

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Stanley Weir
- poems -

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Robert Stanley Weir(15 November 1856 – 20 August 1926)

Robert Stanley Weir, FRSC, was a Montreal, Quebec judge and poet most famous for writing the English lyrics to O Canada, the national anthem of Canada. He was educated as a teacher and lawyer and considered one of the leading experts of the day on Quebec's municipal civil law. He was appointed a municipal court judge and a judge for the Exchequer Court of Canada.

Weir published several individual poems in magazines and collections in books. His lyrics for the English version of O Canada eclipsed many others' lyrical attempts and songs to quickly become the most popular patriotic song in Canada for the past century.

Robert Stanley Weir was born in Hamilton, Canada West, the son of William Park Weir and Helen Craig Smith, who had emigrated from Scotland to Canada in 1852. Weir moved to Montreal, Quebec with his family as an infant, where his father became a Surveyor of Customs in the Port of Montreal. His brother, William Alexander Weir, was born there and would later become a Cabinet Minister in the Legislative Assembly of Quebec.

Weir studied at McGill Normal School, Montreal, and at the age of 19, was appointed principal of Sherbrooke Street School, one of the newest and largest Montreal public schools at the time. He continued his studies at McGill University earning his Bachelor of Civil Law in 1880 and a Doctor of Civil Law in 1897.

In 1882, he married Margaret Alexander Douglas, daughter of wealthy Montreal businessman Alexander Douglas. They had two children, a son, Douglas Weir, and daughter Marjorie Douglas Weir. Margaret would become known for her role in a movement to provide children's playgrounds in Montreal. The family divided their time between Montreal and a summer home named Cedarhurst, in Cedarville, a picturesque hamlet on the east shore of Lac Memphrémagog in the Eastern Townships of Quebec.

From 1881, Weir practised law in Montreal and took a particular interest in municipal questions and had several of his studies published. In 1892, he ran unsuccessfully as a Liberal for the Montreal No. 4 riding of the Legislative Assembly of Quebec. In 1898, he was one of several eminent advocates appointed to revise the charter of the City of Montreal. It is believed that, in particular, he wrote many of the sections relating to expropriations and the

power of the city to pass by-laws.

On May 6, 1899, he was appointed Recorder for Montreal. During this time as a recorder, he also taught liturgics and jurisprudence in the Congregational College of Canada, which was affiliated with McGill University. Weir later served as a municipal court judge and was considered an expert on the historical aspects of municipal law. Lastly, he was appointed a judge for the Exchequer Court of Canada. In 1923, he was honoured as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

In 1908, Weir wrote English lyrics for O Canada while at his summer home, Cedarhurst, in time to honour the 300th anniversary of the founding of Quebec City.

The French version had originally been commissioned in 1880 by the Lieutenant Governor of Quebec, Théodore Robitaille with lyrics by Sir Adolphe Basile Routhier and music composed by Calixa Lavallée in time for the Congrès national des Canadiens-Français which was to be held on St. Jean Baptiste Day of that year. The popularity of the song grew quickly in Quebec and was played frequently at special events in the province.

The first evidence of O Canada being sung in English Canada was when school children sang it for the 1901 tour of Canada by the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall (later King George V and Queen Mary). Various translations of the French lyrics were attempted over the next few years but none were well-received until Weir's version. It gained acceptance quickly enough that it became the most popular patriotic song for Canadians by approximately the middle of the twentieth century, winning out over The Maple Leaf Forever and other less well-known alternatives. Weir amended the lyrics slightly in 1913, 1914 and 1916.

This Weir's version would eventually become the unofficial Canadian Anthem sung in English Canada at sporting events and by Canadian schoolchildren until 1980

Judge Robert Stanley Weir died on August 20, 1926 at Lac Memphrémagog, Quebec, Canada.

Weir's verses of O Canada were published in an official form for the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation in 1927, and gradually became the most generally accepted anthem in English-speaking Canada, completely winning out over the alternatives by the 1960s.

In seeking to enact O Canada as the national anthem officially, a Special Joint

Committee of the Senate and House of Commons was struck. In 1968, the committee recommended changes to the English version—replacing one of the repeated phrases "We stand on guard for thee" with "From far and wide" and one "O Canada" with "God keep our land".

The committee also thought it appropriate for the government to acquire copyright to the words and music. Canadian copyright laws held for 50 years beyond the author's death so there was no trouble with the copyright for the music but the heirs of Weir objected to the changes to the words. Since Weir died in 1926, it would not be in the public domain until 1976. Evidence was found that the copyright had actually descended to Gordon V. Thompson, a music publisher, who agreed to sell it to the government in 1970 for the nominal sum of \$1. The committee, however, still hoped to settle the matter amicably with Weir's family, if at all possible.

Finally, on July 1, 1980, 100 years after Routhier and Lavallée penned the hymn, the National Anthem Act officially proclaimed the French and modified English versions as the National Anthem of Canada. Today, God Save the Queen is Canada's royal anthem, while The Maple Leaf Forever is rarely heard.

Two provinces have adopted Latin translations of phrases from the English lyrics as their mottos: Manitoba —Gloriosus et liber (glorious and free)— and Alberta —Fortis et liber (strong and free). Similarly, the motto of Canadian Forces Land Force Command is *Vigilamus pro te* (we stand on guard for thee). As well, the motto for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics was "with glowing hearts".

A postage stamp was issued in honour of Weir, Lavallée, and Routhier on June 6, 1980 and on May 24, 1999, a monument for Judge Weir was erected in Weir Memorial Park, on the shores of Lac Memphrémagog, near where he wrote the famous lyrics.

In recent years, the English version of the anthem has been criticized, by feminists such as Senator Vivienne Poy, for being sexist ("true patriot love in all thy sons command"); alternate lyrics ("in all of us command", "in all our hearts command" or "thou dost in us command") have been proposed but are not widely supported.

Weir's grandson, Steve Simpson, says the word "son" is not about gender, but a reference to a patriotic command from a maternal goddess.

O Canada!

O Canada! Our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North, strong and free!
And stand on guard, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.

Refrain

O Canada, glorious and free!
We stand on guard, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee!

O Canada! Where pines and maples grow.
Great prairies spread and lordly rivers flow.
How dear to us thy broad domain,
From East to Western Sea,
Thou land of hope for all who toil!
Thou True North, strong and free!

Refrain

O Canada, glorious and free! etc.

O Canada! Beneath thy shining skies
May stalwart sons and gentle maidens rise,
To keep thee steadfast through the years
From East to Western Sea,
Our own beloved native land!
Our True North, strong and free!

Refrain

O Canada, glorious and free! etc.

Ruler supreme, who hearest humble prayer,
Hold our dominion within thy loving care;
Help us to find, O God, in thee
A lasting, rich reward,
As waiting for the Better Day,
We ever stand on guard.

