

arts

Will writer weather the winter?

The following article deals with an informal interview that Gateway had with poet Gary Geddes, the U of A's Writer-in-Residence for the coming year. The article deals with Mr. Geddes' impressions of the position he has just taken, in addition to his appraisal of the present Canadian literary scene, and the general direction it's moving in. The article is accompanied by a review of his latest work: *War & other measures*.

by Brian Bergman

For the second consecutive year the U of A English department has engaged a young Canadian writer to be its 'writer-in-residence'. Last year Ontario-born novelist Matt Cohen filled the position. This year Gary Geddes, a West coast poet, editor and anthologist, has accepted the one-year "assignment." I had a chance recently to chat informally with Mr. Geddes and learn a little about his background, his present interests, and his ambitions for the immediate future.

Geddes comes to Edmonton from Victoria where he has lived for the last few years as a freelance writer. Geddes was born and raised in Vancouver and studied at UBC and Reading University in England before completing his doctorate at the University of Toronto. He has taught at various colleges and universities across Canada.

Geddes is a well-known anthologist, editor of *20th Century Poetry and Poetics*, *5 Canadian poets* and *Skookum Wawa: Writings of the Canadian Northwest*. But he is also a poet

of some repute, author of *Rivers Inlet*, *Snakeroot*, and his most recent *War and Other Measures*. Besides all this, the versatile Geddes reviewed regularly for the *Globe and Mail*.

Asked if his more academic endeavors interfere with his poetry, Geddes replies matter-of-factly that "you have to survive in this country. 'Free-lance writer' is a nice term; it implies a real sense of freedom to create and do what you want. But if you don't have an income base, then it becomes pretty scary, and you find that insecurity can really hamper your more creative ambitions."

As a critic of Canadian writing Geddes has some definite views on the state of Canadian literature and the need for exposing this literature to a greater number of Canadians. In this latter vein he claims that "Our departments of education need shaking up. We have tried guiding and encouraging them; perhaps the time has come to turn the political screws."

Recognizing that Canadian literature must be able to compete in the international market, Geddes insists, however, that

until recently it was not even allowed to compete nationally: "When I was growing up we weren't exposed to Canadian authors at all. At many schools today it's the same thing. Even at the university level they often only pay lip service to the need for Canadian lit courses."

Geddes himself has been working hard at popularizing the literature of this country. Last year he travelled across Canada doing readings of his own work and conducting seminars with teachers and students on Canadian and regional studies.

Recently, the life and work of an obscure West coast writer, Howard O'Hagen, sparked his interest and an upcoming article by Geddes in *Saturday Night*, should help increase, if somewhat belatedly, O'Hagen's recognition factor amongst Canadians as a whole. "Now here's an example of a brilliant writer of the last generation who was completely ignored by his contemporaries," Geddes said to me with some emotion. "He had to popularize all his stories into articles suitable for the magazines of his day. With each of those articles he lost a potential novel."

Geddes, admitting that there is something quasi-mystical about the position of writer-in-residence, hopes nevertheless to be able to put it to positive and productive use. He is grateful for the chance to dedicate himself to his craft and is hoping that during his stay he'll be able to re-acquaint himself with the Alberta community and its particular culture.

