DOCUMENTS
The Lives of a Poet: the Correspondence of Earle Birney and Desmond Pacey, 1957-58

Edited, with an Introduction, by Tracy Ware

The correspondence between Earle Birney and Desmond Pacey starts at least as early as December 9, 1946, when Pacey sent his congratulations on the first issue of the *Canadian Poetry Magazine* under Birney's editorship (1946-48). On January 22, 1957, in the first of the fifteen letters collected here, Pacey asks Birney for biographical information for *Ten Canadian Poets* (1958), then nearing completion. Birney's thoughtful response includes an invaluable account of his earliest literary efforts: "I didn[']t set out to be a regional poet; it was simply that the absence of poetry dealing with my part of the world gave me a little more courage to try writing; my Tantramars were still virgin rivers, and a very different sort" (4 Feb. 1957). Encouraged by Birney's generosity, Pacey seeks further information in a series of letters, eventually submitting a draft of his chapter, to which Birney responds in astonishing detail.[1] Taken together, these letters throw an interesting light on two of the most important figures in Canadian literature of the mid-twentieth century. Pacey devotes the last chapter of *Ten Canadian Poets* to Birney, who enables Pacey to avoid the polemics associated with such other Canadian Modernists as A.J.M. Smith and F.R. Scott. Writing before the emergence of Al Purdy, Pacey argues that "No other poet has sought to describe so many of the geographical areas of Canada as has Birney" (*Ten* 294). Birney gives Pacey an inside account of the several lives that he had led as poet, student, professor, Trotskyite activist, and citizen, in Canada and abroad. In the last two letters collected here, Birney congratulates Pacey on the publication of *Ten Canadian Poets*, and Pacey responds with relief.

Concerned to make his "study as definitive as possible," Pacey had earlier sent draft chapters to Smith, Scott, and E.J. Pratt (see his letter of 27 March 1957). He describes his work to Birney as follows: "I am sure you won't agree with all that I say, especially about 'On Going to the Wars' & *Down the Long Table*, but I hope you will take it as an honest effort to

speak the truth as I see it" (17 April 1957). *Ten Canadian Poets* shows how harsh his criticism could be: he calls "On Going to the Wars" "diffuse and embarrassing" (*Ten* 309), though William Arthur Deacon called it the "great Canadian poem of the war" (10). And he says that while he looked forward to *Down the Long Table*, Birney's 1955 novel, "It quite fails to bring back the peculiar flavour of the hungry but hopeful thirties" (*Ten* 324). But such comments do not represent Pacey's generally appreciative attitude towards Birney as a poet who "has provided us with an indispensable literary chronicle of our Canadian time and place" (*Ten* 326). It probably helped that Pacey made his appreciation clear in his influential criticism: in *Creative Writing in Canada* (1952), he argues that "next to Pratt, [Birney] is the most original poet of Canada" (139); in a 1954 survey of "English-Canadian Poetry, 1944-54," he writes that "No other poet is more successful than [Birney] in capturing the feel of contemporary Canada" (106). Determined not to write Canadian literary history as what Philip Kokotailo calls "a progressive realization of cultural maturity" (5), Pacey ends *Ten Canadian Poets* by arguing that Birney has many of the virtues of previous Canadian poets from Charles G.D. Roberts to A.M. Klein: "Although he has not represented a strikingly new departure in Canadian poetry, he has effected a useful synthesis of all the major tendencies up to his time" (326). It is of course a different Birney than the international traveller or the concrete poet of the later work, but Pacey's reading of Birney's early work remains valuable, especially for its shrewd recognition of Pratt's profound influence (see 307, 312) and for its influential reading of "David" (Glickman 137).

Because Birney was not writing much poetry in 1957, his canon seemed misleadingly complete, and therefore Pacey chose him over Dorothy Livesay and Irving Layton: as he says in his preface, "they are both still in the full tide of poetic production, and on balance I decided to cherish the hope of including them in a possible revised and expanded edition of this book a few years hence" (*Ten* vii). More than once in these letters, Birney supports the idea that he has "deserted the art of poetry" (*Ten* 324). As he later told Frank Davey, "I think there was a short period when I felt what the hell, you know. I didn't seem to be getting anywhere as a writer. Especially after *Down the Long Table* was a flop" (interview of 26 October 1969, qtd. in Davey 26). One of the ironies of these letters is that Pacey writes his chapter to confirm Birney's importance, but some of his judgments must have enhanced Birney's sense of failure at a low point in his career. Birney was certainly disappointed that Pacey saw no progress from *David and Other Poems* (1942), and he is not entirely taken with the emphasis on his

being a "chronicler," but he is remarkably patient with Pacey's questions and assumptions. He begins his longest letter by saying, "On the whole I was surprised by the amount of space you gave to me–this must be a big book–and very grateful for the seriousness and thoughtfulness with which you have considered my work" (20 April 1957). In this and other letters, he describes his earliest literary efforts and ideals; deals at length with Pacey's question about the origin of "David"; gives a long account of his father, a page on his experiences at U.B.C., and several pages on his studies, teaching, and political activity at Toronto, California, Utah, and London, with striking off-the-cuff remarks on such personalities as Garnett Sedgewick, Stanley Ryerson, E.K. Brown, and Pelham Edgar. He responds point by point to the issues raised by Pacey's draft, discussing his influences and his understanding of religion, biography, and form. On only two points does he lose his equanimity: first, to Pacey's mistaken idea that "Almost all the new poems [in *The Strait of Anian*] are in a slack free verse, and only three are in rhymed stanzas," Birney replies that the new poems are not all in free verse, and that even if they were, Pacey's remark betrays a "very oldfashioned" aesthetic; second, when Pacey assumes that "On Going to the Wars" and *Down the Long Table* can be read as "semi-autobiographical," Birney argues that the former is "more a public than a private poem," while the latter is above all fiction: "And I will … have to deny, most publicly and vigorously, any identification … between me and the central character … both for reasons of fact and for artistic reasons" (all quotations from the letter of 20 April 1957). If these passages show the temper for which Birney was legendary, they are the exceptions to the rule in a letter that is primarily concerned to correct the errors in a chapter written to an imminent deadline. The absence from *Ten Canadian Poets* of several of the statements with which Birney takes issue reveals that Pacey accepted Birney's corrections, even while he refused to alter his opinion of "On Going to the Wars" and *Down the Long Table*.

We know from Elspeth Cameron's biography that Birney's accounts of his hectic life were always selective. He had personal reasons for concealing his brief first marriage to Sylvia Johnstone in 1933 and his other relationships (Cameron 116). He cites McCarthyism and its Canadian equivalent as a reason for keeping his distance from his Trotskyite past, as when he notes that the "dissident Marxists" that he admired "were wrong too, but they had integrity …" (8 April 1957). What was Birney's political position after he broke with the Trotskyites in 1939? (Cameron 178). Here's how he answered the question when Pacey raised it in 1957: "Yes, I guess liberal-humanist is a good enough tag, but I vote CCF because I

believe in considerable more public ownership than Canada enjoys" (April 8). That was good enough for Pacey, who recognized that Birney's outlook included occasional despair at "the present state of world affairs" and "the present state of poetry in Canada" (*Ten* 326). Both the humanism and the despair would be important for Birney's rebirth as a poet with *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* and *Near False Creek Mouth* in the 1960s.

Birney preserved Pacey's letters and made copies of his own. They are preserved in the Earle Birney Papers, Ms. Collection 49, Box 15, Files 18-20, Thomas Fisher Library, University of Toronto. The 6 letters from 1946 to 1955 are mainly concerned with Birney's editing *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, Pacey's *A Book of Canadian Short* Stories (1947), and Birney's *Twentieth-Century Canadian Poetry* (1953). The letters after the 15 collected here are mainly concerned with Birney's visits to Fredericton in Feb. 1962 and Feb. 1967, and with Pacey's 1964 request for a contribution for a Canadian issue of the *Literary Review*. Two comments from these letters give an idea of their relationship: on Oct. 3, 1955, Pacey writes: "Since I have occasionally thrown the odd brickbat in your direction, I feel that I should take this opportunity to throw a deserved bouquet. I heard your series of talks on Mexico, and enjoyed them tremendously"; on Jan. 4, 1967, Birney ends a letter in which he has corrected errors in the notes to Pacey's school anthology, *Our Literary Heritage* (1966), with these words: "I like your book generally–please forgive this abrupt letter which is merely to send you minutiae of emendation. It is good to see Canadian poems in an *international* selection." For Birney's letters (Letters 2, 4, 7, 9, 12, and 14), I have used the originals in Box 1, Files 11 and 15, the Desmond Pacey Fonds, MG 30 D339, Box 1, Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa. File 15 of the Pacey Fonds contains a written and corrected manuscript of the chapter on Birney in *Ten Canadian Poets*, and Files 12 and 13 contain notes on Birney's poems and prose and on reviews of Birney's work. In editing these letters, I have omitted the return and forwarding addresses (which do not change) and corrected obvious typographical errors, but I have preserved the underlining that both writers use for emphasis. Other corrections are indicated with square brackets, except for the quotation marks and italics that I have sometimes added to titles. I am grateful to Madame Justice Wailan Low and Mary Pacey for encouragement and permission to reproduce this correspondence; to Sophie Tellier, Public Archives of Canada, for help with the Pacey Papers; to Anne Dondertman, Jennifer Toews, and the fine staff at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, for help with the Birney Papers; to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the

Advisory Research Committee of Queen's University for a timely research grant; and to the readers and editor of this journal, for their incisive comments.

