

# Old primer poet makes good

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF  
EARLE BIRNEY

Birney is a wildly uneven poet, as uneven as our other poet of value, Irving Layton.

When he is good, as we all know, he is very, very good. It isn't possible to write a more perfect poem than "De-Composition", for instance:

*A golden tooth within the  
buck—  
mouthed prairie town the  
yellow  
stiff hotel is stuck and sticks  
Within it like a deadened  
Nerve a thin grey wai—  
tress drones the bill-of-fare  
to one pained salesman for  
enamelware.*

This is so precise, so definitive, that nobody need ever try to write that particular poem again, least of all as a "prairie novel", that depressing genre in which a sensitive person is set in the midst of the crass philistinism of a small Saskatchewan town to go mad quietly (cf. "As for Me and My House", by Sinclair Ross.)

At the other extreme are most of the poems in Anglo-Saxon metre, which look pretty strained now, and that favorite of the warped gentlemen who compile school readers, "David" (which Birney, to do him justice, calls "not one of my favorites").

And what are we to do with the dull lists of Birney's recent poems about Latin America? Certainly Birney has taken vistas here, moving from the packed diction of his earliest poems to a much looser line, as in the opening of "Caracas":

*Pumped up  
from the immigrant ships*

*by the great base of the  
American-aid Hiway  
laborers  
homesick for marginal bogs  
in Galicia  
lengthen the 9-mile zone  
of slums . . .*

## CREATIVE SLACK

This is pretty prosy stuff, but it keeps building up into something honest and impressive, or biting, or gently amusing. (Which reminds me to mention how varied are the moods which Birney's apparently frail metric contrives to express perfectly.) As an example of mellow late Birney, here's "Curacao":

*I think I am going to love it  
here  
I ask the man in the telegraph  
office  
the way to the bank  
He locks the door and walks  
with me  
insisting he needs the exercise  
When I ask the lady at my  
hotel desk what but to take  
to the beach  
she gets me a lift with her  
beautiful sister  
who is just driving by in a  
sports job  
And already I have thought of  
something  
I want to ask the sister*

This again is perfect; and yet how effortless it looks, how absolutely slack!

Then there are the typographical games, like "Appeal to a Lady with a Diaper" or "Billboards Build Freedom of Choice" or (one of the great titles) "Mammorial Stungas for Aimee Simple McFarcin" Birney is one of the handful of poets since Cummings to do anything at

all with typographical ingenuity. He hardly ever rises above sarcasm, but he's very good at sarcasm.

An exception, and one of Birney's best poems, is the "Ballad of Mr. Chubb", which is too long to quote. It is quite new to me, and deserves to replace "David" in all the readers; I wish Birney had written more ballads.

## ETERNAL TOURIST

What may strike readers of Birney is his curiously eccentric emotional range.

Birney hardly tackles the traditional lyric themes—love, loneliness, death—at all. When he tries to elegize ("Joe Harris, 1913-1942"), the result is appalling.

But he has mastered his own variety of ironic stance, from which he can match the real world with unusual acuteness. He is the Eternal Tourist; he takes care to seem a visitor even to his own soul.

Most of us love much less than we pretend, and stand as onlookers much more than we're willing to admit. Birney's verse serves as a salutary reminder of this fact. Yet I think he will remain second to Layton for just this reason. A poem exists not only in its own right but in the right of its predecessors, and Layton's verse, being in the main lyric tradition, is simply more highly charged than is Birney's.

This is not to deny Birney's achievement, which indeed is the more remarkable for having been wrested from less promising materials.

Parting shot to tease those who love trying to make sense out of Canadian Literature as a field: Would it or would it not make any sense to speak of Birney's playing Eliot to Layton's Yeats?

—Jenson Phrobosmoth

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# Mad butterfly collector collects mod butterfly

THE COLLECTOR, by John Fowles

John Fowles' *Collector* is a novel of conflict, twice-told to more than double the intensity of its horror. A super-ordinary clerk, Fred Clegg, whose one interest is butterfly collecting, abducts a pretty art student whom he has worshipped from afar. The butterfly collector keeps her imprisoned until she is as lifeless as his other specimens.

Fred Clegg tells his story with less emotional involvement than a collector would feel at capturing a rare type of butterfly. His bravest adjectives are "nasty" and "nice". His attitude is always frightfully self-righteous. Invariably a stuffy perversion of Victorian morality. Clegg prides himself in that he doesn't "take advantage of the situation like other men would."

## MADNESS

This tone intensifies the blood-chilling effect of the story. Ghost stories seldom really touch us because they don't hit close to home. However, madness does. Today, insanity seems to lie close beneath the surface, waiting to erupt. And we fear this madness because it is so often hidden by normal guise.

The diary of Miranda, the art-student victim, tells the same story from a different point of view. With an artistic bent she delivers her prose in a living, colourful style. It plunges us into the ordeal

of human anguish, produced by her isolated imprisonment. In the cellar room Clegg is the only reality and she soon feels a hateful fascination for her captor.

Although she tries everything from attempted murder to seduction, she cannot break Clegg's determination. In fact, the seduction she tries in desperation is what finally brings out the beast in Clegg. Any remaining human conscience is swept away by the humiliation of his impotence.

## LIFE AGAINST DEATH

However, the conflicts are more than mere conflicts between collector and butterfly. There is conflict between bourgeoisie and lower class, education and ignorance, beauty and ugliness, the creative and the mass.

Clegg is ignorance, ugliness: one of the conforming mass who can never understand beauty because it is totally alien to his nature. He is that mass of people that stifles and kills artistic genius by its indifference.

Clegg volunteers one excuse for his ignorance. He didn't have "the opportunities that the higher classes had" even though he was now a member of the *nouveauriche*.

It is his fixed opinion that all the educated (with their "la-dida" voices) are looking down on him.

But the fact remains that his entire outlook on life has been formed by the shabby gentility of

an in-between class aspiring to bourgeoisie. That is why he is so super-courteous, super-correct, and super-suspicious to the world.

Miranda, conversely, is not the direct opposite of Clegg—that is, beauty, art and knowledge—but during (and because of) her captivity she comes to realize the importance of these things. Still, she wants them and the very act of wanting them ennoble her. Before her captivity she did not have the life spark of genius; during it, she seems to gain it. She overwhelmingly wants life, but Clegg is anti-life.

## DOUBLE NARRATIVE

So the essential conflict in this book is a conflict of the Few (Miranda's word) that know how to live, to create, against those who only exist. It is not the artist who is insane. It is the conforming mass.

The reason for the novel's powerful impact lies in the double narrative which develops both characters so well. Miranda never thinks her situation is real, always being sure that she will soon be free. The terror we feel at the situation is intensified by our knowing from Clegg's story that all her attempts for freedom are hopeless.

Fowles' use of the double narrative is brilliantly assured. All in all, Fowles' achievement in this novel is both impressive and moving.

—Caterina Edwards