

REVIEWS

Reading Poetry by the Pound: A Review of the Collected Works of Alden Nowlan and Al Pittman

Collected Poems of Alden Nowlan. Ed. Brian Bartlett. Fredericton, NB: Icehouse/Goose Lane, 2017. ISBN 978-0-86492-960-0. 681pp.

Collected Poems of Al Pittman. Ed. Michael Crummey. St. John's, NF: Breakwater, 2015. ISBN 978-1-55081-437-8. 376pp

Toward the end of his career, the media critic Neil Postman concluded that the best books – those that carried their messages to increasingly distracted readers – were, of necessity, short. And so, as an avowed educator, he committed publicly to writing only short books. The teachers and technologists who made up the majority of his readership received his decision with relief, for they had become wearied by the ponderous, self-indulgent tomes of the times, those that seemed to delight in trading clarity for erudition. For Postman and his readers, the public intellectual was losing ground to the specialist, leaving readers wanting less.

Postman could not have known how prescient his decision was, for shortly after his death there emerged a whole new publishing industry dedicated to concision in the circulation of ideas. Users' guides, readers' introductions, dummies books, and an assortment of other summary formats became popular for people who had lost the capacity to engage with the big book. As Postman had anticipated when downsizing the expression of his own thought, the size of books actually did shrink as media environments became more and more saturated with content.

Few would argue today, myself included (if I'm being honest), that that outcome is bad. For those of us teaching in the country's universities, the short book is not so much a concession to attention deficits as it is a workplace necessity. My students, with very few exceptions, will simply not read, let alone buy, the big book. And colleagues who assign those – the hardy few who teach *Moby Dick* or *Paradise Lost* or *Midnight's Children* in their entirety – are thought to be brave or foolhardy, idealists who are welcome to try if they can sustain the energy while deflecting the scorn.

All of which raises a very important question that editor Tracy Ware asked me to consider when he was seeking a reviewer for Alden Nowlan's just-released collected poems: "the urgent question," he asked, "is why Nowlan still matters." Ware's question is a fair one, particularly given the fact that one of the very few Nowlan books currently in print (this one) is 681 pages long. Poetry by the pound is how I've come to think of it. Is the release of such a substantial volume necessary, then, and can it bring us to any conclusions about Nowlan's worth? These, again, are reasonable questions in an age of deafening chatter, widespread distraction, and rearguard concision.

I sought to answer those questions by reading the collected poems of Nowlan and Al Pittman, each released within the last three years and together exceeding 1000 pages. The choice of twinning the poets for this review came from the fact that each knew and learned from the other and that both share what I consider to be a similar Atlantic Canadian voice. The appearance of their collected works within a three-year period thus marks an important moment for Atlantic Canadian poetry.

What became apparent after weeks of reading is that the question of worth (why the poets still matter) is relatively easy to answer – or at least easier to answer than the question of what the breadth of collected works reveals. One of the reasons why both poets still matter, however, is actually explained by the breadth: both dedicated lifetimes to their craft, not just convinced of the worth of literary expression but also dedicated to its refinement and to the communities of fellow artists who surround and nurture it. And, yes, I am aware that that statement may be considered facile by some, for it is not always the case that persistence is a barometer of worth, but for both Nowlan and Pittman poetry was total-field: business, life, vocation, fellowship, and identity. They were so committed to what percolated inside them that they worked for lifetimes and across volumes to hone the forms that would carry that interiority to larger publics. Neither could be anything *but* poets, even though both did whatever else was necessary for sustenance. In the New Brunswick and Newfoundland locales where they had the most lasting influence, that legacy of the long game modelled a commitment to art that required absolute seriousness. Not solemnity, but seriousness. Dilettantes were not tolerated, nor those hobbyists who sought chumminess or exhibition. Art was all or nothing, the solitary pursuit of difficult questions and uncomfortable answers.

It was through those pursuits that Nowlan and Pittman became aware of their ordinariness, thus able to write about a humanity that readers

immediately recognized as their own. There were no shortcuts and no exits for such a vocation; the price for both was loneliness, alcoholism, and difficult relations with others. To read both poets across the entirety of their works is to become immersed in their struggles – struggles to answer their vocations, accept themselves, learn to live in societies in which they were anomalous, and acquire the bravery to speak of love, fear, self-loathing, and the range of human emotions that most of us work very hard to conceal. That lifelong commitment to what one must address, regardless of difficulty or circumstance, is, for me, a barometer of worth, especially when it involves the most intimate of disclosures, as it often did for Nowlan and Pittman. I want that courage in artists as I want it in seers. It is what separates them from dabblers. That's not romance – the adolescent trope of suffering for art – but rather a statement about the time, effort, and agony it takes to first learn about and then reveal oneself in unvarnished form. When I read in Nowlan's "Another Poem" that "I've never come closer / than this sort of thing where you feel ashamed / when it's done because there's so much more / you'll never say" (229), I know I am in the presence of an honesty that still matters.