The Letters

Letter 1 Desmond Pacey to Earle Birney [typed on University of New Brunswick letterhead]

January 22nd., 1957.

Dear Earle:

I am writing a book tentatively entitled "Ten Canadian Poets" which will attempt to do for Sangster, Roberts, Carman, Lampman, D.C. Scott, Pratt, F.R. Scott, Smith, Klein, and yourself something of the same sort of job that Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* did for English poets.[2] I don't mean that it will match his book in quality, only that it will have the same general form of biography plus criticism. I have done most of the book, am now working on Klein, and hope to tackle you next. I wonder whether you would be willing to help me–as F.R. Scott for example did–by giving me biographical information not available in printed form at present. The sort of thing I mean is what first interested you in writing poetry, when and where your juvenilia were written, whose poetry you most admired, what special job you felt you could do as a poet in Canada, etc., etc. I notice for example that you didn't publish any poetry until you were in your thirties. Had you written poetry previously and not published it? Have any of your poems been published in odd places where I might not find them by means of the standard periodical indices? Are you still writing poetry, and do you hope to publish another book soon?

I shall be most grateful for any help you can give me.

Yours sincerely,

Des Pacey

Letter 2 Earle Birney to Desmond Pacey, [typed]

U.B.C. Vancouver 8
4 Feb 57

Dear Des,

Flattered that you are considering including me in your Lives of the Poets (Canadian), and will do what I can to give you what details you need. Q.1: "What first interested you in writing poetry?" Can[']t really remember. Didn[']t try till I was a freshman at UBC,[3] and then only rarely, as I was much more interested then in prose, to wit, journalism. I suppose there were some experiences which naturally seemed to require a more rhythmic and concentrated expression than I could get in prose.

Q.2: I think I made two, at the most three, attempts at serious verse as an undergraduate. They were quite bad and were published in the undergrad newspaper, the *Ubyssey*.[4] In Toronto, as a grad. student in 1926-27 I remember making some jottings for possible poems, and starting one or two, but only finished one, a light Eliotic character-sketch, very thin, published much later, 1932 I think, in the University of Utah undergrad. literary mag.[5] But I wrote no verse either at California or at Utah,[6] though I made more jottings in the summers, when I was in B.C. teaching at the UBC summer schools. In the fall of 1936, when at last my Ph.D. and the thesis were behind me and I had a job of sorts (Lecturer at U[niversity C[ollege], Tor[onto]) I wrote two small pieces–a sonnet of sorts, "Grey Rocks'" and something called "Slug in Woods"–and I shoved them into the *Can. Forum* in 1937 when I was one of the editors and we were short of copy.[7] Several people went out of their way to tell me they liked them and I think it was then I started thinking seriously of writing and publishing verse. Is there where the juvenilia end? Depends on definitions and evaluations. If juv. are what we write in our teens, then I have scarcely any. But I started so late I am inclined to regard everything I write as still being juvenile preparation for what, if I can only live long enough, I may write. However, so far as verse goes, I've given up.

Q.3: Whose poetry did I most admire? As an undergrad in the 20's, Eliot, Hardy, Housman, De la Mare , Robinson Jeffers (among moderns).[8] Among the oldtimers: Chaucer, Meredith, Burns, Shakespeare (not in that order!).

In the Thirties I was impressed, much more than I am now, by Benet's "John Brown's Body" & MacLeish's "Conquistador."[9] I lost interest in Eliot but not in Jeffers or the others I've named. I read, without particularly admiring him, Pound. I read, without really understanding him, Yeats. And once I got on the *Can. Forum* as Lit. Ed. (1936) I had to review a great deal, and got interested in following most of the young poets coming up in England & the U.S., & did my stint of reading in Canadian poetry. I can[']t remember who all were my enthusiasms. Lawrence, I suppose, for a while, Wilfred Owen, Cummings and, of course, at the end of the Thirties,

Auden-Spender-Lewis-MacNeice.[10] But none of these got under my skin the way the prose of James Joyce did in those years. And, as you see, I wasn[’]t really writing verse in the Thirties anyway.[11]

It was the war that really got me going–the sense of the shortness of time, trying & eventually succeeding in getting into the army, and wanting to throw off the verse ideas that were plaguing me while I still could. In the winter of 1939-40 I wrote most of the pieces in the DAVID vol.; the rest the following winter. In “David” itself I am conscious of minor formal influences of the *Song of Roland*[12] and *Conquistador*. In “Anglosaxon Street” & some others there was of course the formal influence of Old English poetry, which I had been reading for several years. Some reviewers mistakenly found a Hopkins influence;[13] but I had read only the two or three Hopkins pieces I had to, for courses, and I never really got around to reading and understanding and liking him till after the war. It’s simply that both of us–if I may link myself with him for the passing purpose–drew from the same tradition, though for very different purposes. Eliot’s influence was of course inescapable though, except in 2 or 3 poems in the DAVID book, I think I was less under his spell than most people writing at this time. Thumbing over the volume now I see I will have to confess to some belated Georgianism, probably Rupert Brooke, in such things as “Eagle Island.”[14] I suppose I liked Brooke in the Twenties, without really admiring him, if you know what I mean. I think I even wrote a seminar paper on him, must have been 1925. My feeling about my own verse in general, a feeling that may be quite wrong of course, is that I have read so damn much poetry, so indiscriminately and professorially, that I have never got under the spell of any one poet, but casually reflect influences of single poems in passages here and there. In general I have always tried to be myself when I write, but of course one is never as original as one thinks he is going to be.

Q.4: “what special job you felt you could do as a poet in Canada”? None, really. I wasn[’]t trying to start a new school or a new trend. I was conscious, I suppose, that my own part of Canada had scarcely been written about. But I didn[’]t set out to be a regional poet; it was simply that the absence of poetry dealing with my part of the world gave me a little more courage to try writing; my Tantramars were still virgin rivers, and a very different sort.[15]

Q.5: … poems in odd places…. I think any that might conceivably be worth your while looking at are accessible to you. Those not in my Ryerson volumes[16] can be found in *Can. Forum* & *Sat[urday] Night*.[17] They are

few, light, and trivial. Some squibs in undergrad mags I shall be happy for you not to find.

Q.6: “Are you still writing poetry…?” No. Since the last book,[18] I’ve written maybe ten short pieces but haven[’]t bothered to send them out to mags yet. I have been re-working the poetic drama, *Damnation of Vancouver*,[19] from a radio play to a tv play, and, last month, into a stage play. In the last-named form, it is having its premiere at the University of Washington next Sunday. At the moment I am interested in writing poetry only as a medium of drama, i.e. so far as publishing poetry goes.

Have I answered all your questions? I think so. If not, let me know. In case it’s of any help, I include a copy of the local official curriculum vitae.[20]

Good luck. You’ll need it. I’m an unpromising subject.

E.B.

Letter 3 Desmond Pacey to Earle Birney
[typed on University of New Brunswick letterhead]

February 8th., 1957.

Dear Earle,

Thank you very much for your letter of February 4. I am sure the information contained in it will be of great use to me in writing the chapter on you and your work.

I am sorry to hear that you have given up writing poetry. I hope you will reconsider.

I have often wondered if “David” had any basis in fact. Would you care to drop me a line re this?

Sincerely,

Des Pacey

Letter 4 Earle Birney to Desmond Pacey [typed]

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Dear Des,

I’d better answer your query about “David” now, or it may never get answered. You ask if it “had any basis in fact.” From my end of the table, all fiction has, so it’s a question of degree. Well, it’s not true, as one freshman who had the poem in H[igh] S[chool] was reported to have said to

another as he saw me walk by, "there's the character that pushed his best friend off a cliff." It's basically an imagined story shaped around the theme of the duality of human experience as symbolized (or maybe "shown" is a less pretentious word in this connection) by mountain-climbing–the hair's breadth between, on the [one] hand, beauty and the exhilaration of being alive, and on the other fear and nightmare and death and the static dumb hostility of the non-human world. More specifically, since it's a story, it's about the role of tragedy in the maturation of youth. Naturally I drew from what I had experienced and, where that was inadequate, from what others had experienced. I was an enthusiastic amateur mountain-climber from about the age of 10 to 22 (after which I moved away from the vicinity of mountains). So, sitting in Toronto in my thirties, I drew on memories of my own climbing days for the first half of the duality. I was always lucky on mountains, never had a fall or an injury and never was with anyone who had. But I grew up in a country (Banff) where the perils and accidents of climbing, or of just being loose in mountains at stormy times, were part of village news and tales. Later, living in Vancouver & climbing a bit in the coast mountains, I was still in a somewhat similar atmosphere–climbing accidents are always big news in Vancouver dailies, now of course with accompanying helicopter-rescue effects. So it was easy to chew over old realities at second-hand. One of these was the fate of a university president (Ohio State, I think) who came climbing in the Bugaboo Mts. of B.C. in the Thirties, with his wife.[21] The two of them roped to the top of Mt. Eon, a rather tough rock spire, or at least he got to the top, loosed his rope, and started drawing his wife up from the last ledge below the peak. He lost his footing, let go the rope, and fell past her many hundred feet and was killed on the rocks below. She couldn[']t get down alone and stayed there, at the 9000 foot level, for I think 48 hours before a rescue party reached her. She was a very tough gal and survived, though she was apparently dying from exposure when found…. Then there was a chap I knew when we were undergraduates at UBC, though he wasn[']t a close friend and I never climbed with him. After I left Vancouver I heard of his death from exposure on a Vancouver mountain side. He had gone climbing with a companion, and had slipped, fallen only a few feet, but broke his back. His sole companion went back for a rescue party. When they returned he was dead[22]…. Then there was a U. of Alta. student I went on some climbs with around Banff one summer–no accidents, but he was a "David" type, steady, reliable, observant…. These are all components, I suppose…. As for the mountains themselves, some of them have their right names in the poem

(when the names fitted) and some haven[']t, and they were all moved around a lot to get them onto the one stage.

