
I would implore the birds to blend their voices  
And bring you melody from near and far.

I would be rain to parching earth; and sunlight  
Aslant through trees, enriching all your way;  
A broad and pleasant meadow where the grasses  
Are kind to weary feet at close of day.

I would be beautiful for you, beloved,  
That you might know how fair the earth and sky;  
That you might never haste again, unheeding,  
And pass the shining face of beauty by.

That you might hear the song of wind and water,  
The low and friendly murmur of the trees,  
And know, as Francis knew, in far Assisi,  
The precious comradeship that dwells in these.

## GALLANTRY

THE gallantry of man . . .  
Can God not see  
How much it costs a man  
To face life gallantly?  
The hunger after bread;  
The stinging of desire;  
The poignance of regret  
Beside a dying fire;  
The groping years of youth;  
In age, the secret fear  
That the dark robber, death,  
Is lurking near.  
The gallantry of man. . .  
Can God not see  
How much it costs a man  
To face life gallantly?

## BONDAGE

THIS is the nearest to freedom  
I shall ever know  
Where the waves roll in  
And the birches shine  
And the clean winds blow,  
And whip-poor-wills call plaintively  
In the quiet afterglow.

Then, why should I miss my fetters,  
I, who sought to be free,  
And listen for you in the wind's voice  
And look for you on the sea,  
And walk with you in the morning,  
And speak to you secretly?

## TO A YOUNG GIRL

YOUR features are a smooth, unwritten page  
Where only passing dreams have been recorded;  
Your eyes are not yet darkened by dim pools  
Where sweet and perished promises are hoarded.

Your timid hands held out to happiness  
That reach for roses on the thorny hedges  
Are still unpierced, and your reluctant feet  
Unbruised upon the high and rocky ledges.

And like that breathless hour before the dawn  
When morning's pearly mists are yet unrisen  
Your unawakened heart beats quietly  
Within the virgin stillness of its prison.

But life will find your fortress, call you out  
Upon the hills, your reticence forgiving,  
And write upon your face, your hands, your heart,  
The agony and ecstasy of living.

## CONJECTURE

**W**AS it on a fearful night of storm  
That the thunder and sharp lightning  
Drove the first woman  
To the first man's arms  
To seek for shelter  
And to stay for love?

Or was it a quiet morning  
In the primal garden  
When the doves cooed murmurously  
And the olives hung ripe in the sun  
That their eyes met, and their hands,  
And they became as one?

## RAIN ALONG THE OTTAWA

**A**LL day I battled with the blinding rain  
And drove the winding roads at laggard pace,  
While birds sat huddled close with folded wing  
And pallor put her hand on nature's face.

The houses by the road withdrew themselves  
In quiet, contemplative somnolence;  
Like spectres stood the cattle on the hills;  
The River flowed in sullen turbulence.

The fences straggled dimly as at dusk;  
The thirsty fields drank deeply of the rain  
To treasure it a season in their arms  
And give it forth again in full-eared grain.

And all the day, you seemed so near to me,  
Who were so many weary miles away,  
If you had spoken I had surely heard  
The words I listened for your lips to say.

## NORTHERN QUEST

**W**E sought the rugged grandeur of the north,  
But so serene  
It rested on a sunny afternoon  
It might have been  
A corner of the warm, complacent south.

But when, at twilight, thunder shook the hills  
And foamy crests  
Were on the storm-black waters of the lake;  
And in their nests  
The frightened birds forgot their evensong;

When lightning flashed her cruel blade across  
The pallid sky  
And trees that whispered happily at noon  
That night would die  
And wait the kindly moss to cover them;

When screaming winds were at the cabin door,  
And all night through  
The rain was beating on our narrow roof,  
Oh, then we knew  
The vibrant north where high adventure waits!

## WE ASK FOR JOY

**W**E ask for joy, who walk this troubled way;  
For paths of pleasure burdenless and gay;  
Forgetting pain enriches common clay.

We ask for rest, when toil would make us strong;  
We shun all sorrow in our quest for song;  
We doubt His Word to Whom the worlds belong.

We ask for joy, and find it empty, vain,  
And then, remembering, we cry again:  
"O, Man of Sorrows, sanctify our pain!"

## THIS TROUBLED PEACE

**T**HIS strange, uncomprehended flame  
That sears our prying fingers;  
This gift  
Of questioned, uncomputed worth;  
Its weight our weary shoulders know  
And yet, we fear to let it go.

This mystery that weaves a veil  
Between the past and future;  
This promise  
Fulfilled and ever unfulfilled  
That goads the mind of man from birth  
Until he joins the flowering earth.

This aching joy, this troubled peace;  
This burden laid upon us;  
This life  
We live but cannot fathom;  
We hold it hungrily, and cry  
For Time, the thief, to pass us by.

## THE STAR

(December, 1936)

**T**HE "Peace on earth" that angels sang  
At Christmas tide so long ago  
Can scarce be heard above the cries  
Of man declaring man his foe.

And few there are who raise their eyes  
To heaven when the night is still  
And wait with reverence for God  
To set His Star above the hill.

"Goodwill to men" we cannot hear  
Above the strident voice of greed;  
Too few there are who listen, now,  
And fewer, still, are those who heed.

But when the grim design is done  
Of rending earth and sky with war,  
And man turns, sickened, from the strife,  
The Star will guide him as before.

## THE CHOIR

THE Easter choir of Heaven  
Is filled with boys who sing  
In high and fluty voices  
Their anthem to the King.

With faces round and shining,  
And mischief in their eyes,  
They carol: "He is risen!  
Rejoice, ye earth and skies!"

Their surplices are whiter  
Than once they used to be;  
The pages of their hymn books  
From finger-marks are free.

But one will nudge another,  
And they will laugh at how  
A slightly crooked halo  
Adorns a saintly brow;

Until an angel whispers:  
"Now, boys," to put them right,  
And then they'll blush a little  
And sing with all their might.

Oh, happy choir of Heaven,  
Lift up a joyful noise,  
For Jesus Christ will listen  
To songs of little boys.

## INLAND WATERS

THERE was a time I did not care to stroll  
By quiet inland lakes with willows rimmed  
And slender sedge and birches silver-limbed.  
With ocean's loud, inexorable roll  
Beneath the sky's wind-haunted, hollow bowl  
My eager spirit's lifted cup had brimmed;  
All softer, homelier melody was dimmed. . .  
The sea, alone, could satisfy my soul.

But now that I have tasted bitterness  
And known defeat, and nightly lain with fear,  
I turn from ocean's aching loneliness  
To waters neither awesome nor austere  
Whose gentler voice and healing loveliness  
Are like a friend with comfort breathing near.

## THE HEART THAT LOVE HAS TOUCHED

**T**HE heart that love has touched  
Can be the same no more;  
When love has once come in  
We cannot close the door.

The heart that love has touched  
Is made aware of pain;  
It never can enjoy  
Immunity again.

The heart that love has touched  
No further peace shall know,  
No rest, no quietude,  
But—we would have it so.