

Sincerely Al Purdy

Sam Solecki, ed. *Yours, Al: The Collected Letters of Al Purdy*. Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour, 2004. 560 pp.

In a letter to Al Purdy of May 1, 1996, Sam Solecki suggests the possibility of a *Selected Letters of Al Purdy*, to be published after the two finish Purdy's *Collected Poems*:

This could draw on the Woodcock, the Bukowski, the Laurence and the mountains of letters in the three archives at Saskatoon, Lakehead, and Queen's. There's a lot of really good stuff in there both from you and to you. If the volume included some of the letters by people like Bowering, Glassco, Atwood etc. it would have a really good presentation: i.e. the continuing thread would be your voice, but there would be occasional transitional letters by others to show what it is you are referring to in a letter or what the dialogue is about. (516-17)

The passage touches on three of the most unusual features of this wonderful book. First, it is really a *Selected Letters*, as Solecki says in this letter, and not a *Collected Letters*, as it is now called. But as Solecki hoped, it is a much more rewarding selection than the three earlier collections: *The Bukowski / Purdy Letters 1964-1974* (1983); *The Purdy—Woodcock Letters: Selected Correspondence 1964-1984*, edited by George Galt (1987); and *Margaret Laurence—Al Purdy: A Friendship in Letters*, edited by John Lennox (1993). Second, Solecki is a correspondent as well as an editor, and odd as that is, he plays both roles with gusto. Third, *Yours, Al* includes letters to Purdy as well as letters from him. In principle, that shouldn't work, but we can ignore the principle, for the letters from the likes of Earle Birney, Irving Layton, Milton Wilson, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and Pierre Elliott Trudeau are too good to summarize in a note.

In his Introduction, Solecki writes that the letters reveal “the life almost *as it happens* written by a man who before his mid-forties wasn't sure whether he would achieve success in anything, much less as a writer” (6). As in *The Last Canadian Poet: An Essay on Al*

Purdy (1999), Solecki notes that in both his letters and his early publications, Purdy was even uncertain about his name: “was he Alfred Wellington Purdy, Alfred W. Purdy, A.W. Purdy, Alfred Purdy or Al?” (5) As usual, Solecki vividly captures the qualities that make Purdy unique, though Purdy’s years of uncertainty are [page 123] covered quickly in this volume. There are only a few letters from the 1940s, and by the time of his November 1, 1959 letter to Birney (“All the goddamn Birneys wander over the globe looking for poems as I do...Do they?—57), the Purdy voice is recognizable. Solecki refers to the “the various, sometimes contradictory aspects of a great writer’s self caught in the voices and personae of letters written to various people at different times and on different occasions” (5), but my overall impression of *Yours, Al* is less of multiple personae than of a surprisingly sincere and consistent self-representation. Readers of the earlier collections know that Purdy is most irreverent with Bukowski, and more distant with Woodcock than with Laurence, but for the most part *Yours, Al* gives us the Al Purdy that we like to think we know. Of course in a way Purdy creates a different persona in every poem and every letter, and he was critical of writers who too readily identified themselves with one style. So he tells George Bowering in 1992 that “Most people work to achieve an identifiable style...I’d prefer not to have one myself, and make all poems different.” Then he adds the kind of self-deprecating qualification in which these letters abound: “I hear you yell pronto you could pick out my stuff in a dark room wearing ear plugs. But what boots it, this kinda talk” (474). What Atwood says of Purdy’s poetry (in her Foreword to *Beyond Remembering: The Collected Poems*) is also true of his letters: “underneath that flapping overcoat and that tie with a mermaid on it and that pretence of shambling awkwardness—yes, it’s a pretence, but only partly, for among other things Purdy is doing a true impersonation of himself—there’s a skilful master-conjurer.”

