STUDIES

Earle Birney as Anglo-Saxon *Scop*: a Canadian "Shaper" of Poetry?

by M.J. Toswell

The first poem in Earle Birney's final collection, *Last Makings* (1991), is entitled "Beyond the Meadhall":

> Deep goeth mood that driveth
> out with seaflood to float
> far from steading to stray
> the wide whaleroad sailing
> leaving lovers by hearth
> from beership in meadhall bereft.

Written in 1985, the poem evokes several Old English poems, and is perhaps best described as a response to the best-known extant elegies, "The Wanderer" and especially "The Seafarer." Both poems are filled with nature imagery and describe the way in which the world outside, the sea, impels the thinker to travel, to go far on the ocean. While "The Wanderer" offers only a first and brief hope of consolation at the end of the elegy, "The Seafarer" finishes with an extended Christian reflection on the heaven awaiting the *peregrinus* who has travelled well through the vicissitudes of daily life. The endings, particularly of "The Seafarer," have inspired many critics to reinterpret the poems as Christian allegories depicting the sea as the turbulent path of life. Birney, to judge by this meditation, stands with the critics who see those endings as rather desperate attempts to seek meaning. He favours fierce courage in the face of the unknown, with no real expectation of any return to the hearth, to the meadhall. Some critics, evidently including Birney, even argue that the epilogues are the additions of later poets to the bleak original texts, which traced human emotions and responses from youth to old age, and questioned the value of aging, reaching the conclusion—if conclusion it be—that one's behaviour should be the best possible in the face of uncertainty and death.

Birney's interpretation of these well-known elegiac poems of Anglo-Saxon England is, if anything, more pessimistic than W.H. Auden's response to "The Wanderer," first written in 1930 and beginning "Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle." It seems likely that Birney knew Auden's poem, since he went through his own Audenesque period, and a trace of it may be present in his opening line—but no more than a trace. The poem itself depends very heavily on Anglo-Saxon poetics, though the Old English poetic line generally has four stresses with an internal caesura at the half-way point, and Birney uses a shorter line. Old English alliteration requires at least two and often the first three of the four stressed elements to alliterate. In this poem the first line alliterates on "d" (with a heavily-stressed "m" in the middle), and the second line on "fl" (a more exact alliteration than an Old English poet would have produced). The "f" recurs with unstressed elements in the third line, "for" and "from," and the alliteration in that line is provided by "steading" and "stray," which follows the standard practice of Old English verse that "st" alliterates only with itself. The fourth line alliterates in a typically Anglo-Saxon pattern of adjective and following noun on "w," and picks up the "s" of the second line for a linkage of alliterative effect. The penultimate line alliterates on "l," and the final line has principal alliteration on the plosive "b," reminiscent of the "d" of the opening line and not of the intervening liquids and sibilants. Finally, the "m" reappears with "meadhall," so that the alliteration of this short poem turns back on itself to create a coherent and tightly-knit whole, from the title to the ending.

In fact, the poem is so coherent and tightly-knit that it seems possible that Birney is combining his knowledge of Anglo-Saxon poetic usage with Old Norse structures. Old Norse poetry, particularly skaldic verse, depended on having a fixed number of syllables in the line, so precisely that Winfred Lehmann argues that "form dominated sense completely" (85). The *dróttkvætt*, the favourite stanza pattern of the skalds, required a line with three stresses and six syllables. The first five lines of "Beyond the Meadhall" have six syllables each, and the sixth and last line has eight syllables—which suggests that the poem might well be a *dróttkvætt* modeled on the stanza structure most commonly used by the Old Norse court poets. Birney does not have internal rhyme, a significant feature of skaldic verse, but he does have a very high frequency of long syllables (Lehmann 81). Because of its formal restrictions, the *dróttkvætt* stanza often had one syntactic structure, in which different possibilities were juxtaposed against each other. "Beyond the Meadhall" has one complex sentence. Finally, skaldic verse depended very heavily on kennings or condensed metaphors; Birney here uses several, though their lack of complexity evokes an Anglo-Saxon rather than Old Norse origin.

