

ALDEN NOWLAN:

Alden Nowlan is Poet-In-Residence at the University of New Brunswick. Several volumes of his poetry have been published and he has

many articles in literary publications. At present he writes a column for The Saint John Telegraph Journal.

"A poet is only a poet as long as he is writing a poem."

by john blaikie
brunswickan staff

Brunswickan: Which would you rather do short stories or poetry? Or are they complementary?

Nowlan: I find that the poems, perhaps because basically they're shorter, they can be produced during the height of an emotion, even though later you revise them. Whereas with a short story it's difficult to sustain the original emotion that sparked it, throughout. You find that you're working much more through the will than through the imagination. At least this is what I find.

Brunswickan: You are still working for the Telegraph-Journal, writing a Saturday column. I noticed that a few weeks ago you wrote an essay on Mirimichi folk music. Do you think that N.B. would be well advised to maintain this tradition?

Nowlan: Oh yes. I'm not sure that it's the loss of the thing itself which bothers me so much as the loss of the way of life it represents. Many of these ballads and so on couldn't be defended on any sort of artistic ground. They're simply doggerel ballads about incidents around specific lumber camps. At the same time it's that sort of way of life in which the people did create their own ballads which was very much a part of 19th century N.B.; it would be sort of sad to see it go entirely.



"THE BOIL ON THE PRESIDENTS ASS" — The president probably forgets he is human"

Brunswickan: do you differentiate between the ballads of the Mirimichi type of music and the Hank Snow, Wilf Carter type? Are these part of the same general mode?

Nowlan: I think probably they are in a sense. **Brunswickan:** You were born in Windsor, N.S. You are a Maritimer and have always been a Maritimer. Do you find the Maritimes, and its associated ethnic and cultural background conducive to the writing of good poetry?

Nowlan: I think that it would depend a lot on the individual poet, I'm sure that there are a lot of people who are writing in Montreal and Toronto and have always been a part of the environment there who would come down here and perhaps find the atmosphere very destructive; to their type of talent.

Brunswickan: You wouldn't classify yourself as belonging to the Bliss Carman, Charles G.D. Roberts tradition. Do you think that it would be valid to say that they were influenced by the prevalent movement in Great Britain at the time rather than N.B. environmental factors?

Nowlan: I think that it's wrong to criticize someone like Bliss Carman for taking for his models the poets who were the best poets of his day, the Georgian poets. You can't fault him for failing to do something that he wasn't even aware existed. It would have been nice if he had been a genius like D.H. Lawrence or William Butler Yeats and could have written above that tradition and created something new but the mere fact, that at best, he was a minor Georgian poet I think is not grounds enough to dismiss him entirely although it is true that his poetry and the whole tradition to which it belongs really had no influence on me. At least not that I'm aware of.

Brunswickan: Do you recognize any influence of other poets on your poetry? Are you aware of any influence?

Nowlan: Many people have been influential in the sense that they have reassured me that what I was doing was right, this sort of thing. People like William Carlos Williams, Irving Layton, Raymond Souster.

Brunswickan: Do you think that your poetry does the same things that Livesay's or Layton's does?

Nowlan: I think it is to the degree that it's all sort of basically concerned with the materials of real life, you know

Brunswickan: You wouldn't call your poetry romantic poetry?

Nowlan: Oh sometimes these tags . . . a lot of them don't mean very much . . . but one time last year I suddenly began to think that probably what I was really a classicist, you know, as opposed to someone like Leonard Cohen, whom I think is a romanticist.

Brunswickan: Is your poetry open to direct intellectual interpretation of the conscious or do you think that it appeals to the imagination and emotion?

Nowlan: I think the best of it has an effect at all these levels. It seems to me that the strength of a poem depends to a large extent on the levels of meaning. The greater the number of levels of meaning for me the greater it is as a work of art. Actually the type of things that I most admire are the things that on the surface are simple enough really to be understood by a child yet have depth enough that you can go on re-reading them all your life and keep getting new things out of them

Brunswickan: When you write

are you conscious of the technical aspects of writing?

Nowlan: More and more so . . . yes. When I started I was dealing almost exclusively with the emotion itself rather than technique. I've become much more intensely aware of the necessity of expressing it in such a way that it communicates itself to someone else. You can feel something very intensely but express it in such a way that to almost any one else who reads it, it will be almost a flat meaningless statement.



"The only thing I learned in school was how to do long division, and I left before I could do that very well."