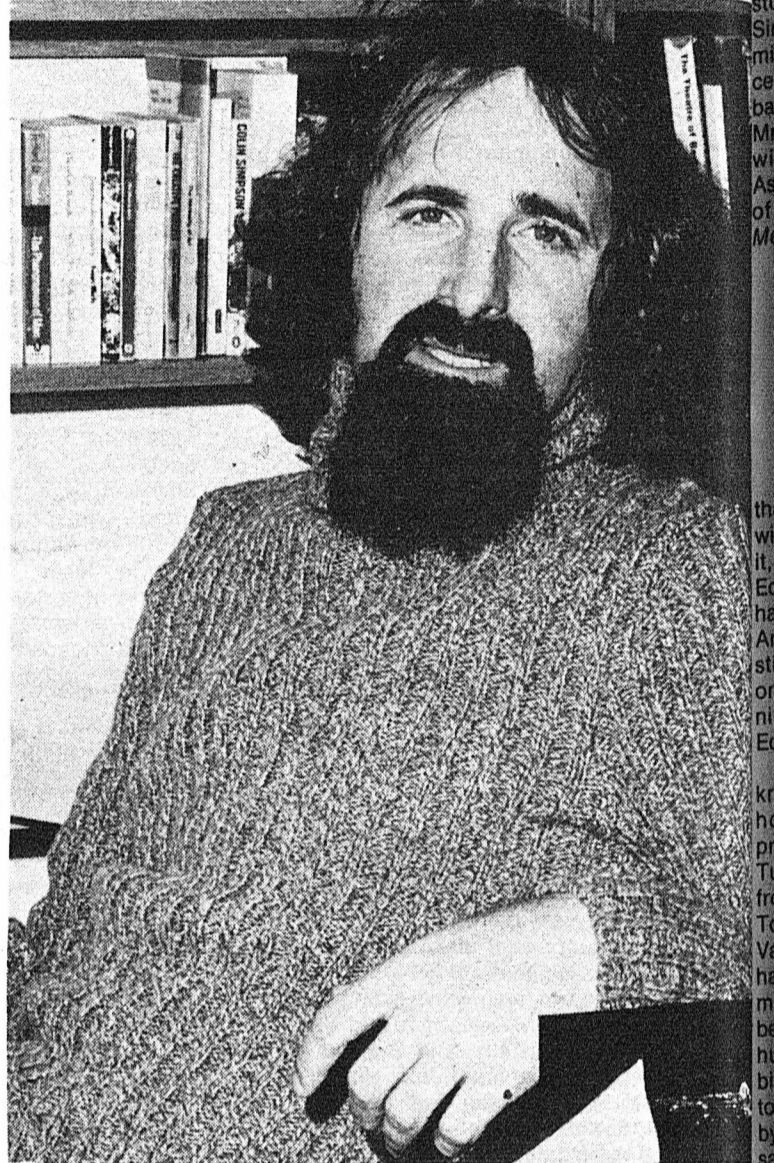


photo Don Truckey

Geddes is happy enough to be stationed in Edmonton. "Edmonton," he says, "is like Paris after a city like Victoria. There everything is zippered up at 10 p.m. And I'm looking forward to the winter here too. Of course, I'm probably the only one who is."

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Blast changes history

by Beno John

Geddes, Gary. ...*War & Other Measures* House of Anansi Press Ltd. 75 pp.

On May 18, 1976, the men's washroom in the Canadian House of Commons was the scene of an explosion - the explosion of Paul Joseph Chartier when the six sticks of dynamite that he was carrying went off. Gary Geddes has rescued this incident from its relative obscurity, and fashioned a series of poems ...*War & other measures* around the act.

With a sharp, uncluttered style, Geddes delineates the psychological milieu prefacing this strange act. He delves into the troubled psychology of a nation which Chartier mirrors. Chartier embodies the crisis of

identity Canada has always suffered in its search for a form - an expression, somewhat summarized by the following lines: *Beauty ... is a matter of form, a/composed intricacy of form/ which leads the eye/ and mind a kind of chase.* It is this search for an expression that consumes Chartier in Geddes' fictionalized account.

One gets the impression that Geddes believes that the assertion of the real Canadian cultural identity is a recent phenomena. This identity lies in the various cultures that have been transplanted to Canadian soil, as well as the strong tradition of regionalism. The result of course is a culture unique for its diversity. But it is a diversity that has to be recognized, which ...*immigrants... wrapped in old nationalities have to discover*

among their own rocks and billboards.

Chartier of course has made this discovery, and it is this truth he wishes to impart to the politicians who have sacrificed diversity, for an arbitrary sort of nationalism.

Chartier's apparent suicide is a revolt against this self denial. For him, ...*The masquerade of personality is over.* The masquerade of personality had been the political game played by the rulers of this country - playing to the tune of other, external interests, ie. American business interests. Or as Chartier thinks of himself - *My face peers from window/ ...Amazed there is still beauty/ in the world, but worried the politicians will still find out.*

Chartier's ultimate self sacrifice is revealed as the expression of truth so long submerged. And *Out of this blood another rose/will burst, its fragrance/ confound the universe./ History is being made, I am the materials.*

Geddes' imagery is of an intense nature, leaping out of the arrangement of words to saturate you. They affect you on different levels in a jarring instant. For example: *Time's a fiction, its units/ collect unemployment insurance. or Truth is a snowflake on the naked eye./ I am a blindman/ trying to discern the shape and texture/ of its dissolving.*

War & other measures is a powerful, immediate work. It is engrossing and rich in detail plus striking in its clarity. It is also a total experience.

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