The diction of the poem is self-consciously Anglo-Saxon, even to the point of using strong verb endings for the third person present active verbs "goeth" and "driveth" in the opening line. Word choice continues to be intentionally archaic, with the compound "seaflood," a Noun + Noun compound not itself in common usage since Anglo-Saxon times, when it was written *sæflod*. Similarly, "steading" derives from Old English *stede* or home, and is more commonly found in the compound "homestead" than in the simplex. The "whaleroad" is a transliteration of a common Old English kenning or condensed metaphor, for which the reader must interpret the meaning. "Whaleroad" is a road for whales and therefore an ocean; *hwælrad* does not itself occur in Old English poetry but *hwælweg* "whale-way" and *hronrad* "whale-road" both occur. Finally, the central image of the poem is that of the "meadhall," the central gathering-place of Anglo-Saxon society according to the poets, the place in which mead was dispensed to the warriors both literally and figuratively, referring to celebratory drinking and to the handing out of treasure or gifts to cement the relationship between lord and retainer. The meadhall is also the place in which the poet, the maker or *scop*, would sing the songs that would, in effect, "make" the deeds of the warriors since the only chance for immortality was through fame, through the words of others remembering and declaiming heroic deeds.

Birney, then, opens *Last Makings* (henceforth *LM*) with a reference in the title of the book to the poet as maker or shaper in the Anglo-Saxon sense, and carries through that veiled reference with the theme, imagery, and poetic technique of the first work in the collection. "Beyond the Meadhall" describes the way in which the *mod*—transliterated with intentional inaccuracy as "mood," when the word is normally given as "mind," "soul," or "spirit"—must travel far beyond the safe confines of the meadhall and out to the unsafe and turbulent world of adventure. The poem is an opening invocation, a call to embark on the journey, to leave behind the security of home, of lovers, of calm acceptance of one's lot in order to accept the deep-seated urge to strive, to travel, to move away from the hall. Strikingly, Birney also labels the first section of poems in this chapbook "Fytte the Fyrst," a casual reference to the fact that the Old English poem *Beowulf* is divided in the manuscript into sections called "fitts." The second half of the book is "Fytte the Hindmost," the rearguard of Birney's entire production as a poet. The spelling is pseudo-Anglo-Saxon, perhaps intended both to introduce Birney as an Anglo-Saxon craftsman and also to poke quiet fun at the notion that a poetic mode over a thousand years old could readily be utilized in the last decade of the second millennium.

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In this paper I will examine Birney's use of Anglo-Saxon, and to some extent later medieval, poetic techniques and themes in his work, a usage which is often fairly obvious in his early writings but becomes subsumed into his own unique voice in mid-career, only to be used once again—very blatantly and with intent aforethought—in some of his last poems.[1] Birney came by this usage honestly, in that he trained as a medievalist in two graduate schools: University of California, Berkeley and University of Toronto.[2] He could therefore hardly avoid detailed knowledge of Old English metrics and techniques of morphology and word-order, which he clearly made conscious, and perhaps at times unconscious, use of in his poetry. Somewhat sardonically, in the list of "sources" he provides for the New Canadian Library selection of his poems, the name Cynewulf appears.[3] Caedmon, the divinely-inspired first poet of Anglo-Saxon England in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and every Old English textbook since that point, did not inspire Birney. Birney's stated Old English precursor was Cynewulf, the only other named Anglo-Saxon poet, the creator of four poems (about ten per cent of the extant Old English poetry). His name survives because, in a bid for individuality, he wove it into his poetry in runic epilogues, the rune-words having meaning in the text and also standing for their alphabetical designation to spell out his name. Birney, describing his last poems as "makings," clearly appreciated the craftsmanship—and the bid for recognition—of his Old English predecessor.

The evidence for Birney's Anglo-Saxonism and his philological interest is far-reaching and lifelong. His name, Alfred Earle Birney, is a starting-point, at least providing evidence as to the intent of his parents. Even that evidence, appropriately, is somewhat compromised; according to Elspeth Cameron, his mother intended to name him "Alfred Errol" but the registrar misheard her and she did not correct him (11). The result was a given name which has both Anglo-Saxon and Norse connotations, in that "eorl" was an Anglo-Saxon term originally meaning "man" or "warrior" but in the later period coming to mean "nobleman" and replacing "ealdorman" as the title for the leading figures (particularly those of Norse ancestry) of late Anglo-Saxon England. Thus Harold Godwin, before election to the kingship in 1066, was Earl Godwin as a reflection of his Norse/Anglo-Saxon background, while Byrhtnoth, who died in 991 repulsing the Vikings at the Battle of Maldon, was usually described as the *ealdorman* of Essex. Alfred, the name of England's greatest Anglo-Saxon king, was a fairly common Victorian name. Birney himself would later know that etymologically it means "counsel of the elves" or "wise advice." The surname "Birney" is also Anglo-Saxon, though "birnie" survives today only in

