

Ian Young, prominent poet and columnist for *The Body Politic* recently visited Dalhousie on a Canada Council reading tour. Young has published books of poetry in Canada, the U.S., England and Germany. He edited the anthology of gay poetry *The Male Muse* and his anthology of gay short stories *On The Line*, will be published in the fall. He lives in Toronto and New York City.

Interview with Ian Young

You write for *The Body Politic*. Is the newspaper being harassed?

The strategy of the Attorney General of Ontario seems to be to draw the case out for as long as possible and cost TBP a great deal of money. I'm sure their plan is to put TBP out of business. For this they never need to get a conviction. TBP was acquitted on the charge of mailing indecent or scurrilous literature. The court has now thrown out the acquittal. Nine boxloads of records and books (including subscription lists, bank records and material from the Canadian Gay Archives) were confiscated. The court ruled that this material must be returned to TBP. The government is now appealing that ruling. So the whole thing drags on and on—much like the Damien case. It's certainly harassment. In England *Gay News* has been similarly harassed on a blasphemy charge, initiated by Mary Whitehouse, Britain's version of Anita Bryant. Gay organizations and publications are being attacked in the US and other countries. It's not just confined to Canada.

You mention certain RCMP intimidation of gay people in Nova Scotia and elsewhere. Can you elaborate?

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Gay Liberation Journal

The RCMP has been raiding private homes all over Canada seizing books and belongings (they are especially interested in lists of gays—the list of members of the NDP gay caucus, the TBP subscription list, people's Xmas card lists). I've heard from several of my book customers—including 2 in Nova Scotia—whose homes have been raided. The usual procedure in such cases is for the RCMP to phone the person's employer. The next morning he's without a job. All this before any conviction, of course. Usually there is never a conviction. What people don't realize is that the police never need a conviction. All they need is to harass the person (or business) they want to get. It's very effective. In one instance (this is the Ontario Provincial Police rather than the RCMP) a squadron of police has been stationed across the way from a man's house with Telephoto lenses to record goings on in his home. I suppose it's a more relaxing way to fill one's arrest quota than trying to catch muggers.

What about the publishing industry? You've had trouble with publishers who refuse to publish openly gay works...

The Canadian publishing industry is still very stuffy and provincial. US publishers have finally come around

to publishing some gay books, fiction and non-fiction. But Canadian publishers still regard anything gay as exotic and of no interest to anyone. They're still nervous about the whole thing. I've had work rejected because of its gay content, though of course the publishers usually don't tell you the reason. You learn that later from someone in the know—a worker at the publishing house perhaps. Gay sections of books are often censored by the publishers before publication: Gwen McEwen's *King of Egypt*, *King of Dreams*, for example; Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business*, were censored in this way. Earle Birney has changed one of his early poems for his "Collected Poems", to eliminate the word "gay". When he wrote the poem "For Steve", (a moving poem about a young friend killed in the war) the word gay was still a code word only people in the know would recognize. I suppose he feels he must protect his latter-day reputation as a heterosexual.

Fortunately, as well as US publishers being more open now, a gay publishing industry has sprung up over the last ten years, encouraged by gay militancy. But apart from Talonbooks and my own small publishing house, *Catalyst*, the Canadian industry is still way

behind.

Where does Ian Young, poet, fit in, in Canadian literature, and what value (if any) does cultural nationalism have in this day and age?

I don't know that Ian Young, poet, does fit in with Canadian literature. People (especially official people) always seem to be agonizing over whether I'm really a Canadian anyway—or British, or American. To me it doesn't matter. I just consider myself an English-speaking person. I see myself in a certain tradition of gay writing rather than in any specific national tradition. But even that category can't be too rigorously applied. As for Canadian nationalism, I think culturally it's been disastrous. Just when Canadian literature should have been turning out to world culture, world literature, it was encouraged, instead, to turn inward, further inward, toward provincialism, self-absorption, a self-conscious Canadianism that I don't feel does much good. There's nothing particularly Canuck about a writer like John Glassco, for example, but he's one of the best we have. As for me, I spend most of my time in the U.S. now, and my lover and I will be off to England next month. I leave the exquisite miseries of Canadianism behind me.

Gay rights are human rights

by Glenn Walton

Election Day 1980 found me up early and in line at our local polling station, ready to vote. Before I did, I noticed a Bible on the table where I was handed the voting card, and it annoyed me. The Bible contains admonitions (in Leviticus) about sex and the eating of shellfish that I would prefer to forget, so I objected to its prominent display at what is supposed to be an impartial voting station.

