

EXHIBITION PRIZE POEM

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# Betula Nigra

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By

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HALIFAX  
PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY W. CUNNABELI  
1855

BETULA NIGRA. \*

The subject of this Poem, as the name implies, is a tree of that species of extraordinary growth, the circumference of whose trunk, at the root, is twenty-four feet; its perpendicular height, sixty feet. From a calculation of its annual layers, its age cannot be less than one thousand years.

No mouldering Pantheon meets my eye,  
No crumbling Obelisk is nigh,  
    No ancient tower uprears  
A seer and venerable form—  
Scarred by the warring of the storm,  
    Bleached by the mists of years.

No! different far the theme I trace;  
Not Art's decay, but Nature's grace  
    In all its vigor seen, —  
A Monarch of the forest shade,  
By Summer's majesty arrayed  
    In robe of living green.

Far in Acadia's solitudes,  
Where the lone hunter scarce intrudes,  
    A Giant Tree displays  
A massive trunk, upreared on high,  
Whose vast umbrageous canopy  
    Charms my admiring gaze.

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\* The Black Birch

In the deep stillness of whose shade,  
With the calm lake beneath me spread,  
    And Summer smiling round;  
While silence rests on vale and hill,  
Saved by the murmur of a rill,  
    Unbroken by a sound.

Oh Nature ! in thy temple wild,  
This feeble tribute of thy child,  
    I dedicate to thee:  
Accept the homage which I bring,  
My heart's spontaneous offering,  
    Though rude the tribute be.

And though no classic ears incline,  
To lowly numbers such as mine,  
    The simpler shall attend:  
Perchance the rustic son of toil,  
Shall trim his evening lamp with oil,  
    And welcome me as Friend.

If so, I ask no more reward;  
To be the Humble's humble bard,  
    Is all my wishes claim;  
Acadia, if my name shall be  
Remembered in thy minstrelsy,  
    Enough my meed of fame.

As upwards I direct my eye,  
To yon green arbor broad and high,  
    To me it would appear

As though a prophet of the past,  
With Nature's mantle round him cast,  
Held converse with me here.

How many a changeful scene has fled,  
Since first thy vernal cloak was spread  
In this lone forest wild;  
A thousand circling years have pass'd!  
A thousand winters chill'd the blast,  
A thousand summers smil'd.

And yet, old tree, thy rugged form  
Has stood, unscathed, the wintry storm;  
Thy foliage bright and new  
Still flutters in the passing breeze,  
As when, thou ancient king of trees,  
Thy sapling branches grew.

Yes, since the germ which gave thee birth  
Was nurtured in its parent earth,  
What change the world hath seen!  
Kingdoms have fallen and pass'd away;  
Cities have sunk into decay,  
Where opulence had been.

Where Spain her standard long unfurl'd,  
The mistress of a new found world,  
A Continent her own;  
For ever fallen, that vast domain,  
The Trans-Atlantic power of Spain  
Is from her sceptre gone.

And where Britannia's fostering care  
Planted a scion young and fair  
    In green Virginia's soil,  
Her own ungrateful offspring stand—  
Alien possessors of the land—  
    Usurpers of her toil.

Methinks that ere the white man pass'd  
The barriers of the ocean vast  
    Which laves fair Europe's strand,  
Even then the red man sought thy shade,  
And with astonished eye surveyed,  
    Thy huge proportions stand.

Oh! could he then anticipate,  
The dire approach of that stern fate  
    Which his wild race befell,  
And know that long ere thy decay,  
His warriors should have pass'd away,  
    From mountain, moor, and dell,—

And from those beauteous waters, where  
His light canoe, as free as air,  
    Moved o'er the lakelet's brim;  
And from the honors of the chase,  
Where he, exulting in the race,  
    Bounded on agile limb;

Save a small wandering remnant left,  
Of home and heritage bereft,  
    Degraded and betrayed;

Prone to imbibe the white man's vice,  
Sold by his passions at the price,  
By Christian avarice paid;

How would his heart have bled to see  
Such presage of their misery,  
While yet a glow of pride  
Had fired his breast, did he foreknow  
How BLACK HAWK met his ruthless foe,  
How OSCEOLA died?

How brave TECUMSEH scorned to yield,  
Upon the white man's battle field,  
When long tried vet'rans fled;  
O'erpower'd, not conquer'd, firm he stood,  
'Till, fainting from his ebbing blood,  
He sank among his dead.

O noble hearts! regret, regret  
Shall bow thy cruel spoilers yet,  
When coming years have flown;  
When future history shall relate  
Your woes, your wrongs, your cruel fate,  
And weep that ye are gone.

