

Purdy's Reputation

Linda Rogers, ed. *Al Purdy: Essays on His Works*. Toronto: Guernica Writers Series, 2002. 166 pp.

We don't need any more books theorizing aspects of Canadian text production and the like right now. We need a lot more books about the poetry of Margaret Avison. Or Gwendolyn MacEwen. Or Al Purdy. The truth is that there aren't many books about poetry because fiction is easier to use when you are pushing theory. A few years ago I used to go to academic conferences and deliver papers on poetry, because all the other professors would be checking the semiotics or identity politics of our novels.

Every day, in every country of the world, there is a book published about the writing of Margaret Atwood, about her fiction. This is a good thing. But Sam Solecki's *The Last Canadian Poet* is the only full-length study of Al Purdy. This is the way it is for Canada's major poets. About most of them, the only books we see are those short items in such series as those run by ECW, McClelland and Stewart, and Copp Clark. I did the Copp Clark one on Al Purdy (117 pp.) in 1970, and that was my idea, after Copp Clark had asked me to do the one on Mordecai Richler the fiction writer.

The most recent such line is called "Writers Series," and comes from Guernica Editions. Number 9 in that series is the Al Purdy number, edited by Linda Rogers, a poet from Vancouver Island, where Purdy spent his last days.

The book is small in format and modest in length, at 166 pages. Almost a hundred of those pages are taken up by the three real "essays on his works," and the rest is made up of memoirs. Is there any meaning in the fact that the essays are by male critics and the memoirs by female writers (with the exception of a little piece by Michael Ondaatje)?

It could have used more editing than it received. There are some typos. Journalist Catherine Porter alleges that when she went to visit Purdy at his house in Sidney, "he opened the door, hands on hips" (162). I don't think that I really want to know how Al accomplished this feat. Editor Rogers supplies a dandy memoir late in the book, but her introduction is guilty of dangling modifiers and other producers of confusion and nonsense. I have not decided what I am invited to make of this passage, for instance: "Like the prophets of Israel, the First Promised Land, there is a sexual-pedagogical [**Page 96**] mix in the seeds he has sewn [*sic*], a frisson she felt in the letters and meetings that made their friendship more than a lesson or a flirtation between an old man and a young woman, something seminal in her life" (12).

Purdy and his readers are fortunate that one of the essays here is by Stan Dragland. His 43 pages make this book worth having, especially if one does not own a copy of Dragland's book of essays *The Bees of the Invisible* (incorrectly titled in Rogers's book). Dragland, who left academia and moved to Newfoundland a few years ago, is not so much a professor-critic as he is a reader who wants to tell you how he understands a writer's work. In "Al Purdy's Poetry: Openings," as in all his essays, he is always right on. Here he lets you know why he got tired of Al's barnstorming poems about home-made beer and the like, and why he cherishes the later and more serious ones that Purdy did not include in his public readings.

We imagine Purdy in later life, bent over his poem, wanting to comprehend why we lie and persist. Purdy was the last of the poets who tried to figure out whether they live in God's world, or history, or geological time. Dragland hears "The Dead Poet" as a mid-career poem indicating the successes to come, and, bless him, he has the nerve to say that "the poem first thrilled me in 1980" (45). He says that he recognized an obvious Purdy poem, but one with all "the rough-edged Purdy persona[,] refined out of it" (15).

Purdy's reputation, like that of Jack Kerouac, is usually abused by people, including himself, who trade in stories of boozing and brawling. Dragland will have none of that, looking early and late to find Purdy's Canadianism in his "voice of refined simplicity" (24). It is a voice that survived the baleful influence of the Canadian high school poets, talked in several disguises in the first good works, and leads Dragland to say this: "I feel that Purdy doesn't speak, so much as he sings, in some of these new poems" (29). But curiously, the more

serious the poems grew, the less likely the Bard of Ameliasburgh was to read them aloud. These are the poems that Dragland goes for as his deeply felt essay argues for a poet of the earth who was indeed a "sensitive man" as the joking Purdy repeated in the barnstorming poem "At the Quinte Hotel." Yes, Al was hoping that we would get the joke being hidden by the joke. Stan Dragland was the perfect person to open Purdy's secret and tell us why to respect it.

