

Three authors

are pushing their books for the Christmas season

Scobie spoke at the U of A, courtesy of the dept. of Canada Council, and the League of Canadian

same series. He will be featured in next Wednesday was in town on business and very graciously

Mary di Michele and Bronwin Wallace, Susan Gluckman, Libby Shire, that whole group are very solidly Ontarian. I think it's a very healthy thing that there are flourishing centres of poetry all across Canada.

Q: How does your latest poetic work, *Expecting Rain* itself differ from your previous work?

Scobie: I don't think that *Expecting Rain* itself differs a great deal from, say, *Grand Memory for Forgetting*, the immediately preceding book, except that toward the end of *Expecting Rain*, in the "Rambling Sign" section, you do begin to notice the influence of people like Jacques Derrida and post-structuralist ideas beginning to be felt in my poetry as well as in my criticism. In the poems that I've been writing since finishing *Expecting Rain* the poems which are at the moment just beginning to be a new book, that particular strand is very pronounced and I'm very interested in exploring in poetry the kind of word play and the kind of use of theoretical ideas that you find in Derrida. That's a very personal thing. I attended a seminar in Toronto this June that Derrida gave, and I was immensely impressed with him personally. So obviously the poetry I've written over the past three or four months has been very strongly under that sign. How long that will last, I don't have any way of knowing. I'm going back to Paris in January for six months, and that may completely change when I get back into Paris again.

Q: Why the emphasis on themes of nature or myths or images? Why not people, buildings or things?

Scobie: Well, I'm not sure that the emphasis is exclusive. I think that when I went back to the West Coast from Edmonton three years ago, there was very obviously a tremendous change in the natural environment, and I more or less consciously set out to write about that, in the same way that in my first two or three years in Edmonton I wrote lots of poems about snow. I immediately, as soon as I got back to Victoria, said OK, I'm going to have to write some poems about rain. Let's write them and get them out of the way. *Expecting Rain*, as a collection, has a lot to do with the Western landscape, just to get that out of my system. But I don't think it's true, that I don't write about people, buildings, or things. There are several poems in *Expecting Rain* which are personal poems. There's a whole series, that I didn't read from today, of

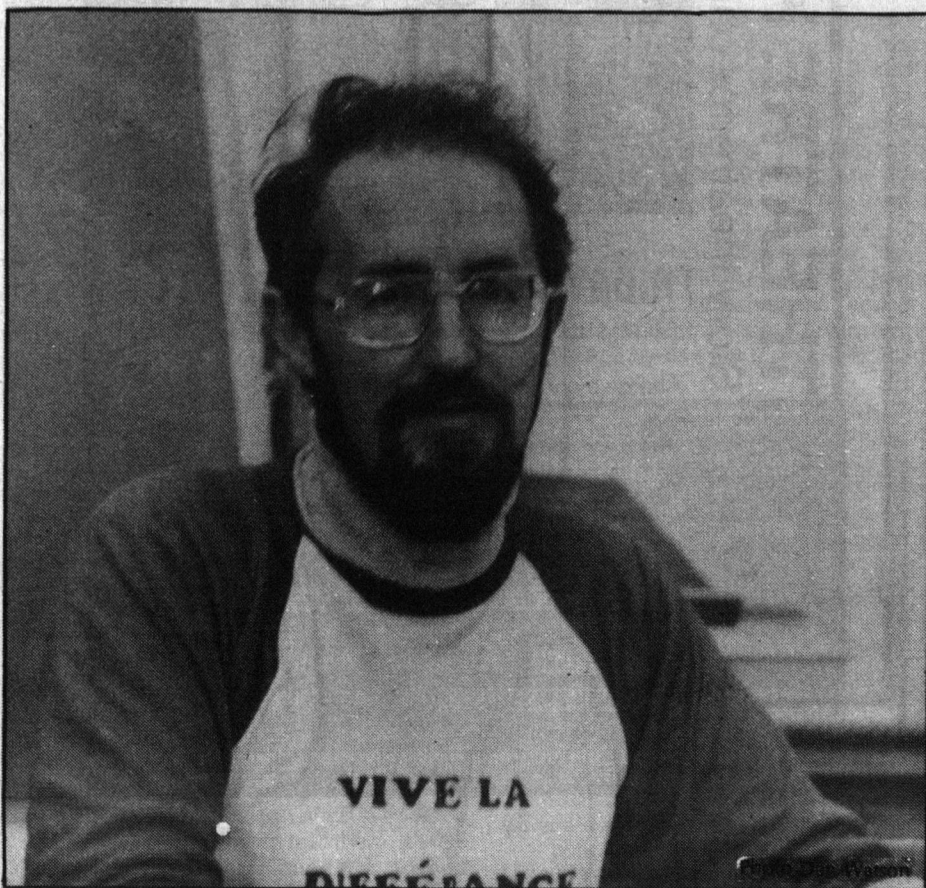
letters to friends, which were written as personal letters, and discuss personal relationships. There are two or three political poems, including "Special Effects." And the "Rambling Signs" sequence ends up being overwhelmingly about the city of Paris and also to a great extent about the political issues that were big in Paris when I was there in May of '83. So I think the impression you have is largely that first burst of West Coast poems.