Scottish usage, and means a wood (Cameron 12). Cameron argues that Birney's ancestry must have been Scottish, since Birney was a place name in use as a surname since the thirteenth century. This may well be. On the other hand, Birney himself may well have thought differently: in his rendition of the Old English poem *Beowulf* as a radio play, he has his protagonist "gird tight his byrnie" (*Words on Waves* 8). "Byrne" is an Old English word of Germanic origin which occurs quite frequently in Anglo-Saxon poetry; it means "corselet, coat of mail." In the typescript for the radio play, dated 17 April 1950 and deposited in the Fisher Library with the original 1976 accession, Birney has "birney" in parentheses beside the more common spelling "byrnie" (54.29.9). This suggests, to me at least, that he saw his name as connected to the Anglo-Saxon "byrne" meaning "coat of mail" rather than to the Scottish usage derived from the Old Norse. This etymology is less likely because surnames more commonly derive from place-names than from warrior's paraphernalia, but the self-perception of a poet about the origin of his surname is an important consideration. Birney's names thus evoke ancient English traditions of nobility and either of interest in nature or of interest in a warrior's armour—or, of course, both. Some evidence for Birney's own continuing interest in etymology and philology lies in the usage, discussed above, of "mood" to mean "spirit" or "heart" rather than "state of mind," but other evidence than that provided in the poetry is available. Birney himself pointed out (in the unpublished draft of his own autobiography, now in the Fisher Library) that he undertook a detailed etymological analysis of every word in "Caedmon's Hymn," from Old English through the antecedent Germanic languages back to Indo-European (205.8.9). The analysis, totalling some fifty pages (there are forty-three words in the nine lines of the poem, only three of which occur twice), earned him an "A" in Arthur Brodeur's *Beowulf* course.

As an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia, Birney developed an interest in Chaucer, whom he described in his memoir as "for me to this day the greatest of narrative poets" (*Spreading Time* 54). He took his M.A. in English literature at the University of Toronto, working with W.H. Clawson and continuing his Chaucerian interests, though writing his thesis on Drummond of Hawthornden, an obscure seventeenth-century Scottish poet. Birney accepted a scholarship for doctoral studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and there pursued a rigorous program of medieval studies. He took courses in Germanic Philology, Gothic, Old Norse, Old French, and *Beowulf*, completing the requirements for a minor in Germanic Philology. To this point, Birney's career path was straightforward and clear; he had taken some extra time to earn money before entering UBC as an undergraduate but since then, despite a wide range of extracurricular activities, his B.A., M.A. and the early stages of the Ph.D. followed a classic path. In the third year at UC Berkeley, however, things went awry. Cameron is not helpful on the fledgling medievalist's setback, simply stating that J.S.P. Tatlock, who was to be his thesis advisor, gave him an E on his final exam. In the late second or third year of a doctorate, the "final exam" should be the major field comprehensive exam or oral exam, and never is it described as a "final exam." Other biographers and critics, including Birney himself in various interviews and in his memoir, are somewhat opaque. Frank Davey, however, tackles the problem, suggesting that "the English department split into rival Yale and Harvard factions" (7), and that Birney's thesis on irony in Chaucer had been developed with Merrett Hughes, but was rejected by J.S.P. Tatlock as having too broad a working definition of irony. Birney's unpublished autobiography sheds more light. By his own account, he failed his comprehensive oral. Also by his own account, the newly-arrived Tatlock forced the issue, refusing to let him answer questions that he was comfortable with, and searching for questions that he could not address (205.11.26-29). His teachers, who would ordinarily have been on the committee, were not named to it (205.8.14). His intended supervisor, Hughes, had in the aftermath of the political struggle of the department moved to Wisconsin (15). The oral exam, lasting the full allocation of three hours, included not a single question about Chaucer or the fourteenth century, and few enough about medieval matters. The failure, which caused great consternation among the graduate students and faculty at Berkeley, meant that he could not continue his doctorate there.

