

DOCUMENTS

**“Stories in the Poems”: Al Purdy
and the Editing of Andrew
Suknaski’s *Wood Mountain Poems*****by J.A. Weingarten**

Scholars discussing Al Purdy’s friendships often focus on his apprenticeship under Irving Layton and the Montreal poets of the 1950s rather than on his role as a mentor for younger writers. Few critics have made more than brief mention of his profound influence on Canadian literature after 1960.¹ In “Beyond Forgetting: Editing Purdy] Purdy Editing” (2008), for example, Dean Irvine gestures to the fact that “Purdy participated in the editorial construction of Canadian poetry” after the late 1960s (71), but his article predominantly explores Purdy’s personal “revisionist practice” (73). There is still much to say about Purdy’s role as the editor of other poets’ collections—Andrew Suknaski’s *Wood Mountain Poems* (1976), for instance.² The record of Purdy and Suknaski’s collaboration—the letters they exchanged between 1974 and 1976—reveals that Purdy exercised extreme creative control over Suknaski’s breakthrough poetry volume and greatly contributed to the emerging poet’s positive reception.³ Their collaboration invites scholars to reassess the degree to which they might grant Purdy greater textual authority over this text and other collections he edited or oversaw. In the specific case of *Wood Mountain Poems*, critics should treat the volume as a textbook example of “multiple authorship.”

Purdy met Suknaski through Earle Birney in Vancouver in the mid 1960s. He eventually recruited Suknaski for *Storm Warning: The New Canadian Poets* (1971), a poetry anthology that gave the younger poet an ideal opportunity to announce his presence to the Canadian literary community. After hinting at collaboration several times after *Storm Warning* was published, Suknaski formally enlisted Purdy’s help with *Wood Mountain Poems* in late 1974. Disheartened by a rejection letter from Anansi and months of silence from Macmillan, he wrote to Purdy on 9 October: “if Macmillan does nothing [with *Wood Mountain Poems*], I’ll send you old & new stuff if you still wanna do the book.” His proposal precipitated an intense yearlong collaboration, during which Purdy wrote letters of sup-

port for Suknaski to the Canada Council for the Arts and provided editorial assistance. Purdy's edits (mostly done during May 1975) came more than a year after Suknaski had already submitted a manuscript to Macmillan. This manuscript was one of more than half a dozen versions of *Wood Mountain Poems* (including drafts for a 1973 chapbook of the same name) that Suknaski wrote between 1970 and 1976. But, unbeknownst to Macmillan's editors, he considered the manuscript he had submitted incomplete. He had written major additions by the fall of 1974, and he reshaped his collection several times thereafter; until July 1975, in fact, he attempted to edit, add, or delete dozens of poems. Even the document that he sent to Purdy in February 1975 is missing several poems that were included in the version Macmillan published in 1976.

Purdy's drastic edits of the manuscript further explain why the published version of *Wood Mountain Poems* differs significantly from earlier manuscripts. "Louis Leveille" is a case in point. The poem derives from an obscure article about a Wood Mountain resident, Louis Lavallee, which appeared in the *Edmonton Journal* in 1929.⁴ "Louis Leveille" is well over four hundred lines long in Suknaski's 1974 draft of *Wood Mountain Poems*, and he replicates much of his source material verbatim. Purdy, seemingly unaware that "Louis Leveille" was a found poem, crossed out all but approximately twenty lines, which constitute the final version of the poem. This specific instance is perhaps the most extreme of many creative choices Purdy made.

Indeed, a comparison of Suknaski's drafts, Purdy's copy of the manuscript (which can be found among Purdy's literary papers at Queen's University), and the published collection shows that Purdy thoroughly reworked Suknaski's manuscript. He altered poems such as "Teton Sioux," which was split into several poems instead of just one. He retitled other poems. "Phillip Well" was published, perhaps erroneously, as "Philip Well"; Purdy also reduced it by eight pages, which, among other things, removed an allusion to Sinclair Ross's fictional character, "Philip Bentley."⁵ Numerous dedications disappeared from the text: a dedication to Barry McKinnon, John Newlove, Phil Piffer, and Dale Zieroth was dropped ("Poets whose prairie poems form the energy field making these poems possible" [n.p.]), as was a dedication to "al purdy" included in one of Suknaski's concluding pieces, "Anon." Purdy also extended the lines of many poems, probably in order to save space (and money) and to enhance readability. If poems were not reduced, they were usually removed; Purdy cut "Crowfoot," "Lanterns," "Ballad of Botoche [*sic*]," and several other poems. Lastly, he reordered Suknaski's poems so as to offer, as he saw it,

a more meaningful structure. Purdy believed, for example, that “Home-
stead” would most effectively set a tone for *Wood Mountain Poems* and
thus moved it from the middle of the volume to the front; he also reduced
the poem from fifteen to eight sections. These examples provide just a
sampling of the differences between the draft Purdy received in February
1975 and the one he mailed to Macmillan in June that same year.

