

gwen mac ewen: no paranoid poetess

Gwendolyn MacEwen, widely considered one of Canada's most remarkable younger poets, stopped over recently for a day in Edmonton on her way to an Arts Festival at UBC. While here she read some of her poems to a Canadian Literature class.

The following interview is boiled down from the conversations in the car on the way from the airport. (Imagine, as accompaniment, the steady roaring of John Whyte's Volkswagen.) In the car with Miss MacEwen were Dr. Eli Mandel of the English Department, grad student Ann Hardy, John Thompson holding the tape recorder and Jon Whyte at the wheel.

We began by reading Miss MacEwen the biographical sketch of her which appeared on the jacket of her first book, *The Rising Fire*, covering her career up to 1963.

THOMPSON: What has happened to you since 1963?

MacEWEN: Well, I've become twenty-five. I no longer have a part-time job. I just write. For the past two years I've been working on a historical novel on the Theban period in Egypt.

MANDEL: You're writing poetry as well.

MacEWEN: Yes, poetry as well. . . . Since the *Breakfast* book there have been only twenty or thirty new poems, and that's in over a year.

MANDEL: Of course, you've written a novel before: *Julian the Magician*.

MacEWEN: But this present novel. . . . I don't know what it's going to be. It just goes on and on.

HARDY: Why are you so interested in Egyptology?

MacEWEN: I am a frustrated archeologist. I wanted to be an archeologist. I was never going to be a writer; then, I got sidetracked into writing. I still want to do that.

MANDEL: Do you connect archeology and magic in any way?

MacEWEN: Oh, it's all muddled up in my mind. You know mythology is ancient history, is religion, is shards of pottery. . . . it's all thrown in together. I've been reading Robert Graves a lot recently. . . . his idea of poetry with the necessity of understanding not just ancient symbols but ancient tongues, of poetry as a manner of speaking. He's all very involved.

THOMPSON: What necessity do you see for the poet's taking this sort of interest in the past?

MacEWEN: Just to keep in touch with something. Even if the poet is writing about automobiles and planes and the modern world, there is



—David Applewhaite photo

BREAKFASTS FOR EGYPTOLOGISTS . . .

a certain language, a manner of speaking, he should keep in touch with. I guess you get back to recurring symbols, and recurring images and universal archetypes and such things. I find though it's not good to be sort of fixed on that—it can be sort of dull academic—I don't think you can get far from it somehow—that mythological sort of structure of things.

HARDY: You've actually made a language with your heiroglyphic poems, drawings of charming little birds, but this is a created language. Is this a metaphor for poetic language?

MacEWEN: I'd rather say it's a tongue, because tongue is something else than language, isn't it?

HARDY: That's like speaking in tongues? That's magic, isn't it?

THOMPSON: Who knows more about magic: You or Leonard Cohen?

MacEWEN: I don't think Leonard Cohen is interested in magic. I don't want to get in a discussion about that—

(Laughter.)

MANDEL: You wrote *Julian the Magician* . . .

MacEWEN: Yes . . .

MANDEL: Was this an exorcism? Were you trying to get rid of something about magic there?

MacEWEN: Well, I was trying to get rid of

something. . . . When I look at it now, I find it seems strained and overdone; I was trying to get rid of the idea of the sort of religious genius and the magician-type genius, which is Christ and Julian. . . . It seems awfully facile now to me, the idea, but at the time I thought "No-one's ever thought of this". You're right, I was trying to get it out of my system.

MANDEL: Are you still interested in breakfasts?

MacEWEN: Oh no, I've had it. I don't even read those breakfast poems any more.

THOMPSON: Do you find that what you have done drops very much away from you, or is the backlog of your previous work an active force propelling you forward?

MacEWEN: Mostly it drops away. A few things remain—mostly incomplete things or badly done things, they remain to drive me on. But generally books are like weights falling from me; I publish them to get them off my mind.

HARDY: Getting back to the *Breakfast* poems how much is your interest in the past involved in this business of eating the world—you could call it cosmophagy?

MacEWEN: I don't know, I wasn't consciously thinking of things like that at the time, but I know that later, when reviews of *Breakfast* came out, people made very profound, poignant comments on the meaning of all this, and I was quite fascinated by the things they were saying. Doug Jones said a few really poignant things. . . . about why I was using the eating-and-appetite thing. But at the time it was just a lot of fun.

MANDEL: But there is a pattern that runs through the work. You start with *The Drunken Clock*, which was your first publication, and go on the *The Rising Fire*, *Julian the Magician* and *Breakfast for Barbarians*. And the idea of time being dislocated, chronological time not meaning anything and the past coming forward in some way, runs through all of your poetry.

MacEWEN: If anything is the central theme, that's it on the nose. I never get away from that. . . . Time is at the bottom of everything; time holds a sort of a peculiar terror for me even though I realize that it doesn't exist, it's subjective. The passage of time has a particular terror. . . . I feel the need to sort of photograph things, to stop movement in order to examine it; I can't seem to function well in the middle of movement, which is a very bad way to be because there's no other

BETWEEN YOU AND ME

*Between you and me the Messiah stands
like a white and wild chaperone,
our hands are joined onto his hands
and we cannot go anywhere alone.*

*I know your body by virtue of his flesh
and your words by virtue of his interpreting
tongue
and you know me by the same process
and will know me thus for long and long.*

*We are very aware of his slightest move
and he records every place we three have
been,
we are very aware of his going out,
of his going out and of his coming in.*

—from *A Breakfast for Barbarians*