

A visit with W.O. Mitchell

By Lynn Snelling

There's a man on campus whose been a springboard diver, a sheet writer during the depression, done carny (carnival) work with the Red River Shows and found time, during all of this, to write four novels, a number of short stories and plays — the most recent of which *Back to Beulah* premiered last week at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal.

My interview with him took place in his office in Calumet College. W.O. Mitchell began with a common complaint, his bus had been late that morning and he wasn't too fond of buses anyway, especially when he had to catch them. As we began talking, Mitchell assumed a comfortable position in front of me, with his black snuff box placed aptly beside him, on his desk.

Mitchell came to York's Creative Writing Department in September and will stay till June, after which he'll go back out west to his home in the Calgary foothills. He has taught Creative Writing at the Universities of Calgary, Alberta, and Toronto either as a writer in residence or as a teacher. The practice of having resident writers began in North America just after the war and "is best compared" said Mitchell, "to a research scientist."

"Obviously it is important that such people be freed from their conventions to invent and to work and that the result of that will benefit the society within which the University is a part... this is a valid function and allows an artist in residence, not just a writer, but composers and playwrights to do something that otherwise they would not be able to do... and have their year bought."

"The idea that also works nicely along with this is that, because you're very salient in a university and the kids do find you, you can probably mark or nudge the odd promising young writer, just by talking in a nice informal way."

The difference between teaching and being a writer-in-residence is a distinction given by the Canada Council, the body whose subsidies allow this to happen. Their stipulation is that the writer in residence doesn't teach. Mr. Mitchell teaches if he is writer in residence because, as he explained slipping into a Scottish accent, "next to writing I like to teach. My Grandmother's name is Maggie McMurry and she'd spin in her grave if she knew I was taking subsidy and not giving something in return."

When asked about how he taught his own classes, Mitchell first complimented York for its unique writing department.

"You see, York is the only university in Canada which has deliberately patterned and set up a stream, and a number of courses in creative writing, in poetry, in drama, or fiction, in order that people can say that their specialty is creative writing... and it's a pretty bloody good idea!"

Mitchell holds a three hour seminar group each week and his students are "invited", (he changed that from "ordered,") "to write every day, week, month, of the course," so that by the end of the term each writer has accumulated about fifty pages of what Mitchell refers to as "finding or free-fall."

"What" I asked, "was free-fall?"

Leaning forward, elbows on his knees, he made an explanation.

"We want you, uncritically, to have faith in the fact that you have stored an unlimited amount of people, of emotions, of incidents... just plugging into what is there."

There was a pause.

"Have you ever made a snow angel?" he asked, turning the tables.

"Yes."

"It's dangerous, do you realize that in order to make a perfect snow angel, you have to lie perfectly still, and not knowing where you're going to land... and you can't look at it first, because you'll disturb the snow. You've just got to fall per-



fectly straight without flinching and land in that snow and then do your arms up and down, and then get out so carefully... that describes the writing process."

"The fabric of the seminar class" was described by Mitchell as being a "pressure-cooker kind of thing." He approaches his writing classes in the same manner of teaching as does the Otenhagen Berdorf School for Actors in New York, because he

believes that "writing and acting are the same thing, they are both performances." Each piece of writing is read to the class by Mitchell, who began his career acting in Seattle with the Penthouse Players, in order that young writers can stand away from their work, objectively, and wait for what Mitchell calls "the finest and most lonely, dispelling criticism in the world", which is the "inadvertent

stir "of the other people in the class."

The common problem that Mitchell has found in his years of teaching, is that "most writers are not aware of their growing and have underestimated how difficult the writing profession is, and even though you tell them that the average apprenticeship of a writer is ten years, they don't believe you."

Throughout his career, which included three years as fiction editor for *MacLeans* magazine, Mitchell has discovered a number of now well-established writers.

"I'm very proud of some of my finds, which include Farley Mowat and Ray Bradbury and even arrogant about how I can make good guesses."

Mitchell himself was first published in the *Queen's Quarterly* and said that he spent "five years doing wrong things" before finally realizing the method that suited him best. Mitchell feels that if he had been exposed to creative writing courses when he was younger, he probably would have published six years earlier than he did.

"The very fact of having someone say don't look here, look over there, is a hell of a big jump and saves time."

Mitchell thinks that any creative writing program helps calm artistic insecurities, which doesn't mean that artists themselves are insecure. In response to the common belief that all artists are kooks, Mitchell replied, "they are the healthiest and most secure people in the world, because if you're going in there and walking around in your past all the time, you're not going to have dark crevices and corners that you don't know about and get hit from the dark, or from behind."

The most prominent and recurrent fear among writers, even established ones is that "the magic source will dry up." Mitchell said simply, "it won't, it never will. There's an unlimited supply of stored stuff in the sub-conscious notebook. The well hasn't dried up, you just haven't lowered the bucket."

Mitchell's reason for not coming back next year is because he doesn't feel that he has got enough of his own writing done. Currently he is working on two novels, one of which is on university corruption. When I asked him if Bryan, the young boy in *Who Has Seen the Wind* was autobiographical he said no, but qualified that by saying that all writers "work out of life."

"What you end up saying about a person is the truth, but the whole thing is a lie, which is more meaningful... see art and life are two different things and life don't write books."