The extent to which Purdy shaped *Wood Mountain Poems* and insisted
upon strict control over the editing process raises significant questions
about textual authority. Purdy and Suknaski’s collaboration speaks to what
Jack Stillinger calls “multiple authorship”—that is, the contexts in which
“identifiable authorship turns out to be a plurality of authors” (22). Still-
inger’s study of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot’s collaboration is an instructive
example: “[i]n the case of *The Waste Land*, it took one poetic genius to cre-
ate those 434 lines in the first place, and another to get rid of the several
hundred inferior lines surrounding and obscuring them” (128). The case of
Purdy and Suknaski seems comparable: what Purdy removed from *Wood
Mountain Poems* was nonessential material, and there are no records to
suggest that Suknaski disapproved of these edits. On the contrary, both the
extremely positive reception of *Wood Mountain Poems* and Suknaski’s
later request for Purdy’s help with *The Ghosts Call You Poor* (1978) indi-
cate that Purdy, in Suknaski’s eyes, retained the poetic vision of the early
manuscripts.

The final result may have pleased both writers, but Purdy seemed quite
frustrated with the editing process. Suknaski was disorganized, relocated
frequently (even Macmillan’s editors did not know his whereabouts at
times), and left *Wood Mountain Poems* entirely in Purdy’s hands. Contend-
ing with these difficulties, Purdy expressed his irritation to George Wood-
cock: “did I mention that I edited Andy Suknaski [*sic*] big sprawling
manuscript for *Wood Mountain Poems*, wrote an Intro and it will be pub-
lished by Macmillan come spring [1976]? I’m pleased by this, of course.
Andy seemed to have no idea how to get a manuscript ready for publica-
tion, which was surprising to me” (*Purdy-Woodcock* 148). His impatience
is equally apparent in his letters to Suknaski, such as Letter 6 and Letter 7
below.

If the process was so laborious, why did Purdy put so much time and
effort into editing Suknaski’s poetry? Michael P. Farrell argues that collab-
oration necessitates “a shared vision” (7), as does Vera John-Steiner:
“[s]hared vision [...] is crucial to successful collaboration” (64). Certainly
both poets appear to have shared a poetics informed by history, just as John
Lennox and Sam Solecki have argued was the case with Purdy and Marg-

aret Laurence.⁶ Purdy's introduction to *Wood Mountain Poems* could easily be mistaken for an introduction to his own work: "[Suknaski's] poems are a clear look at people and places of Wood Mountain, seeing both past and present simultaneously with a kind of double vision. [...] [T]ime exists as a territory to explore; the dead are raised, in the sense of re-creating them on the now pinpoint of here" (Introduction 11). Reviewers of *In Search of Owen Roblin* (1974) made similar observations about Purdy's writing. Bob Bragg, for example, remarks that "Purdy draws out a universal meaning and shows the study of history to be a consolation in the face of the ever-present" (12). Perhaps the historical consciousness that Purdy and Suknaski shared motivated Purdy to continue editing the latter poet's volume.

More interestingly, what Purdy calls Suknaski's "now pinpoint of here" complements his own ruminations on "here" and "now" in poems such as "Remains of an Indian Village," "Method for Calling up Ghosts," "Roblin's Mills," and "The Battlefield at Batoche." Adverbial pairings such as "here and now"—one of Purdy's most noticeable habits in his poetry—mark moments in which his poet-speaker ponders the immediate presence of a past paradoxically distant, temporally and sometimes spatially. It seems appropriate, therefore, that he would value a historical impulse and "sense of place" in other writers' works, given how central such concepts were to his own poetry. He introduced *North of Summer* (1967), for instance, with a lament that "[n]one of the travel books about the north gave me a specific *sense of place*, being more concerned with fact and not impression, size and not colour, information and not feeling" (81, emphasis added). It is Purdy's "sense of place," or "spirit of place"—to use Solecki's preferred phrase—that exposes "the influence of personal, familial, and public history" on the present (Solecki "Grain" 101). This sense of place parallels the "personal search" that Suknaski undertakes in his own writing (Suknaski and Hillis 109). That Purdy, in his introduction to *Wood Mountain Poems*, draws special attention to Suknaski's "sense of place" is therefore no surprise (Introduction 11). The parallel might further explain his investment in the younger poet's work.

