

Earle Birney versus Al Purdy

The quiet music of poets

Mandel: Now the topic has been defined for us a little more closely by Jon Whyte, and he has asked certain questions here. Why is it that when we discuss Canadian literature, we think first of the poets and second of the novelists? Is poetry a form of expression which reaches us in spite of the barrenness and stretch of this country? Is Canada a desert isle, and therefore particularly apt for the private voices of poets? Is there a strangely large public for poetry in this country? And if there is, why? That, I guess refers to you people here. Has poetry made our national literature into a private island for the elect? Is poetry a private or a social act for the poets individually? And it seems to me that these questions really break down into the questions about communion—is poetry really communication or expression, or something else? More specifically, the question, and I think this a very interesting one, of the relationship between the poet and his audience, and particularly the relationship between the Canadian poet and his Canadian audience. In other words we're going to talk about the effect of a given society on poetry, and the effect of poetry on a given society. Put it another way—if Canada is a desert island, why are we writing poetry? Or how can we be on a desert island in a global village, to put it in McLuhan's terms? I think I'll ask Earle, if he would, to start the discussion, and then we'll just see where it goes from there.

Birney: Well I think that every man is his own Baffin Island. And that perhaps at the beginning, I think that we should find what each of us means by a desert isle. I have a very rich notion of a desert isle. It isn't anything like Purdy's Baffin Island. I think if I'm going to say yes—that I would write poetry on a desert island—I am assuming that there are coconuts and other things so that I don't have to run around all the time working to stay alive, or collecting pieces of rock to throw at the Eskimo dogs in order to attend to the duties of nature, like poor

Al had. He had to wait until he got off the island to write his poems. If we assume that we are talking about the situation within the terms of the metaphor in which one has a way of making a living by working part of the time, then certainly, I don't see why I wouldn't be writing poetry and why somebody else wouldn't be carving statues out of the driftwood, and other people wouldn't be inventing tunes in their head, whether or not anybody else was on the island or was ever going to come to the island. In other words, for me, the beginning of the writing of a poem is something to do strictly with myself. It is scratching an interior itch, or trying to get rid of a memory that is bugging me, and I don't know why it is until I try and get rid of it. And the way of getting rid of it, or of exorcising this little ghost inside me, is to make my spell about it, so I can stop forgetting about it and go on in life and get bugged the next minute by something else.

So that is for me a purely interior sort of thing. However, if the little spell I make seems successful for me, then another thing happens. I want to, I suppose, make a fire and send up smoke signals, in case a boat is going past the island, and somebody can listen to my spell. I try to turn myself into a Merman, or something, with my little song.

There is then the communication thing, I would hope to be able to talk a little about that, but I would certainly firmly say that I would write poetry inside myself, and I would put it down on paper, if I had paper, whether anybody was going to read it or not. In fact, I was trying to remember the first poems I tried to write—not as a graduate, I suppose—I remember that I wrote them because I was trying to seduce a girl. Other methods hadn't worked, so I thought, well, I'd stun her with a poem. But by the time I got the poem written we'd bust up for good. (Laughter all through this part.) And I had the poem, and as a matter of fact, when I thought back to it, I'd really wanted to write the poem anyway, and the

girl didn't matter too much. And I guess that's why I wasn't successful with her. But I wrote this rather bad poem, and then I had a habit. You know you get a fix like that and it's a hard habit to break.

Mandel: Frank, I think, will come particularly to Earle's points about an interior itch, or coming from an interior itch, and becoming a habit, and then the question of communication. I want to ask you to comment about something you said last night, which I think relates to this topic. You referred to the fact of the north—the Laurentian area—its impact upon you, and the great emptiness up there. There's a sense in which that is the desert of Canada. Canada as a desert isle in its landscape—I don't know whether I'm anticipating or directing you in the wrong way here, but I wonder if you'd comment on that first.

Scott: I'd just like to say something about what Earle's talking about. Of course I think every poet's experience is different from any others, and some will write best when they see a lot of people, and are moving around and entertaining and so on. That is true of most of Goethe's life. Others are sort of lonely people. This remarkable French-Canadian dramatist and novelist, Marie Claire Blais, they discovered her, at age 17, in a house that didn't even know she was writing, with five novels and three plays. And she kept it secret from her parents. Now there's an extraordinary uprising of a creative spirit in a young person that didn't have any contacts around at the start. Certainly in my case, while I was writing some poetry—it was pretty terrible stuff—and I was not really in touch with what was going on in the world until I met A. J. M. Smith, Montreal was a desert island, from the point of view of anything that would stimulate people to a cultured outlook. The time I'm talking about is English Montreal in the early 1920s. It was the kind of thing that made me raid the Canadian Author's meet—that was desert enough. But then

I meet a man like Smith and get a few others around, and the island becomes quite sufficiently populated. Particularly when you have access to the new poetry then being written in the states, and the poetry magazine, *Chicago*, and there was nothing coming out of England then, though Hopkins had sort of been discovered. But it was a place where two or three people met together, with their own little magazine, so they could always be sure they would be published. All my early poetry came out in magazines of which, curiously enough, I was an editor. (Laughter)

Well that was just my own personal experience. And as regards this Canadian northland, I don't know. I think all Canadians, know it, have been into it, and I think we're extraordinary people to have a great, wonderful—even if it's fly-bitten—outdoor area where you get this tremendous sense of vastness. And to me it was the vastness of the time scale which kept constantly impressing me. The notion of the ice-age—and who knows, it may be coming back. We've already had three of them. And this huge, sort of presence of nothing. The felt presence of nothing. A sort of waiting. That to me was at least something that had an influence on me. And I don't know of another country in the world where you could have got it in that way. So it's in that sense distinctively Canadian. But that wasn't what impressed me about it.