In store for the future, Mitchell has three feature films on the go, one of which will be *Back to Beulah*. The exteriors for the film will be shot in Calgary, a common setting for a number of recent films including *Silver Streak*, *Golden Rod* and *Buffalo Bill*. As well as his novel on the study of corruption, Mitchell is working on a second novel that he described as "a serious gothic thing, unfortunately set in a prairie community."

Perhaps Mitchell said unfortunately because of the "prairie gopher image" that has been tagged onto him by a number of critics.

"Wait till they see *Beulah* and this other thing, then watch the shit hit the fan." He chuckled and picked up his box of snuff.

After 9 years, Layton says good bye

"Now what I would like to see is more corruption & decadence around York"

By Laura Brown

"I'm taking my leave as easily and gracefully as I can", says pre-eminent Canadian poet Irving Layton, as the completion of this school year marks the end of his nine-year stint at York University and a teaching career spanning 32 years.

Retirement for Layton means his embarkment on a marathon of writing projects. In September and October books entitled *The Last Edition of Love Poems*, *The Tightrope Dancer* and *The Layton-Rath Correspondence* will be released. A portfolio comprised of 20 Layton poems (in English and Italian) and 20 pictures by Italian artist Aligi Sassu will follow shortly after.

Complaining heartily about Canadian winters, Layton said that next year "I expect to settle somewhere in the south of France, and if not there then in my beloved Greece, or maybe Israel."

His exit from what Layton terms "the ivory tower of university" will place him "back on the streets where the poet belongs".

Controversy and abuse have followed Layton through his writing years. In an essay written in 1939, Layton attacked the British for not stopping Hitler. Consequently, he was tagged 'communist' which was closely followed by harassment from the RCMP.

In the '40's he told stuffy, prudish Canadians "sex is here to stay" and in the '70's he served notice to Christians "that I'm reclaiming Jesus and I'm telling the Jews that Jesus is here to stay."

"Jesus was a Jew when he died on the cross and the Christians have perverted the whole meaning of Jesus on the cross", is the message Layton relates in his most recent poetry collections, *For My Brother, Jesus* and *The Covenant*.

Above all, is his message that "Jews ought to scream out and claim what is theirs - Christianity, Marxism, Muslim, Islam...all are the products of the Jewish creative mind".

Layton says that the true prophet is a poet who "awakens the people who stay asleep and remain smug", to "remind them of the evils

and atrocities in their civilization that they'd rather forget". Layton remarks about himself, "I don't think any poet has been so ferocious about the atrocities of our civilization".

Layton's works may be savage expressions of his hatred for the evils of the world, but his lusty humour shields readers from the severest of his blows. In his review of *The Covenant*, critic Eric Garsonnin wrote, "I like to laugh with Mr. Layton, but not to hate with him. Thankfully, he laughs more than he hates".

A comic novel may be the next vehicle through which Layton prods the "sleeping people". "I want to write a comic novel on the human condition that will say such serious things that when the readers put it down there will be tears in their eyes", Layton says.



Layton's emphatic messages of concern for the problems of this age have come out in his teaching "and opened up the students eyes, revealing a world they've never seen", claims graduate student Doug Beardsley.

Layton "guides, instructs, illuminates and awakens", Beardsley added.

According to Beardsley, Layton is an extraordinary teacher whose quality of concern for humanity and mankind reaches out to the students.

Commentin on Layton's fourth year Twentieth Century Fiction course, Beardsley said, "I don't think anyone will leave that course without being transformed. Layton teaches about growing up, reading, seeing, living, and existing in the 20th century."

Another graduate student, David O'Rourke, spoke of Layton's teaching as "guts and passion". O'Rourke continued, "In graduate school the study of literature becomes all analysis and dissection. With Layton, I have a professor who has a passionate, anti-scientific approach, dealing with human beings, not a science".

Reflecting on the past nine years at York, Layton said, "My years at York have been singularly happy and very productive."

Speaking about the York students he's taught over the years, Layton said, "I have only good things to say about my students". With a hearty chuckle, Layton added, "with my fearsome reputation as an ogre, only the braver and most original students attended my classes".

He holds a special fondness for the Creative Writing Program's poetry workshop "which attracts a variety of unusual students - they're eccentric...different...crazy...in original ways. And they have a dream about poetry".

Gratitude was expressed to the administration, "for not making me do administrative work and letting me do the things I like and do well", said Layton. "The best thing I could do with my time was to see more students individually".

The last nine years at York have been his most creative with the release of six books, and one on the way, Layton said.

The only objection Layton expressed about York was that it is so far away from the city and offers no compensations for the isolation.

"It's like a high school here---everyone leave by 4:30 and the place is deserted", Layton said. "Now what I would like to see is more corruption and decadence around York". The suggestion of "a seedy café and a sleazy hotel" would transform "the terrible girl guide and boy scout air that York has about it".

Wherever Layton moves to next year, his Toronto home of nine years won't be sorely missed. "I detested Toronto at first but I did learn to like it", Layton said. "The trouble is that there are too many ambitious people here and the good things of life are abandoned. Although the city is energetic, there is no time for leisure, friendship, conversation, fellowship, love or laughter".

So Layton, although retiring from York, remains unretired. His teaching career may be over, but with three Layton books appearing this fall alone, it would seem that his work has just begun.

Shalom Irving.