Over the next few years Birney taught, as what would today be called a sessional lecturer, at the University of Utah. He also re-entered for the doctorate, this time at Toronto, taking a year away from Utah to fulfill the residency and coursework requirements. Just as the opportunities at Utah were disappearing, Pelham Edgar jump-started his academic career by submitting an application on his behalf for a two-year fellowship in England offered by the Royal Society of Canada. Edgar, who had taught Birney at Toronto, was not even in his field; his kindness meant that an academic career that had been collapsing now could begin again. Birney, who had been turning steadily more and more to political activity as a Trotskyist organiser, rediscovered Chaucer.

The thesis on Chaucer's irony that Birney wrote during the next two years, picking up the introductory material and the bibliography from his work at Berkeley, starts from an interesting premise but becomes a fairly straightforward catalogue of Chaucerian irony for its second volume. Two-volume theses are not at all unusual among medievalists, and providing extensive evidence to buttress the shorter argument section is quite common. Birney, as explicated in his final report to the Royal Society, wrote a detailed analysis of irony as a form, a detailed history of irony in classical and medieval Latin and in vernacular texts that provided an historical background for Chaucer, an extended study of the whole field of Chaucer criticism through the years with particular emphasis on the growing misapprehensions about his irony, an historical study of Chaucer criticism in the twentieth century, and a chapter focusing on Chaucer's irony with respect to his class origins and historical surroundings (206.17.1-5). The last and largest section of the thesis provides a chronological catalogue of irony in Chaucer's works, including source study and analysis of each possible example. The principal argument of the thesis, as adduced in the central chapter, is that the dramatic and structural irony of such texts as the individual Canterbury tales tend towards commentary on social and political issues of the fourteenth century. In short, Birney opposes those who suggest that Chaucer wrote texts largely unaffected by the turmoil and uncertainty of fourteenth-century English society, and argues that in fact his work is embedded in the mores of his time, and engages in a subversive attack on those mores. Chaucer's irony is not a gentle comedic tool, but a carefully-calibrated harbinger for his political and social concerns.

Beryl Rowland, Birney's only doctoral student, assesses his academic publications in *A Companion to Chaucer Studies*:

> The papers of Earle Birney are outstanding for their sound and imaginative perceptions, bringing into play psychological insights, ideas and terms compatible with modern concepts, while recognizing the importance of fourteenth-century poetic conventions. In the *Miller's Tale* "symbolic detail, sly image and verbal play" are interwoven with ironic effect. In the *Summoner's Tale* patterns of irony are elaborately developed through the imagery. Simile and metaphor are related to the hunter-prey theme to achieve a perfect figurative unity. (1979.125)

Later in the same book, Vance Ramsey declares the need for a comprehensive treatment of the subject of irony in the Middle Ages and in Middle English, following on from Birney's "excellent dissertation" (356). The offshoots of the dissertation fall into two groups: three early papers, largely drawn from the historical surveys in the first part of the thesis (1936-41), and four papers on specific texts and their use of irony, published 1959-60 after Birney spent a year on leave in England. After the oral examination of the thesis, Thursday 28 May 1936 (62.14), Birney unsuccessfully submitted the work to the University of Toronto Press as a book. Long after the end of his academic career, the same material, the reprinted articles, found favour with the same press, appearing in 1985 as *Essays on Chaucerian Irony*, edited and with an essay on irony by Beryl Rowland.

Birney's productivity as a medievalist was perhaps low, for he depended on his thesis to generate all of his published articles in the field. However, his productivity as a popularist of medieval texts and ideas provides a more accurate gauge of his lasting importance. His analyses of Chaucer could be described as new historicist before that approach was developed, but despite the accoutrements of social and political criticism he adduces in Chaucer, the real strength of his work was, as elucidated by Rowland, his subtle analyses of the text, the very traditional but very useful *explication de texte*. His fundamental interest remained in the words themselves, and in playing with the effects of the words chosen by the poet. Thus, his Middle English-inspired poems are works such as "For Maister Geoffrey" (*Collected Poems* I.182) and "Valentine, After Chaucer" (*CP* I.39), which are written in Middle English, and specifically in Chaucer's London dialect.

