

Politics and Poetry

by Frank M. Bryan

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotions, but an escape from emotions, it is not an expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things . . .

T. S. Eliot

THE sap had already turned yellow in the buckets in 1963 when Representative Edward Conlin of Windsor rose and faced his colleagues in the legislature. Mr. Conlin was a native Vermonter and retired insurance executive who had served his country as an airman in World War I. Standing before a packed house, he patiently awaited the hush his experience in Montpelier had taught him to expect and then said:

The hungry mice eat plastic pipe
The deer eat clover too,
From Jay Peak down
To Stamford town
We're told that this is true.
The little fawns will cry at night
It's pitiful to hear.
But let's get on, there's work to do,
Forget about the deer!

The lower house of the old Vermont parliament has been accused of many things, The 246-member body was unwieldy, rural-minded, archaic, inefficient—or so it has been said. But one charge that I have failed to uncover against the House of Representatives as formerly constituted was that it lacked

personality. Evidence of this is the verse that has so often echoed through the lower chamber.

A brief glance at the history of Mr. Conlin's poem shows that H.200, a bill relating "to a special session for taking deer without antlers" had gone through three tedious roll calls that April 10th. Moments before Mr. Conlin rose to recite his verse, the bill had gone down to defeat, 149-85. Moments after, the legislators recessed.

The old Assembly was, indeed, a place of delay and procrastination; but it was also—and perhaps for that very reason—a parliament. For parliaments are, after all, places for speaking. The poets of Montpelier have reflected more than a personality—they have reflected politics as well, and one of the hottest issues in Vermont's political history for more than a decade has been the management and the fate of Vermont's deer herd.

Another case in point appeared in the *House Journal* for the session of Thursday, March 23, 1961. On that occasion, H.113 was passed to a third reading. This bill was entitled "An Act to Prohibit the Sale of Malt Beverages in Non-returnable Containers." Innocent enough, isn't it? Or is it? You have not lived in Vermont long or visited often and not seen the springtime farmer out with his tractor and wagon to collect the bottles and cans that have gathered along his roadside meadow during the winter. He will continue this process throughout the summer.

And yet, what about the village grocer, who, in his window, sports the familiar "Beer, Ale, Wine" sign and who makes a good living selling the replacements for the cider barrels of another time? It is not an exaggeration to suggest that to end the "sale of malt beverages

in non-returnable bottles," would be an economic blow to these people and a psychological one to their customers. With such an issue before the House, Mr. Rowden of Ryegate placed his tongue in his cheek and his pen to paper to create the following verse:

Once again these walls will rattle
With sounds of a most familiar battle
Somehow we never seem to throttle
The voices raised in defense of the bottle.

One of Vermont's most prolific poets has been Representative Reid Lefevre of Manchester. Sparked with wit, Mr. Lefevre's poems are sprinkled throughout a long legislative career. In 1959, when Mr. Daley from Newport was elected a judge of the Vermont Superior Court, Mr. Lefevre chose the following words in all good humor, to celebrate his colleague's good fortune:

And from the Northeast Kingdom
A mighty happy clan
Came tromping to Montpelier
Rudy Daley in the Van.
"It's mighty cold," I heard 'em say,
"Up there in them thar hills.
So we'll hole up down
Where we know it's warm
And pass a few more bills.
Why freeze to death in Coventry
Or Derby, or Jay Peak,
We'll make our home, beneath the dome
At seventy bucks a week.

That same day, Mr. Lefevre commented on the status of nudist camps in Vermont as follows:

The nudists' camps with naked vamps
Secluded in the trees
No longer will (if we pass this bill)
Perform their nude strip tease.

Representative Lefevre's favorite occasion for poetry, however, is St. Patrick's Day. When March 17th arrived in 1959, the House *Journal* records: "Mr. Lefevre of Manchester

rose to a point of personal privilege and recited the following poem which had been written in observance of St. Patrick's Day:"

There's a fable that I can't believe
I never-never can
That the Irish Politician
Is the real forgotten man.