Although the Purdy-Suknaski correspondence partly illuminates an established poet's effort to help an emerging poet express this sense of place in the most effective way possible, readers might take issue with Purdy's iron-fisted editorial style, his curt dismissals of Suknaski's requests, or his elaborate reconfiguration of Suknaski's poems. Regardless, Suknaski asked for and accepted Purdy's help. It seems undeniable, too, that Purdy did more good than harm: without his editorial decisions, his

pertinacity, and his intervention with Macmillan on Suknaski's behalf, *Wood Mountain Poems*, one of the most groundbreaking poetry volumes of the 1970s and the collection that secured a young poet's reputation, might never have been published.

Editorial Notes

Because Suknaski burned an enormous portion of his own archive, this selection of Purdy-Suknaski correspondence only includes epistolary material retrieved from Queen's University's Al Purdy Fonds (stored in Kathleen Ryan Hall), though I have consulted drafts of Suknaski's *Wood Mountain Poems* at the University of Manitoba for information included in my endnotes. Queen's University has only one folder of Purdy-Suknaski correspondence, which contains approximately one hundred and seventy letters written between 7 February 1969 and 20 November 1980. Most of these letters are fairly unremarkable: they contain information about individual travel plans, upcoming publications or projects, and social engagements. The letters reproduced below represent the bulk of Purdy and Suknaski's discussions about editing and publishing *Wood Mountain Poems*. There are, however, scattered mentions of this collection throughout their correspondence. Such letters either repeat information or reveal little about the editing process, and so they have not been included here.

The following correspondence has been faithfully reproduced, though there are corrections to minor errors in spelling and punctuation, and the dates of letters have been altered to conform to MLA guidelines. Suknaski's idiosyncratic punctuation, however, remains unchanged. He almost never uses capitalization, a practice that I have respected. Purdy and Suknaski use various shorthand phrases, which are represented exactly below. Punctuation has been kept inside quotation marks for the sake of consistency and readability. In instances where words are missing, square brackets contain the appropriate word. Square brackets have also been used to supplement in-text material, such as partial names of people and poems. Square brackets with ellipses indicate excluded material. Many of these exclusions are discussions about personal or professional topics that have no bearing on my primary focus, which is Purdy's editorial work. All signatures, "Al" and "Andy," were autographed in the original text. In that regard, I have not distinguished between handwritten and typed text. Book or journal titles have been italicized, whereas they often appear underlined or capitalized in their letters; this choice makes the representation of such titles consistent and helps distinguish poems (which Suknaski also capital-

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ized in his letters) from books. The titles of poems are enclosed within quotation marks for sake of visibility.

The Letters

LETTER 1

27 October 1974⁷

Dear Al,

got your wd mtn letter & all. thanks for intro letter.⁸ read *In Search [of Owen Roblin]* once again in last couple days—jib poem caved my chest in like an abandoned root cellar crumbling. said to myself—‘well eff! your wood mtn efforts (like a cucumber grown in prairie drought) stand about that high to a ripe & fat ontario pumpkin in Ameliasburgh Township (County? Whatever.) when compared to *In Search of Owen Roblin...*’

Okay, best

andy

LETTER 2

30 October 1974

For chrissake Andy,

when I found you were living at Wd. Mtn. from the C[anada] C[ouncil] application, I sent you a copy of *Owen Roblin* to that address. I hope it catches up to you sooner or later and doesn’t get ruined in the mails.

[...]

Thanks for the good word on *Roblin*. I liked the old pictures, not the new ones so much. Re my grandfather, thinking of him brings back other things I now regret I didn’t write about...And yet, the piece was supposed to be about Roblin, and would’ve got sidetracked if too much ‘my grandfather.’ Still, I have memory of the stories he told me when I was pre-school, living as a caretaker in the woods and shotgun-blasting a mouse off a bowl of applesauce without touching the bowl. Musta shook his cabin down nearly. I stole a dime from his poker money box once, and got caught, and remember his reaction till death.