Interestingly, however, Birney's academic training as a Middle English specialist seems to appear in his poetry only in these curiosities, and in the autobiographical character who serves as the protagonist for *Down the Long Table*. Gordon Saunders' career almost exactly parallels Birney's own, with grad school years in California, teaching years at Utah which end badly both personally and professionally, and further grad school years at Toronto. The focus of the novel is the conversion of the protagonist to Trotskyism, and the frame narrative is a McCarthyite investigation twenty years later into the political leanings and moral beliefs of Professor Saunders. There, throughout the novel, Saunders punctuates his meditations and asides on the action with quotations drawn principally from Chaucer (though also from T.S. Eliot). Saunders' job as a medievalist remains, however, unimportant to the narrative save as an aspect of his character.

Birney pointed out in *The Creative Writer*, his guidebook for young writers, that poetry was for most of Chaucer's life a hobby, and that the job of the poet is to find a way of developing or magnifying his (or presumably her) voice. Chaucer's voice, he concluded, was the "most serene of English humorists and poets" (7-8). Elsewhere Birney states that he owed his

> deepest poetic devotion to Chaucer and Blake, Shakespeare and Wordsworth and Yeats, rather than to Pope or Auden. For me, Coleridge's "Rime of the

> Ancient Mariner," Keats' "Eve of St. Agnes," *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Beowulf* are all great poems, and no less great because they are narratives. (*Cow Jumped* 16)

Chaucer's narrative impulse is demonstrated in the *Canterbury Tales* with the interplay amongst the characters on the pilgrimage as well as in the narratives told by each participant (except the Parson). The technique of exemplifying character through dialogue was one that Birney worked with throughout his life, starting from a first-person narrator named Bob who in "David" tells a medieval exemplum (wholly unchristian) fraught with symbols of the inevitable tragic fall and growth from adolescence to adulthood, learning the harsh lessons of nature along the way. In the poems chronicling Birney's travels around the world and his encounters with indigenous inhabitants the poet speaks almost wholly in his own voice, eschewing Chaucer's usual masking techniques. His irony strays close to sardonic bitterness, whereas Chaucer invariably held his hand so that the irony remained gentle, ambiguous, funny without being obviously hurtful. Although Birney admired Chaucer, his poetry does not show many traces of that admiration.

There are, however, more than traces in Birney's poetry of his knowledge of Anglo-Saxon. Unusually for a Chaucerian, Birney also taught Old English and such hybrid surveys as "England from 500 to 1500" at Toronto and at the University of British Columbia, where he obtained a permanent post in 1942. His notes from Brodeur's lectures he kept with him until after his retirement; he even completed a survey on the teaching of Anglo-Saxon in universities across North America (81.3). Anglo-Saxonists habitually engage in this kind of worried analysis of the continued existence of their subject; Birney's interest in teaching surveys which addressed the early middle ages for as many hours as they did the more popular romances and tales of the late fourteenth century clearly documents his continuing self-identification as a thoroughgoing medievalist, not simply a Chaucerian. While at UBC he also inaugurated the teaching of creative writing in Canada, and fostered many young writers as a fully-fledged program in the field developed there. His allegiance was to both fields, and it shifted back and forth as his interests developed throughout his career. For example, through the late 1940s and the 1950s he combined his interests by writing dramatic interpretations of medieval and modern texts as radio plays for the CBC. An eclectic collection, the plays include adaptations of *Beowulf*, *Piers Plowman*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and a reinterpretation of the Towneley *Second Shepherd's Play* as "The Third 'Shepherds' Play.'" More modern adaptations also accepted and produced by the CBC include versions of a Conrad novella, of short stories by Frank Stockton, Robert Louis Stevenson, Ivan Turgenev, and Alexander Pushkin, and the folktale *Johnny Dunn and the Wolves*. Finally, Birney wrote some original scripts, including one developed from his wartime experiences entitled *Court-Martial* and a version of the much-revisited *The Damnation of Vancouver*, previously published as "Trial of a City." In this last piece, several of Birney's concerns come together, since the radio play is an allegorical trial of Vancouver framed as a medieval Judgment Day play and including Will Langland from *Piers Plowman* as one of the characters. Langland delivers, unsurprisingly, a *Piers Plowman*-esque reverie describing his impressions as he wandered about the city, in a modern version of the four-stress alliterative line favoured by the fourteenth-century poets known as the Alliterative Revival. For example, Will of Langland (or the Malvern Hills, the setting of *Piers Plowman*) sees the city waken the morning before his testimony:

> Squared it lay, squamous with shingle and cement,
> straitly ruled by steel, by stark wire and stucco.
> South walked a hoary wood-waste of houses
> massing to the river like lemmings on the march…
> (*Words on Waves* 259)