O.K.?

Earle

Letter 5 Desmond Pacey To Earle Birney
[typed on University of New Brunswick letterhead]

February 15th., 1957.

Dear Earle,

Thank you for the information about "David." It will be very useful to me in writing my chapter on you.[23]

Sincerely,

Des Pacey

Letter 6 Desmond Pacey to Earle Birney
[written on University of New Brunswick letterhead]

Wednesday March 27, '57

Dear Earle,

I have been plugging away (in what free moments I can snatch from preparing lectures and marking essays etc.) at my chapter on your verse, and I think I have now assembled and sifted all the material I can get from printed sources. From my synopsis of my biographical notes, it is clear that there are several matters on which I have very little information. I could gloss over them, but I would like to make the study as definitive as possible, and I am wondering if I can strain your patience a little further by asking you to fill in the gaps for me. By the way, I shall be quite willing to send you the draft of the chapter for your corrections and suggestions–I have already done that with Pratt, F.R. Scott, & Smith, & they have all said that I have come closer to the essence of their work than any previous criticism had done.[24] But perhaps they are merely being polite….

Anyway, here are my problems. I note that your father was a pioneer Albertan who did some prospecting. What was his regular occupation? What can you tell me about your mother? You were born in Calgary but went to public school in Banff. When was that move made? And when did you move from Alberta to B.C.? Between what years did you go to high school in Creston? In what year did you switch from engineering to

English at UBC? Your CLA speech mentioned the lack of interest in Canadian writing among your UBC professors.[25] Wasn't Sedgwick[26] a positive influence on you, and if so just how? Who else lectured to you? At Toronto as a graduate student did you come in contact with Pratt, Brown, Finch, Livesay & the other writing people?[27] Did they stir up your interest? What about Edgar?[28] And how about Toronto later on, in the middle & late thirties–wasn't there stimulation from the *Canadian Forum* group & others?

Did your year in London (1934-5) mean much to your writing interests, or was it purely a research proposition?

Did those years in California & Utah have any positive influence on your interest in writing, specifically in writing about Canada?

What was the exact date of your son's birth?

How did you get involved in the editorship of CPM in 1946?[29]

How much can and should be said about your political associations? I understand you were a strong Trotskyist in the '30's. Where did you pick up your Trotskyist ideas? Were they "mere opinions,["] or did you work actively to promote a Trotskyist programme? When did your ideas begin to change? Would it be correct to say that you are now a liberal humanist?

There are very few religious references in your poetry. Have you never had any interest in religion?

Now these questions are set down in a very random way, and some of them may seem impertinent. But I do hope you will answer as many of them as you see fit, & that you will let me hear as soon as possible, since I should like to start writing the chapter as soon as possible.

As ever, Des

Letter 7 Earle Birney to Desmond Pacey [typed]

31 Mar 57

Dear Des,

Much as my author's vanity impells me to sit down at once and write a small book in response to your flattering interest in my career and lineage, I must resist, at least until mid-April. I have to present an hour paper, an explication of the Friar's & Summoner's Tales,[30] to an open seminar of the dept. next Friday, and the paper is not even started yet. Immediately after that, I must get a book review of 3000 words done. After that, I will reply to your letter, if it isn[']t by that time too late to be of use.

Earle

Letter 8 Desmond Pacey to Earle Birney
[written on University of New Brunswick letterhead]

April 3, 1957

Dear Earle,

Thanks for your note of March 31. Sorry to hear you are so busy.

I think what I'll do is to write a draft of my chapter with what information I have, & then revise it in the light of your later material. Will you let me have it just as soon as possible, as the book is supposed to be in Toronto by May 1? Rough notes would do.

As ever,
Des Pacey

Letter 9 Earle Birney to Desmond Pacey [typed]

Apr 8/57

1. My father. "What was his regular occupation?" Hard to answer. His trade was that of a signpainter. When times were good, in the old days, he worked at it. When times wernt [sic] so good he sometimes worked as a straight housepainter and paperhanger. But my father isn[']t easy to classify except as a sort of "permanent pioneer." He never liked to do one thing or live in one place long. He was a butcher's apprentice in Guelph when he was a boy (his father had a butcher shop). At fifteen he set off on his own, joined a wrangler outfit somewhere on the Lakes that was taking horses to Calgary, and rode out. That was in 1881,–that is, before the last Indian Rising of '85 & the hanging of Riel.[31] He lived in Calgary before there were any white women there, when it was mainly a few shacks and a bunch of Sarcee tepees. I never found out all that he did or where he wandered. [H]e was certainly a cowpuncher, and later a brakeman on some little spur railroad of Jim Hill's,[32] I think, that pushed up to Lethbridge & Medicine Hat from the States (I think this was before the CPR was finished in '85, but I'm vague about this, and he never talked much about himself). He prospected for oil and coal in the Belly River country[33] and then moved into the Rockies and prospected there. He drifted down into the States and landed up in San Francisco in the 'Nineties. He even was a member of Coxey's Army and started out to march to Washington with them,[34] but got a prospecting job in Montana somewhere, on the way. About the turn of the century he came back into the Canadian Rockies and prospected for various companies–looking for gold, silver, copper–in the Revelstoke area. This is

what he was doing when he met my mother. Somewhere in the bachelor days he had learned signpainting, etc. He worked at it for about two years in Revelstoke when he married. Then he decided to homestead in central Alberta and went back to Calgary, in transit, where I was born. The homestead turned out to be marginal bushland near Edmonton. My father worked it as a mixed farming project in the summers. My mother kept the stock alive in the winters and my father worked around the towns south at his trade to get some cash to meet the payments. When I was seven he sold out and took up to Banff and set up as a signpainter again. I go on about my father because I'm still trying to understand him, thirty years after his death. He did all right in Banff, became the government's signpainter (Banff is in the Park, and administered by Ottawa; before neon, they needed plenty of "artistic" rustic signs).He was a prominent Orangeman[35] and a curler and a straight guy. Came the war and he enlisted at fifty as a medical orderly (somewhere he had worked as a hospital orderly too). He came back a full pension case in 1917, but in the days when a full pension lasted about a week of the month–maybe that's all it still does. So he had to go on working till it killed him, which took nine years. He couldn[']t work at his trade so he tried being a bath attendant at the sulphur springs (he had a life-saving medal from somewhere in his past) but quit to take up a re-establishment fruit farm in the Kootenays. After three years and no farther ahead he sold out and went back to Banff for a couple of years and worked around as a carpenter and handyman (he could fix most things but he had a tremor now and couldn[']t paint or do fine work). Then he came down to Vancouver and worked at what he could get, straight housepainting mostly, until he died. I guess this answers a few of your questions in a bunch, except for dates. We went to the Alberta bushfarm in 1905. Banff in 1911. To B.C. in 1918. In 1920 he and my mother went back to Banff, I got my junior matric and lit out on my own, working in various places in B.C. and Alberta till the fall of 22, when I had a big enough roll to try a year at college, UBC. My folks moved to Vancouver in 23, partly to catch up with me I guess. I had my first year high in Banff, my 2nd & 3rd at Creston–it was only a 3-year High then, I think, or maybe I did four years in three, I can[']t quite remember at the moment.

2. UBC. I was never really in engineering. I took first yr. arts, with all the science I could pack in, intending engineering the next yr (they required first yr arts as preliminary). Then I decided to stay in arts and be a geologist, research type. In my sophomore year I got to know Sedgewick and a lot of other people interested in literature and, at the last moment, made the

switch to Eng. Honours; that would be 1924. Sedgewick was a positive and manifold influence, of course, but there were others, esp. Frank Wilcox, a brilliant young American, asst. prof. in English. He was fired later, went back to California, made a small fortune in olive oil, retired and ever since 1945 he has been a kind of world traveller. He came along with us to Mexico last summer, and he is one of my oldest friends and correspondents. Nobody at UBC ever encouraged me to be a writer, and Sedgewick, somewhat unconsciously I think, discouraged me. His attitude was: if you can[']t write greatly don[']t write at all–a practice he followed pretty well himself. He tended to ridicule Canadian writing and he was such a supercritic I wouldn[']t have shown him anything if I had written anything. I should make an exception–one year, Sedgewick did try a short story writing course, which I took. But he spent most of the time reading us stories by Hardy or Conrad,[36] and when we produced anything of our own he tore it apart pretty unmercifully. I'm not implying Sedgewick wasn[']t a great guy and a good friend, but he wasn[']t Christ Almighty, as he is in the memory of some around here, and he was definitely not a stimulator of creativity in me. He taught me what I know about the scholarly and the critical attitude.