Q: You use a lot of word-play, and puns, and sound poetry, is this going to be as important in your future poems?

Scobie: I've always had a terrible weakness for puns, a terrible weakness for bad jokes of all kinds. I suppose I can say that I've been authorized to pursue these things more clearly by the kind of example Derrida gives because one of the things that is fascinating is the kind of things that are just hidden in the middle of language. The way language itself has a kind of motion to it, which, if you just let it happen will take the poem in a certain direction that you can't anticipate or even control, except in so far as you revise or decide to publish or not to publish. For instance, in the "Fulford Harbour" poem, I was sitting there writing this poem, and the "full forward" and back and forth of the ferry suddenly jumped into the "Fort Da" of Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." and the echo from Fulford to Fort Da is entirely fortuitous. But it was what I discovered while writing that poem, and in the second half of the poem, I just allowed that to take over. In the work that Doug and I have done over the years, we've always been interested in various different effects of sound, both the effect of counterpoint, two voices against each other, and the effects of repetition. And the effects of that whole borderline on the edge of language where words and abstract sounds go back and forth between each other. That's been for us very largely a formal concern. But we have always found that it vitalizes our other work.

Q: There are "found" poems, and poems based on things seen. There seems to be a lack of didactic or revolutionary poems. Is this a trend in modern poetry?

Scobie: There are two answers to that. One is that the whole of 20th century poetry has been a kind of reaction against the kind of didacticism, the kind of moralism that was a feature of 19th century verse. On the other hand, we do treat political themes. One of the poems I didn't read today is a very strong anti-nuclear poem. In fact, my doubt about reading it is precisely because I think in some ways it's too didactic. This gets into all the problems of political poetry, of preaching to the converted. Finally, I would say that a lot of the recent poems try to work within a consciousness that is informed by feminism. That contest is as much an ideological context or a theoretical context as it is a political context.