Each line has at least one alliterative pair, and ornamental alliteration on "s" unites the segment, but most impressive here is the "st-" alliteration of the second line, with all four stresses alliterating and a caesura balancing the two halves of the line. Alliterating all four stresses is a feature of the alliterative revival, although distinguishing among the varieties of "s," "sq," and "st" is an elaboration of Old English practice only sporadically appearing in the fourteenth century. Birney uses Langland to provide an indictment of the squalor of present-day Vancouver, and adds rhetorical weight to his attack by having Langland use the archaic language and procedures of a medieval *descriptio*. The tradition of writing a description of a city began in classical Latin, though it carried through the Middle Ages, and into the vernacular in the eleventh-century Old English poem "Durham." Here, Birney adapts the *encomium urbis* for his modern satire on the filth and folly of Vancouver.[4]

This intermingling of the modern with the medieval for a satiric purpose is Birney's most well-known appropriation of Anglo-Saxon verse techniques. "Anglosaxon Street" and "Mappemounde" have been much anthologized, and much analyzed, for their use of Old English alliterative structures, diction, and themes. Lynn Jakes' conclusion about these two texts, that the former "uses the form and stylistic devices of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry to condemn aspects of contemporary life and expose the squalor of the slum" and the latter uses Old English conventional "theme and mood to lament the human tragedy of loss and alienation" is typical of many of these analyses, and correct as far as it goes (74).[5] In her analysis she focuses on the diction and especially on Birney's use of compounding and his choice of words derived, or in fact unchanged, from Anglo-Saxon. Similarly, Frank Davey points out that "Anglosaxon Street," which appeared in Birney's first collection of verse (*David and Other Poems*, 1942), shared with many of the other poems in that book a propensity to work inside formal patterns—in this case a modified Anglo-Saxon structure (45). Peter Aichinger speaks more generally of the "alliterative verse form," lauding "Anglosaxon Street" as "the best example of a sustained use of the technique" (123).

Richard Robillard's analysis of the metrical patterns emphasizes the metrical and alliterative patterns, pointing out for example the fundamentally trochaic patterns of the lines. (Only two of the five metrical patterns of Old English metre, as Birney would have been taught these patterns at Toronto and Berkeley, have stress on the final syllable of the line, and together they account for only 25% of the verse patterns in *Beowulf*; Birney maintains the stress-initial patterns of Old English verse in these texts, and incidentally in many others.[6]) Robillard also notices in "War Winters" that the first half and second half of Birney's line exist in tension with each other, and though he erroneously believes that the Anglo-Saxons did not worry about the number of feet in each half-line—the patterns are very complex but equally strict—he nonetheless notices that "War Winters" is a more tightly-structured poem than "Anglosaxon Street." George Woodcock is less interested in the metrical and lexical structures of Birney's verse, and instead points out two other elements of his poetic approach that trace themselves to Old English roots: his use in his "wandering poems" of the journey as an effort to establish "meaningful human contact" (1981.88), and his self-perception as a public poet (91).

Woodcock notes that Birney did very many public readings, and that he cultivated the image of a national poet. Certainly his archive is replete with letters asking for readings and making final arrangements about them, and his poem "A small faculty stag for the visiting poet" addresses the awkward situations that arise at readings and visits.[7] Birney resigned from UBC in 1962, and obtained what he described as the first Writer-in-Residency in Canada at the University of Toronto in 1965, and was very pleased that the post was extended for a second year. In the ensuing two decades he accepted several other such posts, including one at the University of Waterloo memorialized in his "1984 minus 17 & counting at U of Waterloo Ontario." The public role of the poet is his concern throughout his career; as early as 1958, Desmond Pacey describes him as a "public spokesman," someone who "has set out to be the interpreter and chronicler of the Canadian people during the middle decades of the twentieth century" (295). Although there were years, even decades, in which his focus turned elsewhere—for example, 1958-59 in England to write Chaucer articles, sporadically in Mexico in the 1950s and 1960s, and for the Canada Council Fellowship 1962-3 during which he travelled largely in South America and Asia—he returned in his final books to a reconception of Canada, based perhaps on what he saw as a broader understanding of the place of the human in the natural world. Although the sequences starting with "Canada: Case History" and "Ellesmereland" become steadily more satiric—and bitter satire it is indeed—*Last Makings* turns away from the geographical divisions of the *Collected Poems* and includes a set of public poems in the vatic mode of the oral poet, and a set of private meditations, love poems for Wailan Low.