In the galaxy of untruths that swirl around us today, such an art of self-disclosure provides personal defence against the insidious franchise of Pound's "liars in public places." It is also a touchstone, re-centering us on a common humanity. I can think of no better poets than Nowlan and Pittman to take us to that centre. They matter because they are "real" in the way that most people still understand that term. They suffer, they rejoice, they seek. Fear and uncertainty accompany them everywhere. They are the kind of writers with whom readers commiserate, recognizing in their work that the only real politics is the politics of the everyday. Such recognition "is an act of the blood," writes Pittman in "Celebration," a "tribal communion / beneath the pale end / of one year's summer sky" (134).

More complicated to answer is the question of the value of such weighty collections, a question that is implicated in the consideration of artistic worth. Wouldn't a "selected works" have had more utility and greater success in finding a readership? And, if not, what possibly is gained by releasing the entire published record? Fair questions again that, in the absence of both poets (each died many years ago), raises the possibility of editorial defiance or indulgence. Spending the time I did in both collections provides a number of answers. First and most obviously, if worth is established then so should the full records be accessible. Desmond Pacey popularized the notion in the fifties that only when the

full records of its artists are made available will Canada ever become a nation. His argument was not in defence of nationhood but of the many voices that contribute to it. Canada could thus only move from its colonial status if the work of our own best authors competed for shelf space with those from away. That effort continues today, even if hampered by a new colonialism that encourages us to believe that globalization erases all borders. As Nowlan and Pittman remind us, however, all culture is local – the baptism of fields, sea, and salt, writes Pittman, “a sacrament of the living” (“Baptism” 35). The work of compiling these collections is thus the work of defining the nation in its many constituent parts.

But it is also an act of faith – faith in the merits of the art to warrant the sustained attention of others and faith in one’s own judgement that those merits are indeed worth preserving in their entirety. The unusual and at times intimidating breadth of the Nowlan collection offers the best evidence that this is so: that comprehensiveness provides windows into the art that concision simply cannot convey. To read all 681 pages of Nowlan, then, is to enter a fully dimensioned world of discovery, surprise, and delight. I encountered early poems that I had either forgotten or hadn’t read before. “Gypsies” (64), “Husband and Wife” (157), and “The Nation’s Capital” (166) were especially rewarding, as was being reminded of Nowlan’s skill with the startling image. The teenaged girls, for example, tormenting the timid old bachelor farmers, “their little posteriors / gift-wrapped in Christmas-coloured / short pants” (“Georgie and Fenwick” 79), or the streets awakening from winter, “motor oil and melted ice / the colour of a pigeon’s throat” (“Broad Street” 161). One also discovers the early studies of later poems: the genesis of “Daughter of Zion” (156) in “Birth” (82); “The Bull Moose” (112) in “Hunters” (89); and “What Happened When He Went to the Store for Bread” (563) in “Points of Contact” (211).

Most startling, however, is Nowlan’s dexterity as he ruminates, across an entire career, on a fairly narrow band of preoccupations, whether religion and belief, social violence, or personal acceptance. Remarkably, one reads these many poems without a sense that the poet is repeating himself, the range of his forms, metaphors, and references, not to mention the depth of his own self-analysis, erasing that tendency to duplicate the familiar. Perhaps that is why one detects the echo of so many other Atlantic Canadian writers in his work, writers who came after him and found room for their own voices in his diversity of expression. In his investigations of darkness and personal contradiction, his satires of privilege and certainty, and his demand that narrowness and delusion be

met with gentle understanding, a whole generation of poets and novelists found a footing. Such breadth of intention and influence is revealed in this collected works, as is Nowlan's role as one of the cornerstones of an Atlantic Canadian school of poets.

I end, then, with an Al Pittman poem that is both an homage to Nowlan's work – readers will recognize Nowlan's "The Mysterious Naked Man" in Pittman's "Guilty as Charged" – and a statement about both poets' incongruous need for fellowship and privacy, a contradiction that fuelled much regret. Pittman seemed to know, uncannily, that as much as Nowlan would have wanted a collected works, so would he have wanted to dissociate himself from it. The following lines are fitting, then:

Today, when the verdict was read
and the sentence passed, he looked
like he knew that the worst of his punishment
was over, looked like he'd be glad
to get out of that courtroom, glad finally
to be locked up out of sight
where he wouldn't have to sit ever again
in front of all those people
feeling like some kind of fool. (191)

Perhaps, finally, in revealing so much, collected works are to be approached with caution for not revealing enough.

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