Toronto, U of T. First, 1926-7, taking my MA. courses from Wallace (he was kind to me then),[37] Clawson (getting ahead a little on Chaucer)[38] and Edgar. Pelham was the great guy for me that year. He invited me to his home, treated me as if I were really an adult and not a graduate student. He had the same worldly courtliness Sedgewick had. He stimulated me to vast readings in the novel, and he made me feel I had a gift for writing, though at that time I was trying nothing but criticism, seminar papers. I met Knister[39] at his house. Edgar wanted to get me a fellowship to England, but my father died that winter and I could see my mother had to have me closer around–I was the only child. Wallace offered me a fellowship to stay in Toronto & start on my doctorate but I was offered one at U. of California and decided this made more sense geographically–I knew my mother would never take to Toronto and I doubted she could stand the winter climate there anyway. So I put in three winters at Cal.[40]
Toronto, 1932-33. T[ea]ch[in]g fellow at U[niversity] C[ollege]. Edgar again, but no courses from him. That year I got to know Daniells,[41] Finch, Pratt, Livesay, Frye,[42] but only Daniells well, as, after Xmas that year I got interested in leftwing politics and travelled rapidly with several different sets. First, the sort of left CCFers: Cassidy, Lorne Morgan, Joe Parkinson.[43] I was in a couple of foundation League for Social Reconstruction pow-

wows at Cassidy's which was trying to mastermind the launching of the CCF.[44] But the depression was hitting me harder than it was them–there was no money to renew my fellowship, and I knew I could go back for only one more year to my U.S. teaching job–after that, the skids–layoffs everywhere, etc. So I ran around with some of the YCL campus crowd[45] for a week or two; met them through Daniells–people like Stan Ryerson, now an old wheelhorse of the Commies.[46] A great grandson of Egerton, I think. I still wasn[']t trying to write creatively, though people like Daniells and Finch and Alf Bailey,[47] whom I saw frequently, were. I had the attitude it was Too Late; I was reading the new guys, Spender, etc. just coming out. But I didn[']t like the YCLers. The Commies smelled a mile away. However, I thought at that time that was because they were bad Marxists So I hung around with some dissident Marxists, damned interesting people, their names don[']t matter now. They were wrong too, but they had integrity, something the Ryersons never had. I didn[']t take to Livesay then either–seemed to me just a Red Barricades bard.[48] On the other hand, I thought Frye too cagey and cynical then, though I respected his intelligence and scholarly energy and knowledge. He probably thought I was intellectually naïve, and if so he was right. E.K. Brown was around some time or other but I didn[']t take to him–a cold smug plate of fish with a false geniality and no knowledge of people or of most of life. I never found reason to change that opinion.[49]

<u>London</u> I was there 34-6. Scholarship ran out in 35 but I stayed on, living on peanuts. Daytimes went in the B[ritish] M[useum], or out in the country writing up the interminable thesis (it turned out to be 860-odd pages). Nights went to politics. I was a member of the ILP,[50] became a London branch chairman, and a delegate to the national conference of 35. So I got to know a lot of interesting eccentrics in English politics–Maxton, Campbell Stephen, McGovern, Fenner Brockway,[51] Jennie Lee (before she married Aneurin Bevan),[52] and a lot of refugee European politicians, etc. Those were two wonderful, poverty-stricken, exciting years. I got around some of Europe on a shoe-string, and I saw a lot of the worst of England, Scotland & Wales, in the depth of the depression, as a travelling ILP organizer for a while–after I got the thesis finished. I also got into the gods for a lot of plays, ballet, music, etc. And I found the girl I married.[53] And I wrote some of my thesis on Chaucer holed out on the old Pilgrim's Road.

<u>CALIF & Utah</u> I think I wrote one rather poor poem in Utah–no, two.[54] In Utah I was much more interested in the bachelor pursuits: women, contract

bridge, mountaineering, beer-brewing, jazz piano playing. Also I was interested in trying to be a good teacher. That was the first two years in Utah. The last year, after the break back in Toronto, I was all hell for politics, and got involved in some, but we will draw a curtain over that.[55]

Calif. O hell, that was a long time ago. I got trapped in the galley-slavery of being a teaching fellow in a university that worked you so bloody hard you couldn[']t get time to write a thesis. Then they kept changing the Ph.D. program and making the changes retroactive, so I kept having to take new courses. There's a lot more, let's skip it. I didn[']t do any creative writing there, but I made a lot of friends. And I still go back to Berkeley with pleasure. I developed a serious eye-strain there, which turned out to be somewhat permanent.

<u>Toronto 1936-43</u> That's when I got drawn into the [*Canadian*] *Forum* group, got to know Ned Pratt well, and started to write a bit. But that wasn[']t till the war broke out. The war reduced class loads, and gave one a sense of urgency–if I was ever going to write I'd better get started. But it wasn[']t till 1940 I really got the time and the drive. Then military stuff (COTC)[56] and later the regular army (June 42) took up a lot of time.

My boy was born Sep. 1, 1941.

<u>CPM 46-48</u> Pratt, Deacon,[57] et al, drew me in. Idea was I was to be a completely independent editor, except for financing. The exception was the fatal flaw. They made an 80-year old relic of the Browning Society the Bus. Mgr.[58]

Yes, I guess liberal-humanist is a good enough tag, but I vote CCF because I believe in considerable more public ownership than Canada enjoys.

Religion. I had a bellyful of Christianity when I was young. I occasionally go to the Unitarian Church, and have even occupied the local pulpit a few times, and I give them contributions. I believe life is a profoundly ethical affair and if we could only get rid of organized religions we would be able to understand this much better. I am not a Christian or a deist of any sort.

Sorry this is so longwinded. Hope it is of some help. I would appreciate very much seeing the draft of your chapter, as you suggest, to make sure I haven[']t confused you on matters of fact. Matters of opinion, yours that is, I have no desire to argue with at this stage.

Earle

Letter 10 Desmond Pacey to Earle Birney
[typed on University of New Brunswick letterhead]

April 12th., 1957.

Dear Earle,

Thanks a lot for your most helpful letter of April 8. I shall send you a draft of the chapter as soon as possible. It was awfully good of you to go to such trouble at such a busy time of the year.

Yours sincerely,

Des

Letter 11 Desmond Pacey to Earle Birney
[written on University of New Brunswick letterhead]

April 17, 1957

Dear Earle,

Here is the first draft of the chapter, as I wrote it before receiving your most recent long letter. You will notice that I have pencilled in one or two additions based on the letter, and I can add more if you think it desirable.

I am sure you won't agree with all that I say, especially about "On Going to the Wars" & *Down the Long Table*, but I hope you will take it as an honest effort to speak the truth as I see it.

If I have misinterpreted your work, don't be afraid to be equally frank in <u>your</u> criticism.

I hope you can send this back fairly soon, as Ryerson Press are clamouring for the manuscript.

Thanks for all your help.

As ever,

Des Pacey

Letter 12 Earle Birney to Desmond Pacey
[typed on University of British Columbia letterhead]

20 April 1957

Dear Desmond,

Herewith some hasty running commentaries on your chapter on me. Wish I had time and opportunity to talk with you properly, either on paper

or in the flesh, but this is exam-marking week, and you will understand if I seem to be sketchy & abrupt. On the whole I was surprised by the amount of space you gave to me–this must be a big book–and very grateful for the seriousness and thoughtfulness with which you have considered my work. Now, page by page. Much of this will be trivia, set down merely in the spirit of complete accuracy, so far as I can help you to it. Some is just argufying.

P. 1 No ref. to religion.[59] "Joe Harris" is my kind of religious poem. So is "Christmas Comes." Surely these make standard "references" to religion. I am really a very religious poet, but I have no religion. As for the coinage,[60] I think I will write one and, with permission, inscribe it to you; it's a good theme I never would have thought of, without your opening.

P[.] 2-3 You make a good case for my being a "chronicler," though much of it is involuntary, and the quote from MAR sets up the idea of "interpreter,"[61] a different, more poetic concept which I may not achieve but which I strive for rather than for mere chronicling. In this respect I don[']t "regard (my) role primarily as that of national chronicler" (p. 2) (v. also bottom of p. 3).