Stephen Scobie

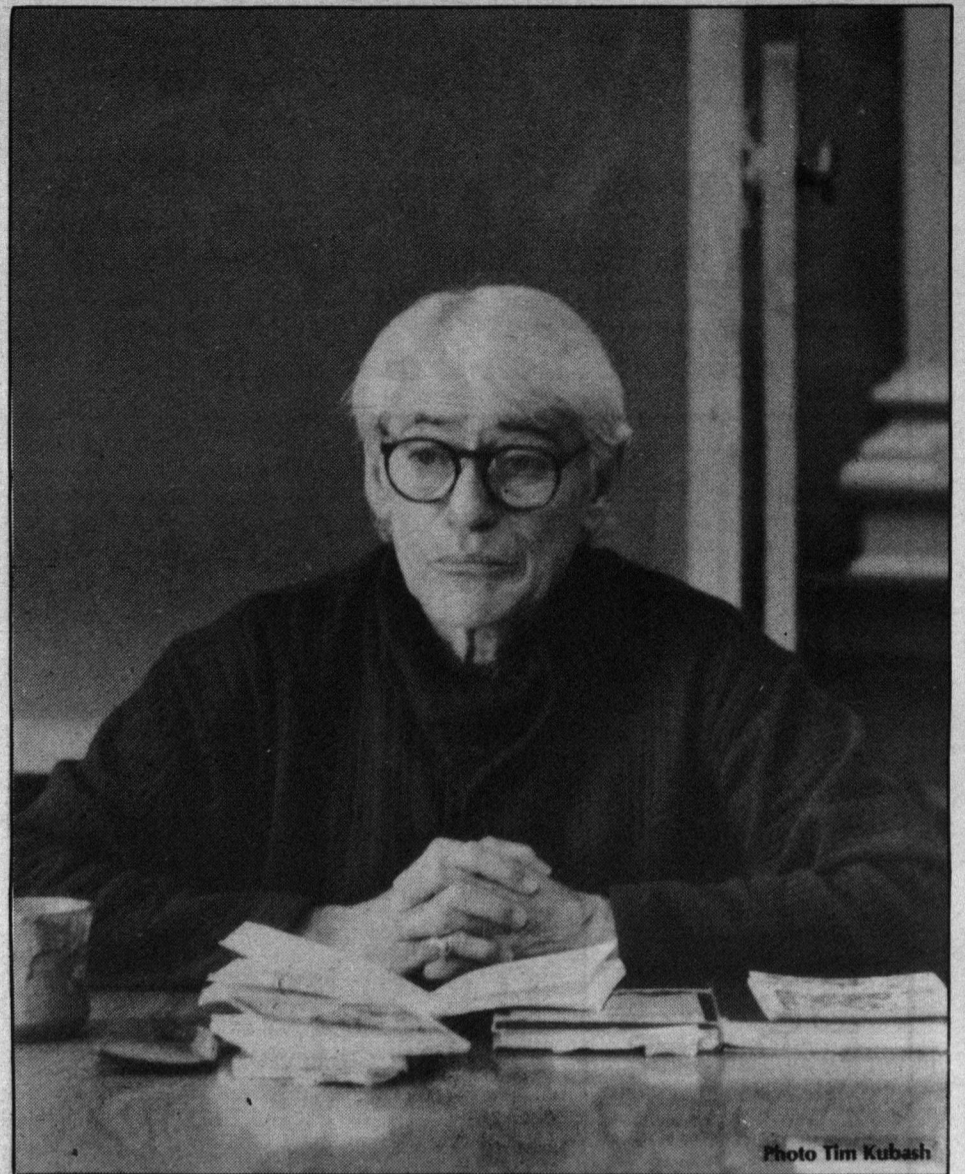


Photo Tim Kubash

Robin Blaser

Robin Blaser is associated with Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan in the development of the serial poem and the new American poetry. Currently teaching at Simon Fraser University, his influence reaches into the recent poetries of Eastern Canada and many of the major poetries of the West Coast. A poet with an encyclopedic range of sources, stretching from Plato to contemporary post-modern European thinkers, Blaser produces poems that challenge the reader. Simple in structure and complex in meaning, Blaser's lyric verses engage the readers imagination; it is the imagination that finally shapes the poem and interprets its message.

Q: Why did you leave the U.S. for B.C.?

Blaser: It was kind of a magical occasion. I was invited to come to British Columbia by the new university, Simon Fraser with architecture by Arthur Ericson, all that kind of thing. I had been up there to read at UBC and Simon Fraser asked me to join his new university. Jack Spicer was dead in 1965 and the city of San Francisco that old and marvelous connection with Rob Duncan, Jack Spicer and so on had just begun to break down and so it seemed time to go somewhere new. I had not intended to say in B.C., but I fell in love with it. I came in 1966 and I took out citizenship in 1972. I had originally intended to move to Montreal, but I am still in B.C. getting ready to take early retirement. I will have been at Simon Fraser for 20 years when I finally manage to get free of the institution. I suppose the thing to note is that there was a loosening of literary traditions that happened in cycles, that suddenly you wanted something new. It seems to me that a good deal of the new poetics comes out of Canada, and has for some time. So I think that I came towards vitality pushed by what I call magic.

Q: Do you see yourself remaining in B.C.

Blaser: Yes, I mean I'm a wanderer; I like Greece, I like Egypt. I like Quebec City, so I'm likely to go for periods to stay in these places. B.C. has become my landscape now. It takes a long time to earn the right to say that you have a real landscape.

Q: Where is your poetry going? What evolutions are you presently going through?

Blaser: Well, the last book *Syntax* did something that I had not known how to do before and that is that it deals with mixed discourses - discourses of all kinds, many variations of discourse - all of them surrounding poetry with the poetic discourse weaving its way in

and out. And the only discourse I left out - I got the mythological in at the book's end - was scientific discourse. And now I'm busily doing that. My new collection that will go to the publisher soon will be called *Rond-donne* I can't translate it any better than to leave it in the French because it's the word random and the word given brought together. And that's what I want - what is random and what is given. And that will include scientific discourse to constantly set the lyric voice and tension with every other kind of conversation one can have including scholarship, because I think that poetry requires scholarship. Considering the deprivation of symbolic meaning in our culture and so on, poetry has to move scholarship out into the public so that scholarship is not always closed up in academe.

Q: Where is poetry in Canada going? Is this a positive direction?

Blaser: I don't find it particularly positive or negative. I think what it probably is, is a correction of a lot of very sloppy loose lines and perhaps an effort to learn again how to watch the musical phrase, how to watch the break, how to organize a poem so that you have basically a musical structure. So in that sense you could call it positive. Sometimes its just a kind of cowardice; its a return to a pre-made form and I don't find the strength, the greater strength's of Canadian poetry there. I turn to people like B.P. Nichol, George Bowering, Robert Kroetsch, Sharon Thiesen, Daphné Morlatt, only naming those that come off the top of my head in this little talk with you. These people when they move to a loosely structured poem give a reading of freedom that I think is more interesting than those who return to strict formal measures. That whole business of using rhyme and so on, should relate to the way that one measures oneself and one's world, and it's pretty hard to measure oneself and present conditions in a strictly formal way. Everything attacks our form. I mean everything. So the consequence is that it's pretty hard to come out looking like a sonnet.

Review and interviews by
Gilbert Bouchard