

# Edmonton writers need exposure in "little" magazines

By DOROTHY LIVESAY

The following is the first in a series of eight articles which will examine the Arts in Edmonton. Written by people who have long been immersed in their particular fields and are thoroughly familiar with what is happening here, the articles will range over the literature, music, film, art, dance, opera, popular music and theatre that is being produced in Edmonton. Hopefully, the series will be an incisive examination of what this city has at present to offer, and what potential for growth there is in each area.

Dorothy Livesay has been a major figure in Canada letters for many years. She received two Governor General's Awards in the forties, and has recently published "The Unquiet Bed" and "The Documentaries." This month marked the appearance of "Plainsongs," a small volume which includes some of the best of her recent poems.

"Sure, I've got this hang-up! I want to know who I am!" The student leaned towards me across the desk, his eyes intense. "I guess that's why I want to write."

Statements like this can be heard all across the country—BUT! All across the country there are little mimeo'd magazines, there are offset presses, there are noon-hour poetry readings in the Students' Unions or Art centres. There's an audience. The question is that when there are probably just as many would-be and practising writers in Edmonton, per capita, as there are in Vancouver, Toronto, London, Kingston or Fredericton, why don't they meet together, greet together, read each others' work? And so, perhaps, outgrow that desperate



need for self-identity by coming to terms with other creative people and writing more objectively of the immediate world around them?

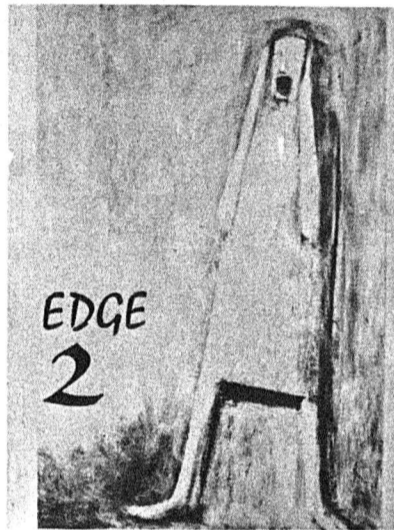
A few Edmontonians of course have done so. The veterans, still

very active indeed, are Henry Keisel (author of *The Rich Man*) Sheila Watson, author of *The Double Hook* and Wilfred Watson, poet and playwright, whose new production *Let's Murder Clytemnestra According to the Principles of Marshall MacLuhan* will be a feature of the Poet and Critic conference next week. Among younger writers I think of Rudy Wiebe who, besides teaching Creative Writing, has published two novels in Canada and the U.S.: *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and *First and Vital Candle*; with a third, *The Blue Mountains of China*, due to appear next year. His deep concern is for the terrain, the pioneer and frontier community and his own roots in the Mennonite settlements. Another young novelist who sprang out of the University of Alberta is Robert Kroetch whose first novel, *The Words of My Roaring* (about a prairie town funeral operator) was followed by a novel of a "Ulysses" search on the Mackenzie riverboats. His third book, written from New York State, concerns a decidedly creative side of Alberta life: *The Studhorse Man* (!) In addition to these two novelists, we now have two who have come from "the outside," to settle in Edmonton: Denis Godfrey and Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*. Will they stay? Who knows! But certainly the campus is richer for their presence.

Rudy Wiebe has a thing about the prairies. He believes that, like the epic novelists of the Russian steppes, only prose writers can flourish here—"The land gives itself to prose!" Perhaps he forgets that people coming to the prairies for the first time may have quite a traumatic reaction, a poetic response to the land. For instance, at Saskatoon, there is a young professor of English who came to Canada from Lancashire. He has recorded that "the wideness opens your eye," and "I wrote very little poetry until I came here . . . I'm reminded of the remarks of T. E. Hulme (the English Imagist poet and critic) when he travelled across Canada in 1905. When he came to the prairies, he said: 'The first time I felt the necessity or the inevitableness of verse was in the desire to reproduce the peculiar quality of feeling which is induced by the flat spaces and wide horizons of the virgin prairie of Western Canada.'"