Brunswickan: Poetry, it seems to me, as a vehicle of communication must, first of all, be a legitimate emotion of the writer, and it must convey this emotion, the poet's business is to convey this emotion, to the reader. How does the completion of a poem, which you feel affect you emotionally?

Nowlan: I think probably that when I write something that gives me great satisfaction I feel essentially a sense of power and a sense of having created something and this sometimes comes with things that, you know, in retrospect, in reading them later.

Brunswickan: Do you ever reread to experience the emotion you felt at the time you wrote a poem?

Nowlan: I do occasionally reread some of my old poems but it's generally just before I give a public reading. In many ways I sort of feel the emotion that was there but in the old ones it's not an emotion I can immediately recapture now because I'm a different person.

Brunswickan: You write very serious poetry and also you write humorous poetry. When you write something that is obviously superficially humorous, like The Boil on the President's Ass, are you searching for a deeper emotion?

Nowlan: That's basically searching for a more serious thing. You know there are some things that in a sense are so terrible they can almost only be treated in a humorous way. Some situations are so terrible that you can only sort of laugh at them. I mean this is one of the last final weapons.

Sometimes the only weapon that is left in an intolerable situation, not only in an impersonal intolerable situation but, I mean if you're existing in an intolerable society or confronted with an intolerable aspect of society as long as you can laugh at it, I think that you have a weapon against it. This is what struck me in this poem which is basically aimed against the dehumanization of not only the leaders but the followers. The President is made into almost an object rather than a human being. I feel that he probably forgets that he's a human being himself.

Brunswickan: What is causing the current literary pre-occupation with sex?

Nowlan: I think perhaps one reason for it is that our lives are becoming so divorced from all the old elemental emotions, the emotions of the hunter, the emotions of the farmer actually planting seeds and having them grow. We're so wrapped in cellophane and saran wrap and so on, that for a great people the only elemental emotion left to them is sex. That's the only real basic animal drive that the average person, in urban, middle-class society, experiences.

Brunswickan: The cry of many students at universities everywhere is that the system won't allow us to do the things we want to do. Can you tell us about your formal education?

Nowlan: I really had no formal education at all. The only thing that I learned in school was long division.

Brunswickan: Do you think that this has hindered you in any aspect of your literary career?

Nowlan: It's so difficult to know, whether I would have been a better writer if I had had any formal education or whether I wouldn't have written at all.

Brunswickan: Do you find that your images and symbols repeat themselves in such a way that your poetry does become easier to understand in the light of the previous things that you have written?

Nowlan: Oh, yes. That is very true. There is an unconscious unity that comes about simply because the voice that's speaking is the voice of one human individual.

Brunswickan: How widely are you read in the novelists and poets? Do you think this is compulsory reading for you as a poet?

Nowlan: Well, I read most of the Canadian poets. Not really in a Nationalistic sense, but, I suppose, just to find out what the competitors are doing — but other than that I really don't read very many novels. What I read is history and psychology, things like that.

Brunswickan: What words of wisdom do you have for the young University of New Brunswick poet?

Nowlan: Rocky Marciano's advice to keep your chin down,

your left up, and keep punching. William Carlos Williams had a wonderful piece of advice which I always quote, its from Jack Kerouac's Desolation Angels in which Kerouac and Ginsburg and Gregory Corso went to Williams' house and just before they left asked him if he had any words of wisdom for them and the old man went to the window and drew the curtains and went aside and said the most important thing for you to remember is that there are a hell of a lot of bastards out there. I suppose a more serious piece of advice would be that the vital thing is to learn to distinguish what you really feel from what you think that other people expect you to feel. Then of course comes the second and perhaps harder job of expressing this in such a way that the reader also experiences it.

Brunswickan: Do you have any sort of epic poem in the works?

Nowlan: I sometimes think that all of my good poems are really just part of one long poem.

Brunswickan: Philosophical, sociological, in nature?

Nowlan: No. Basically what I write about is just what it's like



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to be Alden Nowlan. Of course as the years pass the entity known as Alden Nowlan seems to absorb more of the world around him so that I become more concerned with the external world basically I think it was Goethe who said that everything that he's ever written was only a fragment of a great confession — that always part of it.

Brunswickan: Do you feel this same sort of impotency after you have written a poem? Do you ever feel that the next one isn't going to come for a while?

Nowlan: No, generally not immediately after I've written one but if I go on for a period of time without writing anything I begin thinking that perhaps I won't write anything any more, you know, I feel that a poet in a sense is only a poet so long as he is writing a poem.