Let's think about me editing or whatever yacallit your Wd. Mtn. poems if Macmillan goes s[outh?].⁹ If you feel like it.

I expect to be in Peru after Christmas or perhaps before if Eurithe has her way. Incas and all that.

love,

Al

LETTER 3

22 February 1975

dear editors [at Macmillan]—

i don't know what decisions youve come to with *Wood Mountain Poems*. but ive come to some of my own. the cycle has grown and there is a book two to wd mtn poems completed and titled *Leaving Wood Mountain*. i no longer wish to see a book edited from just those poems. i feel that a much stronger and much more interesting book will come from a good editing from both manuscripts. ive therefore decided to let Al Purdy edit a book and write a preface (as he did for milton acorn in *I've Tasted My Blood*). im sending al a xerox copy of the manu[script] I sent you—plus all new things. if you are interested in considering the book he edits, i would be grateful. i would give you two months to come to a decision on that manu[script]. if this all strikes you as pretentious and turns you off, then return my manuscript to above address C.O.D.

sincerely,

andrew suknaski¹⁰

LETTER 4

22 April 1975

dear al

75

i hope the hell that stuff got to you. enclosed is a xerox of letter i got from [macmillan] via taxi two hours before i left for UNION to come back home. kind of humourous after 8 months silence.¹¹

wrote them today and sd okay. you kin take book to them when youre done and draw up a contract with them and take whatever % you want from what i'm to get. if they take the book.

[...]

well—they're tearing down jimmie hoy's¹² old place (the parthenon of wood mountain) for cheap lumber. someone bought it for the back taxes. the cpr station was dragged away last year. they cut down a tall maple nearby (where i used to lean my bike whenever i went to play with the station agent's daughter) to move the building.

fix up my place some more and prune a few trees. a mist over the village the other night. lowflying ducks and geese overhead all night kept me awake. a couple good poems outta the sleeplessness.

okay al—love to you and eurithe

andy

LETTER 5
4 May 1975

dear al,

[...]

about the *Weekend* piece you'd like to do on this part of the country. i won't be here this summer. i begin work on the 18 may and work till sept 30th. then return here to hunt a bit. if you want to look around this part of the country (WOOD MOUNTAIN) then my second cousin lee soparlo (about your age) i'm sure would be more than happy to spend a day showing you different spots.¹³

[...]

listen al—maybe i bore you with all this. but i just try to help you a bit here. you got some stories in the poems. but there are more here...and i think you kin get a hell of a good story outta it all. and a few poems yourself. and don't worry. [sid] marty¹⁴ maybe worrys about others 'horning in on his myths' as he sez but hey this is a big sky here many coulees to hold whole dead herds of cattle and there's room for all of us. and if you write a better poem outta goin to SIOUX INDIAN CEMETARY more power to you and me caus that just adds to my growth anyway since it mainly begins with you and [earle] birney anyway.

okay enough.

re book. exclusions? No longer care for iii sandia man section. the other two parts cd be separate poems.¹⁵ donno. have doubts. but you kin decide. "INDIAN RINGS ON THE EDGE OF TONITA COULEE"....i've changed first three lines

thus:

'the meadow lark's song proclaiming spring
waters lazily flowing from wood mountain peat moss springs
becoming five mile creek running north'¹⁶

i thought it was 12 mile creek but lee [soparlo] sez it is in fact 5 mile creek. [fraser] sutherland (*Northern Journey*)¹⁷ didnt like heralding i changed it for better or worse.¹⁸ i donno. use what word you think is best. the end of the poem is changed too. maybe for worse in this chapbuk version. maybe second last ending was better. i leave that to yr eye and decision. i think this maybe is a good lead off poem with "POEM TO SITTING BULL AND HIS SON CROWFOOT" FOLLOWING. you decide. Page 28 xiii epilogue of the "HOMESTEAD" poem re: family. that i want excluded. along with SUICIDE NOTE.¹⁹ best to end with "the mirror."²⁰ you do what you want with "PHILLIP WELL." last section has always troubled me tho i think there is something redemptive about [it]. [barry] mckinnon only liked the "homestead" part of it. and printed it.²¹ anyway you kin decide. "ERINA" poem p 45 cd end with '90th birthday.'²² you note that rest becomes part of "TONITA" poem. "TO THE MEMORY OF S.C." i don't want in. too heavy. "POEM (ODE?) TO THE OLDEST BROTHER" i don't want in. too heavy.²³

[...]

okay al. love to yous there.