Hulme, it seemed, stopped theorizing and began to make a direct response through poetry. The same thing is happening today, when painters from outside Canada arrive here and suddenly begin finding themselves, as Virgil Hammock

writes that he has done. For me, these examples are evidence enough of what the prairie can do for the creative person. But I shouldn't forget the first, most vivid portrait of the prairie painted by the Victoria girl, Anne Marriott, in the thirties: *The Wind Our Enemy*.

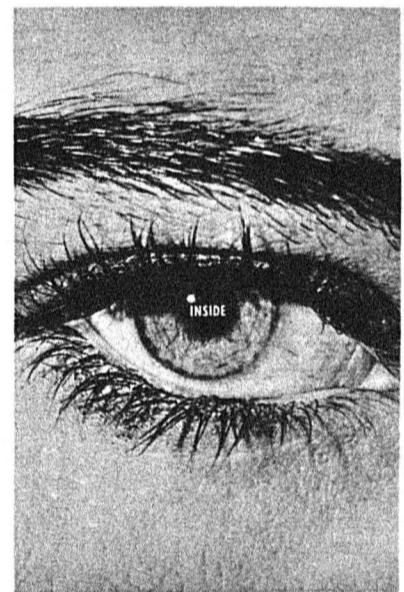


It is true that poets of a somewhat earlier generation, born in the west, such as Earle Birney, Eli Mandel and myself, left our native towns—Calgary, Winnipeg, Regina—to travel and set down new roots in several parts of Canada. But the memories of wide horizons are always with us! This is true also of younger mid-west poets like John Newlove and George Bowering who moved to the West Coast at a critical moment in their development. They have never stopped writing about the prairies or the mountains. Each year, in our Creative Writing classes it is noticed that some of the most promising young writers are soon on the move, usually towards the Pacific. In Vancouver they can get published in "little mags", they can send manuscripts to eastern publishers or West Coast presses; they can give poetry readings and find a sense of identity with their own kind. But I maintain it: the prairies and the mountains are in their blood!

Like youth all over the world then, our young writers feel compelled to discover new experiences, to conquer new terrain. And does it really matter to Alberta, as long as there are other writers coming in to stir up excitement, perhaps soon to start a literary magazine? For what has happened within the last two years is that writers from both east and west have stolen a march on the local people and set up stakes here. At the Cameron Library you can find a well-known poet from New Brunswick, Elizabeth Brewster, author of *Passage of Summer*, whose new poems reflect

the wideness and coldness of Edmonton. In the Department of English there are now three most interesting younger poets: Margaret Atwood from Toronto and Montreal; Douglas Barbour, from Kingston; and Stephen Scobie from Scotland, via Vancouver. Also there are two Americans who are beginning to publish in Canadian magazines: Ted Blodgett and Bert Almon—who says he is now writing poems about mountains, soon to be published in *The Canadian Forum*. These people are already making their work known, through public readings, and are anxious to help start a magazine which would publish their own work as well as that of the younger population of writers, some of whom live in downtown Edmonton and some on campus.

What about this business of having an outlet for creative work "on location", so to speak? I think it is very important. I note that in the past the Students' Union's *Inside* did a heroic job in bringing forward new work; as did also *Edge*, *The Improved Closet* and *Canada Goose*. *Pluck* was perhaps too unconcerned with the local scene; and the new *Coyote* is, contrariwise, so immersed in the local scene that its sights are not high enough. The same might be



said (of an entirely different age-group) for the publications of the Canadian Authors' Association. But experience in other centres has shown that if there is a real will to publish it can indeed be done. The key to such a project lies in the determination of the 'now' generation. Perhaps the upcoming conference on Campus, "Poet and Critic '69" will be the necessary spur to a true literary renaissance in Edmonton, Calgary and the entire Gravel Bench country.

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