What Purdy was most sincerely interested in was Canadian poetry, and he was always happy to share his interest. He was also interested in other writers, and he has striking remarks on such poets as Robinson Jeffers, D.H. Lawrence, and W.H. Auden. But most of these letters discuss Canadian poetry, often with Canadian poets, and there will never be another volume like it. The only parallel that I can think of is Andy Wainwright’s edition of Margaret Laurence’s letters to Canadian writers, and valuable as those letters are, Purdy’s are better. I will focus on the correspondence with Birney and Layton, since they played crucial roles in Purdy’s development as a poet, but first I will note some of the remarkable moments in other letters. In a 1971 letter to Northrop Frye, Purdy states his admiration while keeping his distance: “I enjoyed *The Bush Garden*, which is both a suitable title and also

unsuitable. I think it no longer applies as fully as it once did. Personally, I've never felt cut off from any centres of culture or chit-chat with artists etc." (185). In a letter to Laurence of the following year, he has no problem with *Survival*, since he knows it's less the key to Canadian [page 124] mythologies than the key to Atwood: "Best part of book is impression here's a sharp mind that read & thought & decided—One doesn't have to agree with her all the time—Anyway, what such a book does is to tend to create a critical climate for one's own work, viz Eliot—Any poems or fiction Atwood writes now is liable to be measured with her own yardstick" (213). In a remarkable exchange with Jack McClelland in 1980 (surprisingly not included in the industrious Solecki's *The Selected Letters of Jack McClelland*), Purdy asks his publisher for a candid opinion of two poems and receives this response: "Frankly, Al, I would forget both these poems. I would tear them up. You complain that Layton doesn't tear up his worst poems. He should and so should you..." (324). What does Purdy think of that? "This was a great letter from you, exactly what I wanted. Nothing wishy-washy about it, pure dislike" (325). He is similarly receptive to the more measured criticism that he receives from Dennis Lee and Solecki, but he has good reasons for his different view of Milton Acorn in 1973:

I'd distrust any review you'd write of me, simply for reasons of black and white excess in any direction. At the end, you'd be liable to change me round to something I'm completely not, just as you did in that Souster article some years ago. For you have such belief in your own rightness no matter what that you can conceive no other interpretation. You've changed your mind completely on Souster from what you tell me, and yet in that piece not too long ago he was the common man, the god you espouse and believe in. Now he is not. There has to be some balance in these things. Souster is a damn good poet, who does write of ordinary things and people, but by writing about them makes himself not quite ordinary. Just as you are not a carpenter and too damn lazy ever to be one again. You expect more from Souster, both in his political views and poems, than he is able to give. And you do the same with me.

(229)

I cite the passage at length because of its merit and because it shows that when he needs to, Purdy can stop impersonating himself and say what almost no one else could have said. And that's true even if Purdy is already thinking of eventual publication, as he certainly is later.

Purdy starts his correspondence with Birney and Layton in similar ways: by writing them as an unknown admirer. The first letter in *Yours, Al* is a 1947 letter to Birney about the editorial policy of the *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, then edited by Birney. The correspondence increases in frequency and interest after a 1955 letter co-written by Purdy and Curt Lang calling Birney the “greatest poet in Canada today” (26). After first noting [page 125] that he likes the poems of Purdy’s that he has read in periodicals, Birney argues that “there aren’t and there never have been poets in Canada in the same street with Dylan Thomas or Auden or Eliot or Browning or Emily Dickinson or or etc.” (29). We might expect Purdy to receive that view with nationalist indignation, but instead he seems to have taken Birney’s words to heart, and so years later he writes Woodcock that “I believe there’s much very fine writing appearing in this country. Not ‘great’ writing, and I can’t think of any great writer right now in the world” (255). Who would have expected Al Purdy to put “great” in scare quotes? The correspondence continues for the next three decades, revealing why Purdy tells Birney in 1961 that “I’ve always come under the spell of your poetry (in the last ten years or so) in a way I never could with Layton’s” (68). A great moment occurs in 1964 when Birney is outraged by Purdy’s remarks on Bliss Carman’s influence on young poets twenty years before: “Jesus! What ‘young poets’? Name ONE in Canada (you certainly couldn’t outside of Canada) who was imitating Bliss Carman in 1944 or indeed in 1934 or 1924” (89). Purdy’s reply shouldn’t be as much of a surprise to those who heard Purdy speak at the Carman symposium in 1989 as it must have been to Birney: “you challenge me to name a poet who was influenced by Carman. That’s easy. ME. He was the first reason for my writing poetry, and no snide comments please” (91).