77

andy

LETTER 6
18 May 1975

Dear Andy,

I'm cutting and slashing your manuscript fairly radically and mercilessly. In long poems, I'm sometimes transposing parts earlier in poem or later. I'm making single poems out of what may have been poems of several parts. In short, I'm trying to get a manuscript finally that will be published.

Worst of it is that I have to do much typing, probably to type the whole works again, which I resent but seems necessary. So it'll take longer than I thought.

If you have any objections to such harsh treatment to your poems you'd better tell me right away. But as I see it, I have to be a dictator. I have to make the final manuscript as I think it should be. It's your manuscript tho, so if you don't like all this, stop me by saying so.

I believe you said you were leaving Wd. Mtn. on the 18th. I assume Deer Lodge.²⁴ However, I don't think you said, so addressing this to Wd. Mtn. from which it will be forwarded. Give me your new address as soon as you can.

love,

Al

LETTER 7
19 May 1975

Dear Andy,

I've been typing and rearranging your poems. I've cut "Homestead" down to six pages, for instance. And I've included "epilogue," which I think absolutely necessary. Okay, I know you don't want it in, presumably for pretty obvious reasons. I had forgotten your strictures when I re-typed the

poem. But I think “Homestead” is your central basic poem, and if you leave out “epilogue” you cut something vital, real, tragic, and human. We all live with that sort of thing, in ourselves and others. If we can’t, and they can’t, face up to it, then we are all the less for it. If I hadn’t seen that section, and known that it was very good, then perhaps I could live with editing the manuscript without it. My reasons for including it are both literary and human: I just don’t believe you or I or anyone should sweep unpleasant things under the rug. Because that “epilogue” and the following “suicide note” adds up to a magnificent poem. Possibly a masterpiece. I rather think so.

I must have freedom to edit your book (your book) the way I want to edit it. I expect to see it published and yourself receiving some long overdue praise. No wonder you couldn’t get it published before tho, because all the poems you sent amount to a mish-mash, no organization, no sequential development, no placing poems in such a way that each adds to the others so that the total is more than the parts.²⁵

However, I’d better stop work in view of your pronouncements on “epilogue”... I think the total “Homestead” by far the best poem in the book. I refuse to cut it. If that means you fire me as editor, so be it. I’ve given you what I think are the best reasons for using the total poem—even tho it’s now about half the length of the previous whole. Your reasons for not wanting the poem included are undoubtedly personal, and obvious. But I won’t go along.

I leave here in four days for the arctic and some readings. I won’t be stopping at Wd. Mtn. with you not there. There is still much more re-typing to do on [the] book, and also the Intro. to write. But I shan’t do any more until I hear from you. I’ll be back here at the beginning of June, and hope to have a letter from you on arrival.

love,

Al

LETTER 8
20 June 1975

Dear Sirs [at Macmillan],

I'm sending you this manuscript because Andy Suknaski, the author, requested I do so. It appears that you had an earlier version of the manuscript previously, and that someone there wanted to see it again. I don't know who this would be.

In any event, I have edited the manuscript rather drastically, and written a short intro. It could stand still more re-typing on my part, but I have other work to do at this time.

I would like an early reply from you people. I'm aware that probably everyone, or nearly, says that when they send in a manuscript. But in this case, someone there has already seen an earlier draft of the same book, hence you should be able to reach a decision more quickly. I think within two months is a reasonable time for you to let me know about it.

Sincerely,

Al Purdy

LETTER 9
20 June 1975

Dear Andy,

I've made a final selection of poems, re-typed many of them, written a 400-word Intro, and shipped manuscript off to Macmillan.²⁶ (As I believe you requested). I've given them two months to let me know what their decision is on it, since they had already seen an earlier version of the same book.

[...]

Anyway, will keep this short, because of aforementioned typewriter weariness.

love,

Al

LETTER 10

25 June 1975

Dear Al Purdy:

Thank you for sending along Andy Suknaski's manuscript. I was the one who wanted very much to have a look at the edited, revised version, and after a preliminary reading I am satisfied that this new version is indeed what I hoped it would be – a smoother, clearer collection. I am looking forward to studying it when I have a long, quiet space ahead of me, and will then try and persuade the other editors and those in charge to reach a final decision within, as you suggested, two months.

