

# Fredericton's own poet-ur

by Elizabeth Smith

*This week's regular interview feature is with the University of New Brunswick's Writer in Residence, Alden Nowlan.*

*Mr. Nowlan has been Writer in Residence since 1968. He has published ten collections of poems and a book of short stories.*

*The Governor-General's Award for Poetry and the University of Western Ontario Students Medal are among his awards for creative writing.*

As Alden Nowlan puts it, he was born in a "vintage year", 1933, the year of the lowest birth rate in Canada. Born on the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Stephen in January 25, he is pleased with being an Aquarian in the Age of Aquarius.

Alden Nowlan grew up in a tiny village in Nova Scotia. He attended a one-room school house, but loathed it and quit, when he was twelve. As he explains the teachers weren't very good because the only ones who would teach under those conditions were either brought out of retirement or too young to get a job elsewhere.

At twelve he went to work in the woods, but he spent all his spare time reading. Reading is not a popular past-time in the backwoods of Nova Scotia. In fact Mr. Nowlan's father was almost illiterate. Perhaps Alden Nowlan's gift for the short story has partially come from his father.

When Alden Nowlan was a young child, he would take a book to his father and ask him to read aloud. Mr. Nowlan senior would hold the book and make-up a story, pretending he was reading it.

Alden Nowlan's thirst for reading was almost an obsession. He read all the books in the neighbourhood, mostly things like the "Selected Works of Daniel Defoe which the travelling salesmen brought to the country.

For \$3.14 he brought a 1910 encyclopedia. He read most of it and can still remember one question that plagued him for years, "Whatever happened to the Austro-Hungarian empire?"

**" I thought  
I'm a Keats !  
A Byron ! "**

Of this period in his life Mr. Nowlan says, "It was almost like living in the nineteenth century. I was brought up to believe that the Bible was actually written by God. If you feel that one book is sacred, you feel something special about all books. Even now, sort of unconsciously, I have a sacred feeling about books."

If Mr. Nowlan still has a sacred feeling about books, then his living room must be his temple. Two walls of the room are lined with books, an assortment including the Mad reader.

At eleven he began to write - poems, stories comic strips. He says,

"I wrote for an imaginary playmate. In retrospect, trying to analyse why I wrote, I think it was for an ideal listener who had the patience to listen to what I wanted to say. I wasn't a child prodigy, I just wrote the sort of thing that any eleven year old would.

"There is one important concept to me. It is often necessary to write badly before you can write well. In many cases, to give advice to a young poet is redundant - he has to work it out himself.

"Literally I almost blacked out when I had my first verse published. I thought I'm a Keats! Byron!"

An Evil Creek, Oregon, publication published a Nowlan poem, when he was seventeen years old. He had started to send things to magazines as soon as he began writing. At twelve he was sending short novels to be published.

The Evil Creek, Oregon, publication was one in a network of mimeographed, non-profit magazines circulating in the underground literary circles.

These "little magazines" published poems and short stories, but paid nothing. Alden Nowlan continued correspondence with the little magazines for many years, until he started selling his work to commercial publications. He has published in every state in the United States through the little magazines.

He corresponded with many of the other young writers of the time, like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and LeRoi Jones. He can remember parts of Kerouac's *On the Road* published in the San Francisco little magazine, "Miscellaneous Man".

Writers, especially poets, were considered strange in the 1950's, so Alden Nowlan told no one, not even his parents, that he wrote for a hobby. He confesses that the one thing he misses about not having a formal education is the opportunity of exchanging ideas with other young writers in an institution.

It was not until Alden Nowlan was the news editor of the Hartland "Observer" that he met another poet.

At nineteen he moved to Hartland, New Brunswick, to work on the newspaper. He spent ten years on the Observer, and continued his clandestine creative writing on the sly during this time. As he says,



"I'd be covering something stupid - dog licenses or club meetings and they'd all think I was taking lots of notes, but I'd be writing poems."

Fred Cogswell, a UNB professor, was also writing poetry for American little magazines. Alden Nowlan often noticed Cogswell's name and realized that there was actually another poet only seventy miles away from Hartland.

Fred Cogswell arrived in Hartland to meet his fellow Maritime poet, Alden Nowlan. At their first meeting Nowlan was uncomfortable and inhibited.

"Fred was not only the first person I met who wrote poetry, but the first person who liked it. I was twenty-five and had never told anybody that I wrote poetry.

"He had found me out.

"It was as if something imaginary had suddenly become real. In some ways it was sort of a disappointment. Suddenly I had comedown to reality.