Mandel: I think this question about the north. Al clearly refers to you. Yesterday, we were talking about it briefly, and it's now been said to this group twice that you went to Baffin Island. And the north is a kind of fact for you.

The emptiness—was it the emptiness?

Purdy: I wanted to write poems, and I wanted to see the north. I had read about Baffin Island when I was a child. And it stuck with me in my memory, which is one of the reasons I went there. But you've sort of crossed me up here, because I wanted to—you know—why write poetry on a desert island. I had it all prepared. May I?

Mandel: Surely. (Laughter) This is the happy panel, this morning, you understand.

Purdy: I started to write at the age of thirteen and in high school I did it primarily to show off to teachers. I kept on—I just never stopped. Earle Birney has said that there's a demon he has to exorcise, it is not like that with me. I do it all the time. I can't help it. I've always done it, and I suppose I always will. But I kept on writing for years. Nobody paid any attention to me, or hardly anybody, and I knew no other writers. And it didn't seem to matter very much. And just before the war, as a kid, I rode the freight trains back and forth across the country. And I wrote then too. It just seems a normal way of life to me. The bit about we're always getting about the tremendous sense of loneliness and isolation we always have here. It's something I've never particularly felt. I think it's a personal thing—I mean we all—it's a matter of communication with other people. And it's always very difficult to communicate at any meaningful level with other people.

Mandel: That's perhaps a good point of departure here. Obviously, the kind of thing we have to be talking about, if we're talking about a desert isle, is loneliness—the alienation of a writer from his

audience. Some kind of alienation to the land. I think we'll just throw this open now and see what happens.

Birney: Well, it's just the human condition. We're born into loneliness, and we have to die alone.

Mandel: Is that why you're a traveller, incidentally? Exotic settings are more common than Canadian ones in your poetry.

Birney: That is really not what I'm trying to say at the moment. This business of loneliness is kind of the natural human condition. And that part of being alive is trying to move out of loneliness. At least to establish one's identity as human by understanding the humanness of other people, and making little signals. You know—"Hey I'm human too, and so are you." If we make enough of those, we, I think, grow spiritually, perhaps to the point where we don't want to kill anybody, and we don't want to hurt anybody else. Because we feel we are hurting ourselves—we are killing ourselves. And I think that artists, perhaps of all sorts, including poets, are more concerned

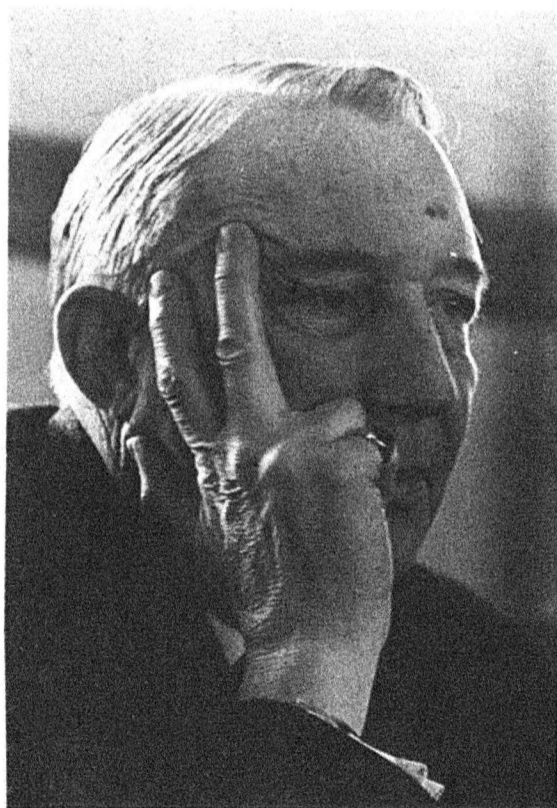
Last week, a number of Canadian poets met for SCW to discuss, among other things, the many aspects of their art. Their statements and conclusions at the literary seminar were recorded, and transcribed. Here are some of their pearls of wisdom.

with this, than with doing other things. And what's why it is not very reasonable for Al Purdy to say he goes on writing all the time because it's the natural thing to do—sure it is—but it is also natural not to write. You see what I mean. I try hard not to write, because there are so many other things I want to do. And writing takes a lot of time. Half the time I try to write, I don't succeed. So traveling for me is in some way an alternation to, to . . .

Mandel: I'm not clear yet. Are we talking about two different kinds of landscape? A kind of an interior landscape, and a kind of exterior one.

Scott: I think we were talking about communication. Because that raises a very big issue. And here again, I think, obviously, Al Purdy didn't have to communicate to write, because he went on writing without communicating, or so he tells us. (Laughter) I think the real writer will write, and I'm sure he likes to write a best-seller or something, but I think the genuine one doesn't go after it. Now to whom does he write is the question. My friend, A. J. M. Smith, has stoutly maintained that the mathematician writes for other mathematicians, and the chemists write for the chemists, and that poets write for the poets. And if he knows that five or six poets understand what he's doing, then that's enough for him. And he's not concerned with the general mass of people at all.

Purdy: Well, of course, that's one of their audiences, but I think that if poets wrote only for poets, it would be extremely limited. After all writing poetry is, to coin another cliché, an essentially private act, unquote, but after that it's a product, it's something else, it's something you give to somebody else and ask them if it's any good. So poets write for more than poets.



F. R. SCOTT AND EARLE BIRNEY

. . . poets of the first water