Dennis Lee's essay is orderly and insightful, and delights in anything like paradox that shows up in Purdy's enormous totality. Sometimes Lee does a handspring into bullshit, coming up with fanciful locutions that Purdy would deride while secretly enjoying. So we allow "things which [Page 97] are incommensurable with one another, yet which coexist" (84), because such is the heady world of poetry, is it not?

Lee is interested in the polyphonic nature of Al Purdy's poems. He attempts to distinguish it from Pound's Modernist practice, which Lee deftly describes as a "hard-edge mosaic technique...where [*sic*] fragment A comes in one voice, fragment B in another, and the two are banged down side by side on the page with no transition" (88). Lee says that this has been the "main polyphonic tradition in this century," and he is right. Now Lee is interested in seeing the manner in which Purdy's polyphony differs.

Though he does not nail it, perhaps, he does catch it in a blanket. It is likely that all poets get hints of a great exactness and adore the moments when it appears reachable. They have their various ways of approaching. In his later poems Al Purdy exhibited the moment-by-moment venture of his ontology, all the while including his reservations about being there at all. "Entering these moments in the poetry," writes Lee, "we sense a great hush which sustains the disparate things that are, and renders their all-over-the-map simultaneity and their vocal flow coherent. Such moments don't seem willed by the poet; they seem sponsored by being" (97).

Purdy, I see, takes his toothpick out of his mouth, and his honking voice says, "Ya think so? Really?"

Lee winds up ranking Purdy among the best English-language poets of the twentieth century. In Sam Solecki's essay we hear about the influences that some of those poets had on Purdy's work and growth. We see the rural autodidact Ontario youth trying to assimilate Yeats while imitating Carman. According to Purdy, especially in his last

years, his *semblable* was D.H. Lawrence, but Solecki has a point when he brings up our own most notable conservative nightsoil-disturber: "Looking back on their generation, I have a hunch that Purdy can only be understood in Canadian poetry facing Layton whose poems of the 1950s showed him a way of becoming a modern poet without giving up either the poetry he had grown up with or the poetry of his self-education" (122).

That is insightful. And it probably explains Purdy's central influence on the more formally conservative of our lyrical poets of any accomplishment. In this way, as in others, Purdy's is a national voice, a voice, some people will go so far as to say, of our earth:

stand like a spell
of the wild gold sunlight,
knowing the aches stones have,
how mountains suffer,
and a wet blackbird feels [Page 98]
flying past in the rain.
This is the still centre,
an involvement in silences—
("Winter Walking," *Collected Poems* 41-
42)

This is good exact stuff, and worthy of its influence. (But I can already see a book of poems coming from Vancouver Island or New Brunswick entitled *The Ache Stones Have*, or worse, *An Involvement in Silences*.)

Michael Ondaatje's foreward to the last collected poems is reprinted here. It is a mere three pages in length, but I mention it because Ondaatje maintains that Souster and Acorn "had prepared the way" (58) for the advent of Purdy. However, I remember knowing some of Al Purdy's poems before the arrival of Acorn. One day Earle Birney and I were looking at some Acorn poems in the *Canadian Forum* or some such place. "I think that's Al Purdy picking an absurd pen name," said Earle. He said that he had received some poems from Acorn, but that the return address had been Ameliasburgh. Well, I thought, Milton, okay, the great cosmic poet, and Acorn, okay a funny name, but promise of a mighty oak, the Milton of trees. It turned out that that flag of Prince Edward Island, Acorn's home province, has oak trees on it, and that Ameliasburgh is in Prince Edward County, Ontario. I figure that a poet like Milton Acorn leads one into the

coincidences of conspiracy theory that are so much like the pathways you try to follow when you are writing down a poem.

Rosemary Sullivan's piece portrays Purdy as the essential Canadian poet, a tricky mythographer but a darling. Linda Rogers's little biography places Purdy among the women—mother, famous wife Eurithe, and Vancouver Island friends in his old age. One of these, Susan Musgrave, romanticizes herself as usual, but then offers us a genuinely loving tribute to the old goat. Finally, there is a piece reprinted from the *National Post*, of all places. It is hard to figure out why it is here. It is addressed to people who do not customarily read Canadian poetry but who like to read personality pieces. It has some pretty bad English in it ("Purdy was a 76-year-old high-school dropout who had rode the rails across the country") (157). It was obviously lifted from the paper and dropped into the book without suffering much of a glance. The opening paragraph is repeated halfway through the article. I think I know the reason. The first paragraph was one of