I hope to get back to you soon with some good news.

Yours sincerely,

Carolyn Smart
Poetry Editor [at Macmillan]

LETTER 11
26 June 1975

dear al P.

jeez you bin a busy man. [george] woodcock preface, your own, and mine.²⁷ 400 word intro...my god my god...anyway al, i'm grateful for the work you've done.

[...]

will write more in time

love

andy

LETTER 12
12 July 1975

Dear Andy,

[...]

Thanks for new manuscript.²⁸ I don't think any poems from it belong in Wd. Mtn. Poems tho.

[...]

love,

Al

LETTER 13
31 July 1975

Dear Andy:

I have a letter from Carolyn Smart at Macmillan:

'Dear Al Purdy:

I simply want you to know what has been happening to the Suknaski manuscript since my last letter of a month ago. Let me say first what a splendid job you did with the collection and how totally pleased I am with the whole organization and effect.

We are proceeding to do costings on it, and are hoping to start talking about contracts when our Managing Editor gets back from holidays in just under three weeks time. Do we deal directly with Andy, or with you, from now on? And where exactly is Andy at the present time?'

That's the gist of it, and let'S SAY IT LOOKS VERY GOOD TO ME. (MY CAPITALS KEY IS STUCK) I THINK YOU'D BETTER DEAL WITH MACMILLAN YOURSELF FROM NOW ON.

I DON'T HAVE A COPY OF THE MANUSCRIPT MYSELF, SINCE I USED THE ONE YOU SENT AND CUT IT DOWN. THEREFORE, I RETURN THE LETTER YOU WANT ME TO SEND TO MACMILLAN. PRETTY HARD ALSO FOR ME TO PICK FOUR POEMS WHEN I DON'T HAVE THE MANUSCRIPT.

OKAY, REMEMBER IT'S IN YOUR HANDS NOW. THE GENERAL ROYALTY IS TEN PER CENT. I RECEIVE NOTHING FROM THE BOOK, I MEAN MONEY, WHICH I NOW EXPECT WILL BE PUBLISHED.

I'D LIKE A COPY OF THE MANUSCRIPT MYSELF, AND THINK WHEN I WRITE THIS CAROLYN SMART I'LL ASK HER FOR ONE.

HAFTA CHANGE TYPEWRITERS NOW.

LOVE

A1

Afterword

Wood Mountain Poems was published in early 1976 to widespread critical acclaim.²⁹ Reviewers such as Shirley Gibson and Margaret Laurence celebrated the emergence of Sukenick, whose poetry became a paradigm for regionalist and vernacular writing by the end of the 1970s. Encouraged by these responses, Sukenick asked Purdy to help him edit the manuscript of *The Ghosts Call You Poor*. Describing his draft in a letter dated 29 November 1976, Sukenick seems to have internalized Purdy's criticisms of *Wood Mountain Poems* as a "mish-mash": "i got about 280 pp. written of what i call *The Ghosts Call You Poor*. now much of it is junk—but I'll be honing some of it as i slowly write some new stuff. i'll put what i think is best into some kind of sukenickMISHMASHorder and then let you work from there." Purdy declined the offer and attributed his reluctance to travel plans and reading engagements. In the end, Dennis Lee and Charlotte Weiss edited Sukenick's manuscript and reduced it from nearly three-hundred pages to one-hundred-and-seventeen pages. Nevertheless, Sukenick remained grateful for Purdy's early help and, in 1980, recommended him for the Molson Award:

12 November 1980

Dear [David M.] Bartlett [at the Canada Council for the Arts],

re George Woodcock's suggestion that Canada Council should consider A1 Purdy for the Molson Award for 'distinction and service' to Canadian Lit-

erature and ‘several areas including the arts’: I cast my vote in support of Al Purdy on the following grounds:

1)Purdy’s tireless support and encouragement of younger writers by teaching (one term at Simon Fraser University in 1970 where I studied under him, and was immeasurably changed by his unique knowledge and ‘eclectic humanism’ only equaled by Earle Birney, Margaret Laurence, and Alden Nowlan, to name a few who’ve taught me by their writing); he has also taught for several summer sessions at the Banff School of Fine Arts / Creative Writing program; and been a stimulating writer in residence at a number of Canadian universities.