The poem pays homage to the Irish members of the House and then concludes:

And seated in the foremost row
It's good old Eddie Dailey.
He's come prepared, I'll have you know
Look out for his shillelagh.
To fight these sons of Erin now
I fear would not be wise
So what's the use, let's call a truce,
And leave the Irish rise!

In February, 1961 the Morgan Horse became Vermont's "State Animal." The occasion produced what I believe to be one of the finest expressions of poetic talent ever to be heard in the General Assembly. The poem is by Mr. Smith of Pownal (an area not disinterested in horses, to be sure) and was called:

A Minor Ode to the Morgan Horse

I may not incline
To the porcupine,
The goat
That's remote,
The sheep, from which year after year,
you must remove the coat
The catamount
That does not amount to that amount,
The cow
That somehow
We, as a human minority, cannot allow;
And although, as one of the Democratic
minority, I should, alas,
Far prefer the jackass,
I must—until a state animal can
choose its own state—
Not hesitate
To vote, of course,
For the Morgan horse.

Poetry is also often recited in Montpelier in the form of the eulogy. In 1963, the Vermont House of Representatives paid homage to one of its own, to men of the nation, and to one who belongs to the ages. When Asa Bloomer, a long-respected and beloved Vermont political personality and legislator died, Mr. Mitiguy of Royalton presented an emotion-filled poem which concludes as follows:

With the call to order in these halls of
fame,
There long has been one with a famous
name,
That of "Ace Bloomer," with manner
mild
Whose memory we will cherish
For a long, long while.

Earlier that year Robert Frost died, and Richard Schmidt of Burlington read a great poem—Frost's own poem, "The Road Not Taken." These are the closing lines:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.'

When reapportionment came, and with it the death of the old House of Representatives, Thomas Chadwick of Chester wrote a long poem in eulogy to "The Fallen House." When he praises the old House as a citadel of common as well as uncommon men, his words are accurate and meaningful.

Vermont's proud sons have long debated
here,
Attorneys, soldiers, tillers of the soil,
Inventors, teachers, merchants, men of
God,
The rich, the poor; but conscientious all,
They melded here their wisdom and their
skills,
Each for the good of all, and all for each.

Despite tremendous disparity from the norm of "one man, one vote," the members of the old House did represent Vermonters.

In 1966, a new legislature met, comprised of only 150 members, the representatives elected from constituencies based on population, not town lines. Vermont welcomed the new system and its promise of increased efficiency in the processes of lawmaking. One might suspect that the personality, and thus the poetry, of the old House would die and lay buried with the memories of yesteryear. Indeed, this, at first, seemed to be the case. In 1966, no rhymed lines appeared in the *Journal*. Montpelier was busy with one of the most productive sessions on record. Poetry was forgotten.

Yet the Vermont personality could not be stilled for long. On February 2nd of the current year there appeared in Vermont's largest newspaper an article entitled "Vermont Panther Proves Good Lobbyist," introduced by the following verse:

Hail to thee, blithe panther
Big game of days of old
The Green Mountain State
At this late date
Welcomes you to its fold.

These lines were constructed by Representative Thomas Salmon, a thirty-five year old lawyer from Rockingham. The occasion was the preliminary passage of a bill to place the panther under the legal protection of the State. Of particular interest in terms of the personality of the new Vermont House of Representatives is the length of the debate which preceded the poem.

The Green Mountain State is a unique land of unique people. If she begins to judge herself in terms of the new efficiency-uniformity ethic of today's mass society, will she lose that quality which makes people flock into her hills to spend their most precious time—their spare time? Vermont can afford Reid Lefevre and Thomas Salmon. Vermont can afford St. Patrick's Day poetry and panther debates. Vermont can afford a parliament. Vermont, indeed, can afford a personality.