Yes weep! This wide spread heritage,  
The wilderness whereon we wage  
A long successful war;\*  
This verdant field, that blooming mead,  
Yon prairie wide beneath thee spread,  
Their just possessions are.

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\* AMERICAN MAXIM—Make war on the wilderness.

And shall we thus usurp their right,  
Behold them perish in our sight,  
    In dens and caves around?  
Oh! surely as they droop and die,  
Our Indian brothers' blood shall cry  
    For vengeance from the ground.

Think ye your sparse economy,  
Your garments doled as charity,  
    Shall pay the debt ye owe?  
Think ye the drugs ye give, to ease  
Neglect contracted dire disease,  
    Enough?—I tell you no.

Nay, think ye rulers of the land,  
The true redress their wrongs demand,  
    Your potent powers can give?  
Go, civilize and teach them then;  
Teach them their dignity as men,  
    Go teach them how to live!

So shall our arts, our industry,  
Receive a blessing from on high;  
    The stranger at our gate  
The listless wanderer cease to be  
Redeemed from want and vagrancy,  
    A value to the State.

How brief the life of man below!  
A little while—'tis gone,—and lo,  
    No trace of us appears.

While nature forest children stand,  
Age after age to deck the land,  
The pride of future years.

A MARLBOROUGH'S name was yet unknown,  
When thou, a stately tree, hadst grown.  
A NELSON yet unborn.  
Fame proudly claimed no WELLINGTON;  
Or greater—no NAPOLEON,  
The unfading wreath had worn.

Or in that great untrodden field  
Where science lay a gem conceal'd,  
Few laborers yet had been.  
No GALILEO turn'd his eyes,  
To scan the mysteries of the skies,  
And worlds before unseen.

No NEWTON yet had lived, to trace  
The wandering Comet's path in space,  
The distant Planets' sphere;  
To measure, as with rule and line,  
Their bright ascension and decline,  
Throughout their swift career.

No DAVY gave to industry  
The noble aid of Chemistry,  
To fertilize the soil;  
The vegetable life to feed,  
With full ear'd Corn the fields to spread  
Rewarding human toil.



No FAUST had ope'd that guarded door  
Where learning kept her secret store  
    Deep in the Convents' cell;  
To bid mankind their vessels bring,  
And dip, as from a living spring,  
    Or an exhaustless well.

No WATT or FULTON'S genius sight,  
Beheld the slumbering giant's might,  
    The Titan arm of Steam,  
No NAPIER'S Godlike skill was there,  
His ponderous harness to prepare,  
    To tread the Ocean stream.

No ARKWRIGHT, with ingenious thought,  
The labors of the million wrought  
    As with a magic hand,  
Causing old Albion's Isle to be  
One wide extended factory,  
    Her trade in every land.

No MORSE had sent the lightning's fire,  
Freighted with thought along the wire,  
    To give to distant lands  
The varied tidings of the day,  
Or friendship's message to convey,  
    Or mercantile commands.

No. All was poor and important;  
A pageant or a tournament,  
    Or bandit like foray,

Was all our fathers cared to know,  
A thousand fleeting years ago;  
Oh! how unlike to-day.

And we, their sons, what work have we  
Achieved within one century!  
The facts shall briefly tell:  
Look round upon this crowded mart;  
These works of industry and art,  
Perchance, shall answer well.

Look round upon the scene again;  
These products of our fair domain  
A single year hath brought;—  
O may it be, this treasured store  
Shall make us love our Country more,  
And prize her as we ought.

If so, the patent good achieved  
Shall realise the hope conceived  
By him who pen this lay;  
Then shall our children rise, and tell  
The blessings which to them befell  
On this auspicious day.

Then strong, in self-reliance strong,  
Undaunted shall we march along  
With conscious pride possess'd,  
That in the great industrial strife,  
With which the modern world is rife,  
She shall not be unblest.

Our smiling homes with plenty crown'd,  
Improvement stamp'd on all around,  
    Religion's influence shed  
On all our institutions, reared  
For virtue's ends; and, so prepared,  
    Shall wide the blessing spread.

What though our clime be stern and rude,  
Our soil but rough and unsubdued,  
    The blessings we possess  
Call forth our gratitude and love  
To Him, that Being far above,  
    Whom for these gifts we bless.

And while war's blood-stained flag unfurl'd,  
Hangs ghastly o'er the Eastern world,  
    O'er suffering, want and woe;  
We undisturbed and peaceful dwell,  
All of war's horrors which we tell,  
    But by report we know.

And now farewell, thou Patriarch Tree!  
Time honor'd friend, farewell to thee:  
    Farewell!—and in thy shade,  
Long may the gentle warbler sing  
His carol to the op'ning Spring,  
    The charmer of the glade.

*Sackville, October 2d. 1854.*