2)Purdy having proven himself as [an] invaluable and capable editor: *Storm Warning I*, *Storm Warning II*, *The New Romans*—and *Fifteen Winds* (poetry anthologies that comprised, in part, the watershed work of many young unknown writers in the Canadian poetry Renaissance). In terms of national recognition, several poets would have been a while yet entering the light of day if Purdy hadn’t encouraged them and edited their work:

I’ve Tasted My Blood (Poems 1956-1968) by Milton Acorn

Ragged Horizons by Peter Trower³⁰

Wood Mountain Poems by Andrew Suknaski

3)Purdy has also proven himself as a poet/diplomat on a recent trip to Russia where he was a guest of External Affairs (Russia) and Russian Union of Poets. As a testament to that fact is the recent publication of his poems *Moths in the Iron Curtain* written in the U.S.S.R. and the Ukrainian S.S.R.

4)*Being Alive: Poems 1958-78* (by Al Purdy) is an irrefutable affirmation of a fully sentient ‘eclectic humanist’ who lives—with a mediating conscience—far beyond himself (confirming he is worthy of a belated MOLSON AWARD).

Sincerely,

Andrew Suknaski. writer.

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, works by Sam Solecki (*The Last Canadian Poet*), Sandra Djwa (“Al Purdy: Ivory Thots and the Last Romantic”), and Tracy Ware (“Al Purdy, Sam Solecki, and the Canadian Tradition”).

- 2 After winning the Governor General's Award in 1965, Purdy was frequently approached by emerging poets in need of creative guidance. The Queen's University Al Purdy contains dozens of letters from popular and unknown poets asking for help. Dean Irvine provides an abridged catalogue of Purdy's numerous collaborations with poets such as Suknaski and Milton Acorn in "Beyond Forgetting: Editing Purdy] Purdy Editing" (see 71n1).
- 3 These letters have been reproduced with the permission of Eurithe Purdy, Carolyn Smart, and Andrew Suknaski. I would like to acknowledge the additional assistance I received from Heather Home and her staff at Queen's University, Brian Hubner and Shelley Sweeney and their staff at the University of Manitoba, and Paul Wilson. All of the published correspondence is from the Al Purdy Fonds at Queen's University Archives, Collection 2071b Box 5 Folder 22. Purdy's personal copy of *Wood Mountain Poems* (with his edits) is also available at Queen's (2071b Box 15 Folder 12). The complete drafts of *Wood Mountain Poems* belong to the University of Manitoba's Andrew Suknaski Fonds (MSS 125 Boxes 11 and 12).
- 4 I have been unable to locate the original article, but Suknaski kept a photocopy of it, which can be found in his archive at the University of Manitoba (MSS 125 Box 11 Folder 11).
- 5 See *Collecting Stamps Would Have Been More Fun: The Selected Letters of Sinclair Ross* (2010) for more insight into Ross's impact on Suknaski's career. Suknaski also cites Ross as an inspiration in an interview with Doris Hillis (108).
- 6 See Lennox's *Al Purdy—Margaret Laurence: A Friendship in Letters* and Solecki's radio interview with the CBC. Discussing the case of Purdy and Laurence, Lennox emphasizes their parallel projects and visions, which spoke to an entire generation of writers fascinated by Canadian myth and history (*Friendship* xiv). In her letters and books, Laurence never downplayed these parallels. She used the concluding lines of Purdy's "Roblin's Mills [II]" ("They had their being once / and left a place to stand on [BR 157]) as the epigraph for *The Diviners* (1974), and, in June 1969, wrote letters in praise of them: "it seems to me you've said damn near everything in those lines that I was trying to say in the short stories. They *did* leave a place to stand on, and we are standing on it" (*Friendship* 144).
- 7 In Suknaski's original, the date appears: "October 27, I think 1974."
- 8 Purdy had written to the Canada Council in support of Suknaski's grant application.
- 9 This portion of the letter is missing; my question mark inside the brackets denotes a best-guess interpretation.
- 10 Purdy forwarded this letter to Macmillan on Suknaski's behalf because Suknaski had lost the publisher's address. The additional section to which he alludes, *Leaving Wood Mountain*, does not appear as a separate section in the published version of *Wood Mountain Poems*. Suknaski published an early draft of *Leaving Wood Mountain* in 1975 with Sundog Press, and certain poems were included in *Wood Mountain Poems* the following year. The original manuscript Purdy received was divided into three parts, the last of which was entitled "Leaving Wood Mountain." Purdy decided to remove Suknaski's section headings; the collection was published whole without divisions.
- 11 Suknaski is referring to a letter in which Carolyn Smart apologized for the long delays and approved his earlier request to have Purdy edit a new version of *Wood Mountain Poems*. Smart worked at Macmillan from 1973 to 1975 as Poetry Editor. After leaving Macmillan, she pursued her career as a creative writer and published five collections of poetry and a memoir. She currently teaches Creative Writing at Queen's University.
- 12 Jimmie/Jimmy Hoy is one of Suknaski's major figures in *Wood Mountain Poems*.
- 13 Suknaski named a poem after Lee Soparlo in *Wood Mountain Poems*.
- 14 Sid Marty is an Albertan writer who published his first collection of poetry, *Headwaters* (1973), at the insistence of John Newlove. He was included in Purdy's first *Storm Warning* anthology and was Suknaski's longtime friend.

