

Earle Birney takes his poetry on the road

By Jenny Pearson

Tall, a little gaunt, one hand in pocket and the other holding and waving a book of poems as he reads, Earle Birney is quick to win and warm an audience. He has a homespun manner with words, his gentle Alberta accent wrapping them around in such a way that even the most complex of poetic concepts becomes immediately accessible.

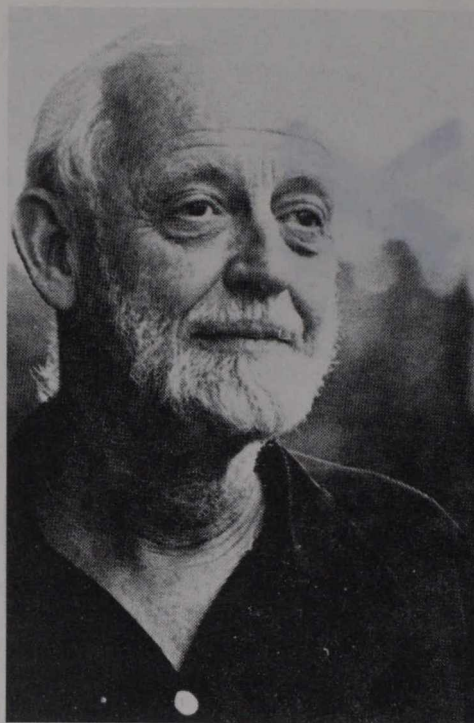
He was recently in London for the launching of a book of his selected poems, published by Chatto and Windus under the title *The Bear on the Delhi Road*, and gave poetry readings at the Commonwealth Institute and the Poetry Society. This is his first book to be brought out by a British publisher, though he is already known in Britain through the poetry magazines and Canadian books of his poetry (now more readily obtainable in London through Books Canada).

Earle Birney is a compulsive traveller, a wandering minstrel who enjoys making contact with strangers. He sees his wanderings as an important means of extending his audience as a poet – something that other English language poets could do a lot more of “if they wanted to”. His travels also provide insights that grow into poems. On a visit to India, he saw two men by the Delhi road with a captive Himalayan bear, teaching it to dance. The scene gave him the title poem of his book, in which there is felt an almost mystical empathy between the poet, the bear itself and the two strange Indian men:

*‘It is not easy to free
myth from reality
or rear this fellow up
to lurch, lurch with them
in the tranced dancing of men.’*

Earle Birney’s poetry is both contemporary and timeless. He is capable of pure sound poetry, such as his audio-graphic ‘*To Swindon from London by britrail aloud*’ which clanks and clatters the reader almost literally over every point and sleeper along the line. But the quasi-operatic instructions for reading aloud supply a touch of spoof: you cannot be sure how much he is laughing at the poem, at you, possibly at a whole poetic genre.

Nevertheless, it is surprising to find a poet nearing 70 (he was born in Calgary, Alberta, in 1904) who is so close and sympathetic to the younger generation of English-language poets. Looking back to the Commonwealth Artists Festival of 1965, he recalls who he divided his time between the younger poets gathered in Cardiff and the older generation of British poets including C. Day Lewis and John Betje-

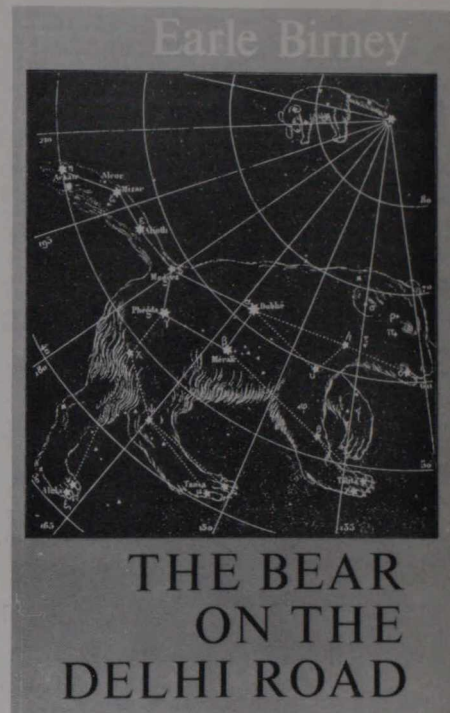


Earle Birney

man, reading at the Royal Court. “I felt there was a tremendous gulf between the younger and older British poets. The younger ones had absorbed the total American experience: it hadn’t changed them from being British, but they were sophisticated in a North American sense – whereas the older ones weren’t at all. They were still in some ways quite Georgian. I felt totally out of place with them, like someone of another generation, though I was their age. They were so *stuffy!*”

This sudden use of a humdrum word is typical of the way Birney hits nails on the head in conversation, just as he does in his writing. A choice of simple words often masks sharpness and subtlety of observation; his throwaway style makes you laugh even as you recognize the truth of what he is saying.

So in *Turvey*, his picaresque novel of the army, which won the Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour in 1949: “. . . it was the lank Calvin Busby whose attitude to women really puzzled Turvey. He had little good to say about them, yet he had little to say about anything else. He loved to fix a woman with his wild yellowish eyes and deliver a kind of sermon, elaborate and insulting, in a bastard Biblical style. As he told Turvey, he had once had a religious spell and won a Bible marathon in the Heavenly Institute of Badger Coulee, so he could always produce something from the Lord to clinch his arguments.”



With the same rough logic, he explained to me why in his view the poet’s audience, in Canada is wider and less cliquey than in Britain, where poets tend to find themselves writing and reading only for other poets and their friends.

“Poetry is a much bigger thing in Canada: there’s more books sold and the audience is larger and more with it than here. Why? Partly because poetry’s a very easy medium to move about. In a big country like Canada it’s hell to be a painter it costs so much just to shift paintings. Any large art like painting or sculpture or, say, a bass fiddle, involves transport, and Canada is 4,000 miles long. But a poet can get to remote places very easily . . .”

Having reached the remote places, the poet was assured of a good audience because there was so little competition by way of entertainment: on the prairies, he could recall having audiences of up to 1,000 for a poetry reading, and once in mid-winter in northern Ontario, a bus load of children had travelled 100 miles through snow and sub-zero temperatures to hear him.

Earle Birney feels that regionalism works in favour of the development of poets, though when they are young they tend to resent it: “The very regionalism that keeps them in small pockets and not very interesting when they start off eventually gives them their flavour when they become good enough to attain international status.”