P[.] 4 My "early childhood," to age 7, was spent in the central Alberta bush

"If we may believe Birney's semi-autobiographical novel…" But we can[']t. Here and later you set up a category for *Down the Long Table* which I have never intended or claimed for it. The central character is not me, nor are his parents my parents except in non-significant details. The early love-abortion theme did not happen to me; it was simply the sort of thing that had to happen to this character in order to set him into certain attitudes (far more emotional attitudes than mine were) towards radicalism. The point you make about my father here happens to be partly true, though he got more fun out of pioneering than out of getting money from it–but later on you build too much on the assumption of autobiography in *DTLT*, so I bring it up at this point.

I think your remarks about the greater Canadianism of westerners is a good one.[62]

P[.] 5 I don[']t remember saying that I got "interested in writing poetry" at High School. I think I tried my first piece of verse the year after I left H.S. It's a small point except that it might suggest, wrongly, that my high school environment ever encouraged me or anyone towards writing…. I see that your quote at bottom of p. 5 sets correctly the time when I "first tried to write poetry" as in my manual working years between 16 & 18.

P[.] 8 It would be more accurate to say (top of page) that at UBC I continued to write "an occasional piece of verse." I never, more's the pity, went through the characteristic adolescent-poet period of writing a great deal of verse, good or bad.

P. 9, top. I suggest "exploited as freshman 'readers' or instructors"– since at Calif. I was only the former,–and it is the real exploitation.

"If we may believe … semi-autobiographical." Again you can[']t. Life was a hell of a lot of other things, many of them joyous and wonderful for me, which I did not drag into *DTLT.* Every detail in that novel was chosen to build the theme and the characters in it, not because they did, or did not, happen to me.

P[ ] 9 bottom. "As he has told us in *Down the Long Table*, he became [for] a brief period a Marxist of the Trotskyite variety." Now you have moved from calling the novel "semi-autobiographical" to treating it as straight biography. I am not going to deny privately to you that I was at one period this sort of Marxist, but I am certainly not going to make public statements to that effect, at least not until we see if Mr. Solon Low becomes Prime Minister and sets up the Canadian-type McCarthy committees he believes in.[63] And I will, on the other hand, have to deny, most publicly and vigorously, any identification, if you make it, between me and the central character of *DTLT*, both for reasons of fact and for artistic reasons. I quite agree with your page ten, however, since here you are taking public and personal statements of mine about "proletarian art" and using them to show how I was thinking about writing, and the criticism of it, at that time. But even here, in the ref. to the frequency of Auden-Spender-Lewis quotations in the novel, you are wrongly assuming that these are an index of what was primarily influencing <u>me</u>, by identifying me with the novel's central character. As a matter of fact I had to dig around not in my memory but in the early volumes of these poets to get the kind of quotations I wanted to provide the atmosphere of <u>Gordon's</u> milieu.[64] If I had been dredging up my own touchstones here, I would have been quoting Kautsky, Plekhanov, Mirsky, Lenin, Engels, Bukharin–or James Joyce and a lot of other people whose ideas or phrases were far more in my mind than those I put into Gordon's.

P[ ]11 "permanent post at the U of Toronto." I was, till 1941, a "Lecturer" on annual reappointment basis and no sense of permanence or security. My salary, I think, began at $2000 in 1936, went down to $1800, and rose to $2500 by 1941 (when I became a father and stormed Cody's office[65] for a raise). A small point, but I hate to see the U. of T. get an inch more than it deserves.

P[.] 13 "Irregular blank verse" is fine for "Hands" but not for the others you list with it because they are half-rhymed throughout, or almost throughout. "Vanc[ouver] Lights," for example, is mainly assonantal couplets (flowing, oceans) with some half-rhyme (winking, ink), and some consonance (Phoebus, Nubian). So is "Dusk on the Bay," while "David" is in an abba stanza (Survey, steeped, weekends, surly; etc). I think the existence of these effects, however subdued, are [sic] important to a technical description of the poems.[66]

P[.] 14 top. I think if either Auden or Yeats had influenced "Eagle Island" it would be a better poem. The trouble with it is that the influence was Rupert Brooke's . . [.] Maybe Spender's influence is observable in "Hands" but it's a surprise to me; that poem, at least, seemed to come right out of myself.[67]

The plot of "David" "is conventional enough." I would be inclined to agree with you, but I wonder if you know that "David" was knocked out of the Ontario Sr. Matric. curriculum, after one year, because of a Catholic lobby against it as a poem advocating mercy-killing. It doesn[']t, of course, advocate it but it deals with such a situation, and the argument about it went right up to the Minister of Educ. and into the Ontario Cabinet. Even Protestant H[igh] S[chool] teachers still find this element in the poem a bit of a shocker.

P[.] 16. Note that here you do take note of the use of rhymes in "David"[68]

I appreciate very much this technical analysis you make here, and your study of "Hands" on the next page.

P[.] 18 Quote from "Vanc[ouver] Lights." Later printings record a one-word revision I would be grateful if you would adopt: "No one <u>bound</u> Prometheus."[69] The change brings the reference more into line with the legend.

P[.] 19 While I agree with you that "On Going to the Wars" is "diffuse and embarrassing" etc I think you are a little unfair in counterposing the poem with my "training to become a Personnel Selection Officer." In the first place, it is, as you yourself elsewhere say, more a public than a private poem, an attempt to get at what a man might be thinking. The mother referred to is "a mother"–my own wasn[']t living on the prairies. Nor did my wife's grandmother starve "last year in Lodz" etc. I think you should carry a little farther, here as in my novels, your own recognition of the public and fictional nature of my themes. In the second place, if you regard this as a private poem, you must take care to be accurate about my private life. This poem was written in 1940, when I had begun training as an infantry

cadet in the hope of going overseas as an infantry officer.[70] I did qualify as a reserve lieutenant in 1941 but because of age and a lowered physical category for eyesight I couldn[']t get a look in. Nevertheless, the war going badly as it was, I still expected to get an active overseas call-up by virtue of being a reserve officer. When it came, in 1942, it was only as a Personnel Officer (a functionary who hadn[']t even been dreamt up in Ottawa when I wrote the poem). In the third place, it so happens that even as a Personnel Officer I came eventually under considerable bombing and shell-fire, like thousands of other Canadians, and in this respect the poem doesn[']t embarrass me even now–though I quite agree with you it's not a good poem, for other reasons. There were casualties among Personnel Officers in Holland and it was only chance that when I became one myself it was not from an enemy weapon; however, a double dose of dysentery and diptheria, followed by a post-diptherial paralysis, kept me in hospitals for nearly six months and left me with a disability for which I still draw a pension. These, however, are irrelevancies. The point is only that when I wrote the poem I was in training to be, I hoped, a fighting officer, not a Personnel Selection Officer. (The poem, by the way, was first printed in the *Dalhousie Review*, after much delay; B.K. Sandwell had sat on it for 8 mos for *Sat. Night*, lost it, and then wanted to print it after *Dalh*[*ousie*] *Rev*[*iew*] had it in type). Most of the *Now is Time* volume was written in hospitals, after I got the use of my hands back.

P[.] 21 You say that of the new poems in *Now is Time*, 7 are in "free verse." I can only find two: "On [a] Diary," and "Man on a Tractor." The predominant method is half-rhyme, etc.[71] "For Steve" is in half-rhymed Spenserian stanzas. "VE-Night" has internal rhymes, and so on.

P[.] 22 On the whole, I think it is a better volume than you do. I think "This Page my Pigeon," "Young Veterans," and "World Conference" and "Joe Harris" are as good as anything in the book. I challenge your remark that "Status Quo" and "Remarks for the Part of Death" are "heavily in debt to … Auden." The phrasing is certainly not, and the attitudes expressed, while by no means unusual or highly original, are not like Auden's and are certainly not consciously like anybody's but my own. "Rats in history's basement" may be a reminiscent phrase but I would be surprised if the source were Auden.[72] "Dusty bushes of bombs" may also be an echo and I can almost remember from whom but not quite–although I know it wasn[']t Auden.[73] As for "The Road to Nijmegen" it has continued to be one of my best-liked pieces from the time John Lehmann took it for *New Writing*.[74] I don[']t agree that the last 12 lines are redundant; without them the poem is static, held in the present and past. Perhaps 12 was too many,

though, a touch of diffuseness, yet I don[']t think it gives this impression when read aloud…. I do agree with you, however, about "Man on a Tractor" and "For Steve."

P[.] 24 "unpaid position of editor" of CPM. I got, I think, $100 a year.

P[.] 26 *Anian*. "Almost all the new poems are in a slack free verse, and only three are in rhymed stanzas." Not true.[75] "Mappemounde" is in Anglo-Saxon metre–something by no means "slack," if you've ever tried to write it. "Canada: Case History" has rhyme. "New Brunswick" has consonantal rhyme, and there is a good deal of half-rhyming in "Montreal." "Laurentian Shield" is assonantal, and so is "[The] Ebb [Begins From Dream]" & "Winter Saturday." "Letter [to a Possible Great-Grandson]" is half-rhymed. "Ulysses" is rhymed, and so on. As for "rhymed stanzas"–which are by no means an indication of tighter technique, except to a very oldfashioned critic–the following are in such a form: "Quebec May," "From the Hazel Bough," "Prairie Counterpoint" (alternate stanzas), "Gulf of Georgia," "World War III"–all new poems in that volume. No wonder you think so little of these poems when you don[']t even understand their form.