- 15 “Sandia Man” appears as a separate poem in the published version.
- 16 The poem was published as “Indian Site on the Edge of Tonita Pasture.” Purdy did not make any of Suknaski’s requested changes.
- 17 Sutherland edited *Northern Journey* from 1971 to 1976.
- 18 The published version of the poem contains “twelve mile creek,” though it is not clear who made this decision. Suknaski might have felt his cousin’s information was inaccurate (though, the region is, as Suknaski says, Five Mile Creek, just north of Wood Mountain). But the fact that Purdy did not accept the change from “heralding spring” to “proclaiming spring” could indicate that he simply started to ignore Suknaski’s late suggestions—Purdy was already editing the manuscript as of May 1975. In later letters, Purdy claims to have forgotten about some of Suknaski’s recommendations (see Letter 7).
- 19 Purdy did not accommodate these requests (see Letter 7).
- 20 Purdy did not include “the mirror” in *Wood Mountain Poems*. The poem should not be confused with an identically titled one that Suknaski published in *Yarmarok: Ukrainian Writing in Canada since the Second World War* (1987); rather, “the mirror” was originally part twelve of “Homestead.”
- 21 It is unclear if Suknaski has misspelled Well’s name; it appears as “Philip Well” in *Wood Mountain Poems* and in an eponymously titled volume in Barry McKinnon’s *New Caledonia Writing Series*, though in every rough draft of *Wood Mountain Poems*, it is “Phillip Well.”
- 22 Purdy cut the poem entitled “Reverend Dumitru D. Erina.” “Lee Soparlo,” however, mentions Erina: “reverend erina praying / near the table heavy with loaves of sweet braided bread” (*WMP* 108). “Reverend Dumitru D. Erina” was a five-page poem that related Reverend Erina’s reflections on Wood Mountain after living there since 1933.
- 23 Purdy refused to cut “Ode to the Oldest Brother.”
- 24 Since his teenage years, Suknaski spent numerous summers working at Deer Lodge.
- 25 Almost identical lines appear in Purdy’s Introduction to *Wood Mountain Poems*: “Despite the impressive long poem ‘Homestead’ opening the book, its total is far more than the parts” (12).
- 26 The proofs of Purdy’s edited version of *Wood Mountain Poems* are in Suknaski’s archives at the University of Manitoba. They are dated 8 August 1975, which suggests Suknaski first saw the edited manuscript nearly two months after Purdy sent it to Macmillan.
- 27 Purdy was also writing introductions for George Woodcock’s *Notes on Visitations* (1975) and *The Poems of Al Purdy* (1976).
- 28 In July 1975, Suknaski sent Purdy a series of new poems, “Suicide Notes,” to be considered for *Wood Mountain Poems*. As Macmillan already had the new manuscript, Purdy denied Suknaski’s request to include them. Although Suknaski had planned to publish “Suicide Notes” as a full-length collection, he believed the collection too bleak and abandoned it in 1977. Some of these poems appeared in an earlier chapbook, entitled *Suicide Notes*, which Suknaski published in 1973.
- 29 Although pleased by the critical response to *Wood Mountain Poems*, Purdy was angry that Macmillan did not send him a complimentary copy of *Wood Mountain Poems* until July. In letters sent that same month, Purdy expressed his frustration to Suknaski.
- 30 In the original, Suknaski misspells “Trower” as “Trawer.” Born in 1930, Peter Trower was another of Purdy’s protégés. Purdy wrote an introduction to Trower’s *Chainsaws in the Cathedral* (1999).

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