Instantly a man next to me jumped to its defense, saying he certainly was glad the book was there and that if I didn't like it, I could 'lump it'. I asked him if he thought its presence was fair to non-Christians and he said that the majority believed in the Bible (a dubious assertion, but I refrained from asking him when he had eaten his last lobster dinner) and therefore it was alright. I asked him then whether he would agree to some other additional form of swearing allegiance or whatever the book was there for and he said no.

I asked him whether he considered minority rights important. He said

that minority rights only took away from the rights of the majority. Then he went off and voted, exercising his (minority of one) right. My candidate, the only one who has taken the time to state a coherent position (positive) on gay rights, lost.

I suppose our state needs its symbols and signs, and that some sort of consensus is needed to run it. But contrary to that man's opinion, I definitely do not believe that minority rights "take away" from majority rights, as if they were part of a pie to be divided up. Apart from the fact that civil rights are not a matter for the ballot box, I believe they profit everyone.

At worst, concern for minorities (and everyone, after all, belongs to one) may mean special consideration and some expense, as in, say, the inclusion of wheelchair ramps in buildings or sign language interpreters on parliamentary telecasts. Our affluent society can afford such 'additional' expense, and the benefits are enormous.

Not only are the lives of those directly af-

ected made easier, but everyone else gains from an awareness of their existence and their problems (and their frequent oppression). The question of gay rights, or women's or black's rights for that matter, is only part of the larger issue of human rights, and the fundamental question: What sort of society do we want anyway?

I would wager that that man at the polling booth believes theoretically in freedom of expression, however vague the concept is to him. I would even guess that he dislikes Communist societies for precisely the reason I took issue with him: tyranny, there, of the state, here of the majority. To a gay person, living in a predominantly heterosexual society often does seem like living in a dictatorship of sorts. Many stay underground, or 'in the closet', afraid of discovery and rejection. A society that insists on denying the existence and dignity of a sizeable minority certainly sacrifices credibility as a free state.

Ideally, in a democratic society (and that is

what we profess to be) there should be a continuing and growing recognition of the diversity and heterogeneity of human experience and needs. That awareness, despite the progress of recent years, is sorely lacking in many segments of society, and most seriously in the law. The numerous custody cases involving gay women whose children have been taken away from them solely on account of their being gay (even where the mothers have been deemed by the judge to be the better parent) point out the need for specific inclusion in human rights charters of the term 'sexual orientation'. Only Quebec has done that. Elsewhere, gays are at the mercy of whoever wishes to harass them, without legal recourse.

Significantly, the RCMP and the government are among the worst offenders. The CBC, supported by everyone's taxes, refuses to run public service announcements for gay people, including notices of church services by gay Christian groups. Here on the Dalhousie campus, people who are

obviously unacquainted with GLAD's activities (hardly radical: we function mainly as a discussion group and put out a newsletter) tear down our posters and write cruel messages on washroom walls. Rather than discouraging us, they only convince us of the need to do more to change people's attitudes.

Ultimately, a person's sexual orientation is a narrow definer, and the heterogeneity of the gay world itself is the best indication of that. Despite this fact, the 'straight' world insists on thinking of us in stereotypes (what more opposite views than *La Cage aux Folles* and *Cruising*?) Only when everyone's common humanity (and not our differences) becomes the basis of our dealings with one another, will human rights become a reality.

Recently there was a letter in the *Dalhousie Gazette* that suggested something so eloquent and humane that I want to repeat it here, although these are the pages of the same newspaper. Someone, referring to recent plans by

the Engineer's society to have a stripper in the Student Union Building, asked instead why that group do not do something more constructive and worthy of civilized people, such as raising money for Bryony House, the refuge centre for women who are beaten by their husbands. At first glance, to anyone acquainted with the engineers' exploits at Dal, the idea seemed totally absurd, and what an indictment of the engineers that is. On second thought, it would be a useful (besides damn decent) thing to do. Not only would it help Bryony House, it would indicate that engineers too can have a social consciousness, and dispell a lot of prejudice on campus against them.

See how everyone would profit from common recognition? Stranger things have happened: recently I met a gay engineer, and that at a meeting of gay Christians here in Halifax. We had a good laugh over the absurdity of labels.