P[.] 27 "Man Is a [S]now." This happens to be another poem I have revised, this time extensively. You may want to keep the quote. as it appeared in *Anian* but in case you are interested in the final version (which appears in *Outposts* No. 10, and in the new Gustafson anthology[76]) here is the last verse:

> Man is a snow that cracks
> the trees' red resinous arches
> and winters his cabined heart
> till the chilled nail shrinks in the wall
> and pistols the brittle air
> till frost like ferns of the world that is lost
> unfurls on the darkening window.

The companion piece, by the way, has a deliberate ref. to DH Lawrence, in the "wind of humanity" image.[77]

P[.] 28-31 Glad you like "Damnation of Vanc." I've re-worked it twice, once into a television play (waiting production for *Folio*) and this winter into a stage play, which has already been acted three times, the premiere being at the U. of Washington.[78]

I think more of "Bushed" than I suspect you do, and certainly of "St. Valentine is Past," which I understand P.K. Page considers my best poem. As for "Takkakaw Falls," I think you miss its central purpose, which is not

to convey the mere violence of nature, but the continual rebirth of life and beauty out of the basic "sexual" violence of nature.[79]

P[.] 33 "He continues to use free verse as the main form of his poetry."[80] No! It wasn[']t and it isn[']t. The "Damnation" itself uses every sort of metre. "Monarch of the Id," "Restricted Area," "[Ballad of Mr.] Chubb," "St. Valentine" are all rhymed.

P[.] 34 *The Long Table* again, and again you set up a straw man to knock down. This novel did not, does not, "promise to be the definitive treatment of that era" and you judge it unfairly when you judge it as such. "But for some reason the novel quite fails to be the definitive treatment it was expected to be." Who expected it to be? "Instead of recording a cross section of life during that period…." Why should it? I wasn[']t interested in presenting a cross-section of life. You don[']t like the book because you wanted it to be something else and you can[']t look at it for what it is. I'm not trying to claim it is a fine novel–though I suspect it has been more damned than it should be and will still find a place for itself as the first honest attempt at a political Canadian novel–but I do want it judged for itself, as a political not a sociological cross-section kind of novel. Nor do I agree that "all the other characters in the book are made to seem completely contemptible." You are being a Puritan in your attitude to the professor's wife, and you show the priggishness you accuse me of when you talk about the Utah instructor. Bagshaw is not a "completely contemptible" character–your sense of humour doesn[']t seem to be operating when you talk about this book. Even Sather surely has his points, and Doc Channing, and MacCraddock isn[']t contemptible in any way, to my thinking.[81] Perhaps we just don[']t like the same people. Nor do I see why you can[']t, at times, if you are really honest with yourself, achieve a considerable amount of identification with Gordon Saunders–does a man have to be always insightful and courageous, never a fool and a cad, for the thoughtful reader to find himself? There are no doubt many good reasons why you should not like this book, but you aren[']t giving them, you are giving bad reasons. And where are those "constant imitations" of Joyce in the book? I scratch my head wondering. The style of Thomas Wolfe has perhaps influenced me slightly, though I doubt it very much; the similarities are probably because I was influenced by Faulkner and so was Wolfe.[82] As for Dos Passos, he has no patent on newspaper headlines, and I do not use them at all in the way that he does–this is a very superficial resemblance.[83]

Well of course I have spent most of the time arguefying after all, and at much greater length than I intended. It's no doubt irritating to you that I pass over in silence most of the good things you say about me and quarrel

about the rest, but this is human nature. I do appreciate, as I said at the beginning, your general approach, especially to over-all theme and content. I think you are less interested in technical problems than I am, which is to be expected, as between the writer and his critic, and I'm disappointed that you don[']t feel an advance from the *David* volume. I may not have come very far, or anywhere, in relation to the real poets, but, in relation to myself, I have come a long way from "David" to "Damnation." However, the only recurring critical attitude of yours to which I have been taking really strong exception, in this letter, is the one which involves my intention in the last novel, in "On Going to the Wars," and elsewhere where it seems to me you judge me by what I was not trying to do. Also I think you make assumptions too easily about precise influences.

Would be very interested to get your own reactions to all this and look forward with real interest to seeing what you are saying about the rest of us. Good luck with the book.

Sincerely
Earle

Letter 13 Desmond Pacey to Earle Birney
[written on U.N.B. letterhead]

April 28, 1957

Dear Earle,

Thank you very much for your letter of April 20.

I'll revise the chapter in the light of your suggestions, eliminating the statement that you were a Communist & playing down the notion of autobiography in *DTLT.* Just what I can do with my critique of the latter, though, I don't know as I don't like the novel much, & that in spite of a desire to do so. But perhaps I was a bit of a prig myself, in spots. The Joycean passages are such as 47ff, 91ff, 147ff–but of course since Wolfe imitated Joyce it could be Joyce-through-Wolfe, though I suspect you know Joyce better than I do.[84]

It was good of you to be so specific, and I'll certainly do my best to improve the chapter.

As ever,
Des Pacey

Letter 14 Earle Birney to Desmond Pacey
[typed on University of British Columbia letterhead]

6th March, 1958.

Dear Des,

Just a note of congratulations on the appearance of your *Ten Canadian Poets*.

I have not had time to do more yet than re-read the chapter on myself and study the Pratt chapter. I think your revisions in my chapter have cleared up most of the points of issue between us and I feel that on the whole you have been very kind to me. I am particularly happy that you defended the ending of "Damnation of Vancouver."

As for the Pratt chapter, I think it is the most important criticism of Pratt yet to appear. You have stolen what little thunder I had been storing for use in Ottawa when I give the Pratt lecture later this month. I shall have to confine myself so far as criticism goes to quibbles with your application of the word "courtesy" to him.[85]

The book looks good and I hope it sells well. I am sure it will be an influential work in the development of Canadian criticism.

Sincerely yours,
Earle Birney

Letter 15 Desmond Pacey to Earle Birney
[typed on letterhead]

March 11, 1958

Dear Earle:

Thank you very much for you letter of March 6. It was a kind thought which prompted it, and I was delighted to receive it.

It is good to know that you feel reasonably satisfied with my chapter on you and your work, and to have your very flattering remarks on the Pratt chapter. I felt myself that I had touched the very limits of my (admittedly rather narrow) critical ability in that chapter.

I hope you will write some more poetry–so that I shall have something new to talk about in the second edition!

As ever
Des Pacey

Notes

1. According to Erwin Wiens, Pacey told Irving Layton that he was having difficulty writing the Birney chapter as late as March 22, 1957: “A week later, however, he is beginning to find more interest in Birney, and by April 2, he has discovered ‘real merit’ in the poetry and the chapter is virtually written” (192)
2. Published in 1958, *Ten Canadian Poets: A Group of Biographical and Critical Essays* would consist of chapters on Charles Sangster, Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, E.J. Pratt, A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott, A.M. Klein, and Birney. Pacey refers to Dr. Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81) as his model.
3. Birney was a freshman at the University of British Columbia in 1922.
4. According to Elspeth Cameron (47), Birney published his first two poems, “Dormit Flumen” and “Shun!,” in 1923 in the *Ubyssey*, of which he became the editor in his final year. Peter Noel-Bentley lists three other Birney poems–“Sonnet,” “Change,” and “Night”–in this journal (30).
5. Probably “Tea at My Shetland Aunt’s,” *The University Pen* [University of Utah], May 1932 (Noel-Bentley 30).
6. Birney was a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley from 1927-30, and an instructor at the University of Utah in 1930-32 and 1933-34.
7. “Slug in Woods” appeared in the February, and “Grey-Rocks” in the March issue (Noel-Bentley 30). Both later appeared in *David and Other Poems* (1942).
8. Birney refers to a mixture of American and British poets: T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), A.E. Housman (1859-1936), Walter De la Mare (1873-1956), and Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962). The “oldtimers” in the next sentence include the Victorian poet and novelist George Meredith (1828-1909) and the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759-96) as well as Chaucer and Shakespeare. In the next paragraph, he refers to Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and William Butler Yeats (1865-1939).
9. Stephen Vincent Benét (1898-1943) published *John Brown’s Body*, a long Civil War narrative, in 1928. Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982) published *Conquistador*, a narrative about Hernando Cortez, in 1932.
10. D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), and E.E. Cummings (1894-1962) were important Modern poets, while W.H. Auden (1907-1973), Stephen Spender (1909-95), C. Day-Lewis (1904-72), and Louis MacNeice (1907-63) were influential British poets in the 1930s. According to Samuel Hynes, Owen was the most influential source of these poets’ understanding of war (22-23), and Lawrence “offered an ideology, a diagnosis of the disease, and a cure for it that was an alternative to sick democracy” (95).
11. James Joyce (1882-1941), the author of *Dubliners* (1914), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *Ulysses* (1922), and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). The influence of Joyce’s complex wordplay and parodic strategies is evident in many of Birney’s poems, especially “The Damnation of Vancouver.”
12. *The Song of Roland* is an Old French epic from approximately 1100.
13. Though Gerard Manley Hopkins lived from 1844 to 1889, his poems were not published until 1918, when they were appreciated for their formal innovations. Like the accentual meter of Old English poetry, Hopkins’ “sprung rhythm” combines strong stresses with a variable number of unstressed syllables, but it is the alliterative quality of the former that influences Birney.
14. “Eagle Island” is indebted to “The Old Vicarage, Grantchester,” an ironic pastoral by Rupert Brooke (1887-1915). “Georgianism” refers to the poets (such as Brooke and De la Mare) associated with the anthologies of *Georgian Poetry* edited by Edward Marsh from 1912 to 1922. Birney’s tone reflects the harsh reaction by Eliot and other Modernists to Georgian poetry.

