

York profile: Eli Mandel

Canadian laureate tries to fill "identity gap"

By TED MUMFORD

The names of famous men are often followed by diverse and sometimes dubious lists of their talents.

Eli Mandel's name, for instance, might be followed by "poet, anthologist, critic, and teacher". There is nothing doubtful, however, about this set of credentials.

Mandel has published six books of poetry and three more of criticism, and has edited five anthologies. For these volumes he has been awarded various medals, grants and fellowships, including the Governor General's Award for Poetry.

He is a professor of humanities at York, and has taught at the University of Alberta and the College Royale de St. Jean. His critical perception and remarkable knowledge have made him one of the foremost experts on Canadian literature, and his spirited lecture style makes him one of the most listenable.

Elias Wolf Mandel was born in 1922 in Estevan, Saskatchewan. His parents were immigrant Russian Jews, his father a grocer. "I was brought up in the drought and schools of Estevan and Regina," says Mandel.

Estevan, "an area of climatic hazard", was hard hit by the depression, and so was the Mandel family. Eli's father went bankrupt, and the impoverished family moved to a ramshackle old house which had only a Quebec heater to battle the raw prairie winters.

Although the depression years were formative creatively, they were hardly enlightening.

"I was brought up on poor poetry," Mandel says. "My mother read me all the great popular bad poems of the day."

During his stint as a medical corpsman in World War II he met some writers among his comrades who introduced him to modern Canadian poetry.

Mandel started writing seriously on his return from Europe. He worked his way through an M.A. at the University of Saskatchewan, and later completed a PhD in English at U of T. From 1954 to 1957 he taught at military college in St. Jean where he became involved with the poetry

scene that revolved loosely around magazine like Contact, Northern Review, and Civ/n.

Around this time he met many of the Montreal poets including Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, Frank Scott, Raymond Souster and Louis Dudek. (Mandel is quick to deny that he ever belonged to the Montreal group or any "group" of poets.)

His first major publication, Trio (with Phyllis Webb and Gael Turnbull) appeared in 1954.

From 1957 to 1967 Mandel taught at the University of Alberta, with one year out at York's Glendon college. Since 1967 he has been at York as a professor of humanities. Trio was followed by Fuseli Poems, Black and Secret Man, An Idiot Joy, Stony Plain, and most recently, Crusoe, a selection of Mandel's poems edited by Dennis Lee and Margaret Atwood.

For all his books of poetry Mandel has deliberately chosen small "alternate" publishers like House of Anansi and Press Porcupine. Mandel explains, "Small publishers are much more involved in the process of producing the book: editing, choosing the paper, and typesetting... the production of the book becomes a unified process."

While the relationship between the author and a large publisher has an element of impersonality, the small publisher involves the writer in the actual creation of the book. Mandel also tries to support the smaller publishers because they are more committed to Canadian poetry.

Of course, Mandel himself is devoted to Canadian poetry. It was in his anthologies (including Poets of Contemporary Canada, Five Modern Canadian Poets, and Eight More Canadian Poets) that poets like Al Purdy and Milton Acorn first received national exposure. His courses at York are all about Canada, one each on Canadian poetry, culture, and regionalism.

Furthermore, Mandel is trying to fill a gap in the Canadian identity with his writing. He feels Canadians have been betrayed by historians who have followed only the country's politics, and none of its

sociology.

"The result is a false picture of what it's like to be Canadian", he says.

The next book, The Hoffer Colony, will be a "collage-documentary-poem-history" relating his trip of last summer to the Jewish colonies of Saskatchewan that his family helped settle. This search for his past made Mandel "aware of a great Canadian yearning to be told about such places."

But while the book is an attempt to keep alive something from out of the past, it will also be part of Mandel's battle to rid Canadian poetry of "old forms... that are bound to a past that's been falsified." He wants to replace "elitist language" and approaches that are "alien" and "imported". The book will include some prose and photographs.

In addition to writing and teaching, Mandel does many public readings, lectures and seminars, as well as television and radio work. He spends his leisure time at his cottage, watching football, or "cycling to the nearest beer store".

Mandel has been married twice and has three children. His first wife Miriam recently won the Governor General's Award for Poetry. His present wife, Ann, teaches at Glendon.

Of his close friend Irving Layton, Mandel says, "Irving made poetry possible for all of us... through his tremendous presence. He's probably paid a price for it, too."

What of Layton's new programme to reconcile Jews and Christians? "It's a bad year when Irving doesn't

have a programme...he has an uncanny sense for issues in the public mind."

Does Mandel ever feel like he's in Layton's shadow? "No...I'd rather celebrate than compete. You do the best you can and that's all; you can't fake it."



Poet and York professor Eli Mandel

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