The correspondence with Layton starts in 1955, when Layton responds to Purdy’s praise (in a letter not included here and perhaps missing) with words that must have thrilled Purdy: “I have frequently seen and admired your pieces in the *Canadian Forum*. There are things you do that no one else in Canada excepting yourself seems to be doing” (45). In the following year, Layton says, “I think you’ve at last found the form suitable to your free-swinging imagination. Not only that, it permits you to comment as well as to imagine. What you need is a form that allows you lots of elbow room, to slide in and out of your many moods and complexities, your passionate uncertainties” (46). Layton is one of many Canadian writers who appears at his most generous in *Yours, Al*. His influence on Purdy was briefer but more intense than Birney’s, and it has been well discussed by Solecki in *The Last Canadian Poet*. By 1961 Purdy expresses his reservations about Layton to Birney in the letter cited above, and in

1965 Purdy tells Bukowski that “I really weep real tears when a guy like that, who has said so much, and COULD say much more it seems to me, succumbs to his own goddam pr crap” (105). The remarkable thing is that with Layton as with Acorn, Louis Dudek, and other cantankerous personalities, Purdy takes pains to remain on good terms. When Layton attacks Elspeth Cameron [page 126] for her 1985 biography of him, Purdy recognizes that his behaviour is both inexcusable and predictable, and he says this to Cameron: “You say something to the effect that Irving never grew up, is the eternal adolescent, with which I agree. But then, I ask, did I ever grow up? Did you?” (413). In one of his last letters to Layton, Purdy says, “And you, despite your habit of firing all obscenity guns at me now and then, I’ve always regarded as a friend” (405). It’s an indication of Purdy’s tact that Layton returns the favour a couple of years later, praising *Piling Blood* and adding that he values their “continued friendship over these many years” (435).

Unless Solecki has exhausted the subject, as seems unlikely even for him, one area of research that these letters open is the influence of previous writers on Purdy. Another is Purdy’s role as editor, for the letters show that he took seriously his responsibilities as the editor of *The New Romans: Candid Critical Opinions of the U.S.* (1968), *Storm Warning: The New Canadian Poets* (1971), and *Storm Warning 2: The New Canadian Poets* (1976). Another is the relative importance of Purdy’s own books. There is a widespread agreement that Purdy’s “breakthrough” comes in *Poems for all the Annettes* in 1962, and that three years later *The Cariboo Horses* “establishes his reputation,” as Solecki notes (14-15). But I was surprised to find that Purdy thought (see his letter to George Galt of Dec. 21, 1984) that his best later books were not *North of Summer* (1967) and *The Stone Bird* (1980) but *Wild Grape Wine* (1968) and *Piling Blood* (1984). Still another area is Purdy’s influence on younger poets. *Yours, Al* contains important letters to and from such younger poets as Lynn Crosbie, Judith Fitzgerald, Steven Heighton, and Susan Musgrave. Given that influence, we might ask if Purdy is “the last Canadian poet” after all. I say that not to disparage Solecki, but to emphasize that the way to respond to him is with the generous contention that he deserves. Even his notes conduct raids on received opinion: Lister Sinclair is “a much more important cultural figure than most of the contemporary (post-1980) poets, playwrights and novelists with more substantial entries” in the standard reference works (43 n1); Norman Mailer is “probably the best living writer not to have won the Nobel Prize” (89 n2); and Brian Mulroney is “best remembered for his Irish song duets with Ronald Reagan” (425 n2). The most urgent task for Purdy criticism is to come to terms with Solecki.