15. The Tantramar river and marsh in New Brunswick were the setting for some of the best poetry of Charles G.D. Roberts (1860-1943). Birney is usually critical of Roberts and of traditional Canadian nature poetry (see *Spreading* 20-23).
16. Ryerson Press published the four volumes of poetry that Birney had written by 1957, and it also published Pacey's *Ten Canadian Poets.*
17. Founded in 1920, the *Canadian Forum* had for Birney in 1936 "a sixteen-year reputation as Canada's kind of *New Statesman*, a truly literate social-democratic monthly" (*Spreading* 28). From 1932 to 1951, *Saturday Night* was edited by B.K. Sandwell (1876-1954), whom Birney called "a natural essayist and an excellent judge, shrewd and flexible within the limits of his kind of Liberalism" (*Spreading* 38).
18. *Down the Long Table* (1955).
19. The drama was called "Trial of a City" when it was published in book form in 1952. The publisher of Ryerson, Lorne Pierce, insisted on the change (Cameron 337). It was broadcast on radio as "The Damnation of Vancouver" on Andrew Allan's CBC "Wednesday Night" on Oct. 8, 1952 (Zink 276).
20. A two-page curriculum vitae is included in Box 1, File 15 of the Pacey Fonds, Public Archives.
21. In 1921, Dr. Winthrop Stone and his wife tried to become the first to climb Mt. Eon, in Banff Park, on the Alberta / B.C. border. After Dr. Stone fell to his death, his wife survived "seven days and nights alone without food or significant amounts of water until rescued" ("Eon").
22. In 1941, Birney told Kenneth Rexroth that the origin of the poem was the death of David Cunningham Warden, a student acquaintance of Birney's who fell while climbing in the coastal mountains in 1927 (Cameron 191). In *The Cow Jumped Over the Moon*, Birney refers to both an unnamed "fellow undergraduate" who fell to his death in "the mountains on the edge of Vancouver" and an "American mountaineer" who fell on Mount Eon while climbing with his wife (18-19).
23. Pacey quotes extensively from Birney's letter in his discussion of "David" (*Ten* 305-06).
24. As Pratt's biographer notes, Pratt was not entirely pleased with the chapter on him, but "writing Pacey he kept his strictures to himself. Pacey had, after all, written some of the most substantial and generally commendatory critiques so far produced on many of the poems, and had, besides, dedicated the book to Pratt" (Pitt 475).
25. Pacey quotes extensively from Birney's 1952 speech to the Canadian Library Association (*Ten* 297-98).
26. Garnett Sedgewick was a charismatic English professor at U.B.C. who served as a mentor to Birney. On the occasion of Sedgewick's death in 1949, Birney told Lister Sinclair that Sedgewick was "the man of all men who has stood nearest in the role of father to me" (qtd. in Cameron 313).
27. Pacey refers to E.J. Pratt (1883-1964), the most prominent Canadian poet of the time, a professor of English at Victoria College of the University of Toronto until 1953, and a friend of and influence on Birney; E.K. Brown (1905-51), the author of *On Canadian Poetry* (1943) and other books who taught at Toronto from 1929 to 1941, except for two years as Chairman of the Department of English at the University of Manitoba (Harris 79); Robert Finch (1900-95), a poet and professor of French at University College of the University of Toronto from 1928 to 1968; and Dorothy Livesay (1909-96) a poet who worked as a social worker in Toronto and elsewhere before moving to Vancouver in 1936. Birney discusses all of them in his response.
28. In 1910, Pelham Edgar (1871-1948) transferred from the Department of French to the Department of English at Victoria College, University of Toronto, where he taught until 1938 (Harris 52, 78). He knew and encouraged many Canadian writers, from Duncan Campbell Scott to Birney, especially Pratt.
29. As noted in the introduction, it was Birney's appointment as editor of *Canadian Poetry*

Magazine in 1946 that led Pacey to initiate their correspondence.

30. Birney would soon publish articles on both of these Chaucerian tales: "'After his Ymage'–Structural Irony in 'The Friar's Tale,'" *Mediaeval Studies* 21 (1959): 17-35; "Structural Irony within the 'Summoner's Tale,'" *Anglia* 78 (1960): 204-18 (Cameron 642-43 n99).
31. Louis Riel (1844-85), the Métis leader, was convicted of treason and hanged for his role in the North-west Rebellion.
32. James Hill (1838-1916) was a part-owner (with his brother) of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad and an original director of the CPR (Canadian Pacific Railway), from which he resigned in 1883.
33. Southwestern Alberta.
34. In 1894, the Populist activist Jacob S. Coxey organized a march from Ohio to Washington, D.C. to present a petitition for "federal work relief on public roads" (Blum 483).
35. Member of the Orange Order, a "fraternal society formed in 1795 to support Protestantism in Ireland" (*O.C.D.*).
36. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) and Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) were both best known as novelists, but both also wrote short stories.
37. Birney took Malcolm Wallace's graduate courses on Wordsworth and "Milton and Seventeenth Century Literature" (Cameron 61). Wallace was both Principal of University College and Head of its Department of English when Birney taught there later in the decade (Harris 103).
38. W.H. Clawson was an "Anglo-Saxon and Chaucer expert" (Cameron 57) and Birney's thesis supervisor.
39. Edgar introduced Raymond Knister (1899-1932) to Birney in his first year at Toronto (1926-27). According to Birney, "Edgar had already told me he thought Knister was the most promising young Canadian writer he knew, and lent me some copies of the American magazine *Midland*, with some remarkable realistic poems of farm life by Knister, and a very mature and craftsmanly short story." However, because of Knister's speech impediment, the meeting was a "flop." When Birney "next came to Toronto, in the fall of '32, [he] learned that Raymond Knister had drowned a few months before" (*Spreading* 24-25).
40. From 1927 to 1930 Birney studied at the University of California at Berkeley, abandoning the doctoral program in 1930 "with only the thesis to complete" (Cameron 78).
41. Roy Daniells (1902-79), also from British Columbia, shared an apartment with Birney when both were graduate students in Toronto. Hired at U.B.C. with Birney in 1946, Daniells replaced Garnett Sedgewick as Head of the Department the following year, and his relationship with Birney soon deteriorated (Cameron 291-92, 427-31).
42. Northrop Frye (1912-91) was the dominant Canadian literary critic of his time. His studies at Toronto from 1929 to 1936 included a year as assistant to Pratt (Pitt 179). After two years at Oxford, Frye was hired by Victoria College in 1938 (Harris 80).
43. All three were economists who in 1931-32 helped to found the League for Social Reconstruction, "the first organization of left-wing intellectuals in Canadian history" (Horn 17). Harry Cassidy (1900-51) was a Vancouver native who "attended the University of British Columbia and the Robert Brookings Graduate School of Economics and Government in Washington, DC." He was hired by Toronto in 1929 and returned to B.C. in 1934 and later helped to draft the Regina Manifesto (Horn 24). Joseph Frederick Parkinson was a "graduate in commerce from the London School of Economics" who was also hired by Toronto in 1929 (Horn 25). Lorne T. Morgan was an "early LSR dropout" (Horn 87).
44. The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, the Leftist party founded in 1932. According to Cameron, it was after tea at Cassidy's in 1933 "that Birney began avidly reading the works of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky in the university library" (103).

45. The Young Communist League had 1700 Canadian members at its peak, but “only a fraction were university students” (Cameron 99).
46. Stanley B. Ryerson (1911-1998) was a historian and Communist activist. At the time of this letter, Ryerson was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Canada. He was descended from Egerton Ryerson (1803-82), the first editor of Ryerson Press.
47. Alfred G. Bailey (1905-1997) completed his Ph.D. at the University of Toronto in 1934. He returned to New Brunswick where he taught History at the University of New Brunswick. He was also a poet who helped to establish *The Fiddlehead* in 1945 (Gibbs 75).
48. Livesay was a Stalinist in the 1930s.
49. Despite Brown’s enthusiasm for Birney’s early poetry (see Brown 85-86).
50. The Independent Labour Party of Britain. After the Trotskyites were expelled from the Communist Party in 1932, they were urged by Trotsky to join the ILP, but only a minority did so (Cameron 131-32). Trotsky hoped that the ILP “could be won to revolutionary politics and enrolled as the British section of the Fourth International” (Cameron 152). Birney (as “Comrade Earle Robertson”) discussed these and other issues with Trotsky in Norway in November, 1935.
51. James Maxton (1885-1946) was a Scottish socialist who, believing that “the Labour Government [of Ramsay MacDonald] was not leading the country to Socialism and therefore it could not claim his continuing and abiding loyalty” (McNair 200-01), led the ILP out of the Labour Party in 1932. Campbell Stephen was “Maxton’s closest political friend” (McNair 100), and John McGovern was “one of Maxton’s greatest supporters,” and, along with Maxton, one of three ILP candidates to survive the 1931 election (McNair 206-07). Fenner Brockway succeeded Maxton as ILP Chairman in 1931 (McNair 209).
52. Jennie Lee (1904-88) was a member of the ILP who married Aneurin Bevan in 1934. Bevan became Minister of Health when the Labour Party was elected in 1945, while Lee was appointed Arts Minister in 1964 (“Lee”).
53. Birney met Esther Heiger in his political work in England, and returned with her to Canada in 1936. They married in 1940.
54. Probably “Tea at My Shetland Aunt’s” (see note 5) and “October in Utah” (*David* 19).
55. In addition to his extensive political activity in Utah, Birney also draws a curtain over his first marriage, to Sylvia Johnstone, in 1933 (Cameron 114-16).
56. Canadian Officers Training Corps.
57. William Arthur Deacon (1890-1977) was literary editor of the *Globe and Mail* from 1936 to 1960. As national president of the Canadian Authors’ Association, Deacon persuaded Birney to become editor of *Canadian Poetry Magazine* in 1946. Pratt told Deacon that he had emphasized to Birney “the importance of preserving the golden mean of letters and avoiding the rasping edges of intolerant extremes,” so that the journal could “cover the young as well as the more established writers” (228-29). Birney found it impossible to attain such a compromise and resigned in frustration in the spring of 1948 (*Spreading* 110-12).
58. A.H. O’Brien, a “retired Toronto lawyer” (*Spreading* 79).
59. Pacey argues that “It is a singular fact that there is almost no reference to religion nor to the supernatural in the whole range of Birney’s poetry” (*Ten* 293).
60. Pacey had quoted the Reverend James Ingram’s introduction to his translation of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1823), and then argued that Birney shows similar characteristics as a “chronicler of Canadian life during the period of World War II and its aftermath.” He continued: “There are … only two omissions: our coinage, which is not significant, and our religion, which is” (*Ten* 293).
61. Pacey cites Birney’s “Has Poetry a Future in Canada?” from *Manitoba Arts Review* 5 (Spring 1946): “The most cosmopolitan service a Canadian poet can do is to make

himself such a clear and memorable and passionate interpreter of Canadians themselves, in the language of Canada, that the world will accept him as a mature voice, and be the readier for that to accept Canada as a mature nation" (qtd. in *Ten* 295).

62. Pacey argues that "Western Canada, with its more diverse racial strains, its more recent settlement, and its geographical remoteness from both the Old World and the great metropolitan centers of the New, has evolved a more indigenous and distinctive way of life than Central and Eastern Canada" (*Ten* 296).
63. In 1946, Solon Low, the leader of the Social Credit Party, said that the answer to the problem of Communist espionage in the wake of the Gouzenko affair was a "continuing watchdog committee on subversive activities." According to Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, such a committee would have been "similar to the U.S. House Un-American Activities Committee" (161-62). At the time of Birney's letter, Low was in the news again for his attacks on the Liberal Party's handling of the Herbert Norman incident. On April 4, 1957, Norman, then Canadian ambassador to Egypt, committed suicide after encountering repeated American suspicions about his youthful Communist interests. In a front-page story in the April 13 *Toronto Star*, Low is quoted as follows: "If Mr. Norman was hounded to his death, then this government and the officials of the department of external affairs must bear a large part of the blame" (Harrison 2). I am indebted to Brenda Reed for these references.
64. Gordon Saunders is the protagonist of *Down the Long Table*. The names in the next sentence are all those of Marxist intellectuals and leaders: Karl Kautsky (1854-1938), worked with Engels in London from 1885 to 1890, then returned to Germany to become "the leading theorist of the Social Democratic Party" (Bottomore 248);Georgii Valentinovich Plekhanov (1856-1918) dominated the Emancipation of Labour Group in Geneva, "the leading centre of Russian Marxism in the late nineteenth century" (Bottomore 374); Prince Dimitry Petrovich Svyatopolk-Mirsky became "a leading interpreter of Russian literature for an English-speaking audience" in the 1920s, before returning to the Soviet Union in 1932, where he died in a labour camp seven years later (Perkins); V.I. Lenin was the pseduonym of Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov (1870-1924), the Bolskevik leader, theorist, and Soviet dictator; Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) was the Manchester businessman who collaborated with Marx on the *Communist Manifesto* and the First International; Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin (1888-1938) was a Bolshevik who edited *Pravda* from 1917 to 1929, before falling into the enmity with Stalin that led to his death sentence at the third Moscow Trial (Bottomore 56-57).
65. H.J. Cody was President of the University of Toronto until 1945 (Pitt 334).
66. Pacey quoted this paragraph in a footnote to his argument that "Irregular blank verse may seem like a contradiction in terms, but I think it is the best phrase to describe the form of the four best poems in the book ('David,' 'Hands,' 'Dusk on English Bay' and 'Vancouver Lights')…"(*Ten* 303-04).
67. Pacey maintained that there are "echoes" of Spender in "Hands," but he accepted Birney's point about Brooke's influence on "Eagle Island" (*Ten* 304).
68. Pacey argues that "Alliteration of harsh consonants, and rhymes which just fall short of being full rhymes, also give the effect of strain and effort" (*Ten* 306).
69. Pacey revised the quotation (*Ten* 308). In *David*, the line reads "No one slew Prometheus" (37).
70. According to Cameron, the poem was written "in April and May 1941, when Esther was pregnant, their child's gender unknown and there was as yet no question of his going overseas. And he published it at first in October's *Dalhousie Review* … under the pseudonym 'Richard Miles,' lest it become an embarrassment to him if he were never posted abroad" (200).
71. Maintaining that seven of these poems are in free verse, Pacey adds the following note: "I realize that this is a rather vague phrase. Some of the seven poems make use of half-rhymes, a device of which Birney is especially fond" (*Ten* 311n).

72. The phrase is from “Status Quo,” the opening poem in the volume (*Now* 3).
73. The phrase is from “Remarks for the Part of Death” (*Now* 4). In the book, Pacey quotes neither “Status Quo” nor “Remarks for the Part of Death,” but he argues that both “are heavily in debt to the oracular and cynical manner of the early Auden” (*Ten* 312).
74. “The Road to Nijmegen” appeared in *Penguin New Writing* 26 (1945): 101-02 (Noel-Bentley 31). John Lehmann was the editor of the *New Writing*, *Folios of New Writing*, and *Penguin New Writing* anthologies.
75. Pacey appears to have accepted Birney’s point, since he discusses only the themes, and not the forms, of the poems in *The Strait of Anian* (*Ten* 315-17).
76. “Man is a Snow” is one of six Birney poems in Ralph Gustafson’s *Penguin Book of Canadian Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958): 147-51.
77. The companion piece is “… Or a Wind” (see *Strait* 80-81).
78. According to Birney, the play was given public readings at the University of British Columbia in 1952 and 1954, and “It was visually successful enough to reawaken CBC interest in the play. By 1956 I had been commissioned to re-cast it as a one-hour drama for television. This was accepted, paid for, and scheduled for ‘early 1957.’ For reasons the CBC never divulged to me, it was never produced. The rumour was it had been one of several scheduled plays shelved that year to appease a parliamentary committee investigating ‘highbrowism’ in CBC programming” (“Preface” 5). “Folio” was the CBC’s “flagship program for quality drama and musical performance” (Allan). It ran from 25 Sept. 1955 to 26 May 1959. I am grateful to Blaine Allan for help with these dates.
79. Pacey’s chapter follows Birney’s comments on “Takkakaw Falls.”
80. Again Pacey seems to have accepted Birney’s point, and he does not discuss the form of these poems (*Ten* 322-24).
81. Pacey dropped his specific remarks about these characters, saying only that “there is not a single human being with whom we can identify ourselves” (*Ten* 325).
82. Pacey refers to “the constant imitation of Dos Passos, Joyce, and Thomas Wolfe” (*Ten* 325). William Faulkner (1897-1962) and Thomas Wolfe (1900-38) were prominent American novelists. Pacey returns to the influence of Joyce in his response to this letter.
83. Birney was later more flexible on the matter of the influence of the American novelist John Dos Passos (1896-1970): noting that some “commentators have been slightly put off by my adaptation of the Dos Passos interchapter of headlines,” he concedes, “I am willing to defend the latter because I use his ‘gimmick’ functionally by integrating the story line with the news clips” (“Epilogue” 217).
84. Pacey refers to passages in the “stream of consciousness” style developed by Joyce and other Modern writers.
85. Birney argues (“Pratt” 142) that loyalty and defiance are more pertinent to Pratt than courtesy and compassion, as suggested by Pacey (175). Earlier in the published version of the paper that he gave at Carleton University in 1958 he is even more critical: “I have my doubts that Pacey’s synthesis will satisfy other critics any more than previous ones. And I find his more lively than consistent” (136).

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