In a detailed course proposal for UBC, Birney describes the poem "Widsith" as the earliest English poem, "words set down *to be enjoyed in themselves and for the communication of personal feeling*" (Birney's italics). He notes that the poem originally might have arrived in England as part of the "memorized repertoire of a *scop* or 'shaper' (i.e. a professional poet . . .)" (78.33.2). He specifically characterizes the *scop* as a professional poet. The Anglo-Saxon *scop* or "maker" is generally characterized as an oral poet, or a craftsman, or a shaper of words; the word itself is the past participle of the verb *scieppan* "to shape, to make." It therefore means the thing which is made, "the shaping" as much as "the shaper." When Birney refers to the ways in which the passengers in "Arrivals Wolfville" are "shaping already what happened" (*CP* II.55), he invokes an ancient tradition of remaking a sequence of events—in this case the fatal collision of the train with a lawyer's car—into a narrative. George Woodcock argues that an "essential continuity" throughout Birney's poetry is precisely this concern with poetry as an oral medium:

> The Old English poets he admired and sometimes emulated—the traditional *scops*—had regarded poetry as an oral and public art, and even when I first knew of Birney at the end of 1940s [sic] he was reading his verse aloud as much as possible (though it might be only in small writers' groups meeting in their members' houses), testing its sound in the rhythms of his own voice and the reactions of listeners. (1993.91)

Woodcock argues that Birney took full advantage of the 1960s when opportunities arose to "speak his poems to wide audience," and notes that even in his late seventies Birney was reading his poetry on regular tours and also involving himself with musical versions of it, including with the jazz group Nexus. Poetry was a public art for Birney.

If, then, a part of Birney's lifelong conception of the role of the poet was derived from the Anglo-Saxon *scop* or shaper, then the signs of that strand of his poetic imagination should be traceable in much of his work. For example, his decision to eliminate punctuation, to depend on the clean line of the poem on the page is generally attributed to his endorsement of concrete poetry and of found poetry (Aichinger, n.d. 30). This is no doubt the case, but at the same time Birney was aware that Anglo-Saxon poetic manuscripts used capitals only at the beginning of a work (and rarely at a fitt division) and that punctuation was exceedingly sparse. One manuscript marks some half-lines, but in general only a major thought-division garners any punctuation. Birney certainly knew that the free verse-inspired new techniques of simply using a breathing-space in place of punctuation replicated a millennium-old technique of the unpunctuated line with a caesura. Unfortunately for my argument, Birney never made the connection in his writing about poetry, and ascribing his aversion to punctuation to a rediscovery of Old English usage is therefore impossible. We can, however, draw clearer conclusions from other features of Birney's poetry: diction, metre, genre, theme, and what I am going to call here the technique of apposition.

In a letter in 1970, Birney describes himself as being "word-alcoholic" (Broustra, Fisher archive 139:ch. 2).[8] The diction of his poems throughout his life certainly reflects this, since he delights in the play of language and in using unusual and unexpected words. Thus, his poem about a cat he entitles "Aluroid" (*CP* I.168) using the rare Latin word to defamiliarise the reader from the text. In "VE-Night" (I.90), he points out the misery of "the again-bite of conscience," which translates the title of a Middle English spiritual treatise, *The Agenbyte of Inwit* "The Again-Bite or Remorse of Conscience," written by Dan Michel of Northgate at Canterbury in 1340. Since Birney's poem addresses the secular world and its errors and uncertainties, wondering whether the successful outcome of World War II will turn out to have been worth the effort, the connection to the Middle English text is tenuous at best. Birney just enjoys using words that have intriguing overtones. He also delights in the kind of portmanteau compounds usually associated with Lewis Carroll, so that the beleaguered graduate student of "Candidate's Prayer before Master's Oral" faces what he calls "philolopods & linguistings" and those most fearsome monsters, the "seamanticores" (*CP* I.139). Philologists and linguistics experts might or might not appreciate the combination of "sea" with "manticore" with "semantics"; the candidate certainly implies that he is at sea.

Many of Birney's poems attempt to transliterate dialect usage, so that he replicates Canadian pronunciation when he writes "the seekurt ov my fan/tastik sukses az a po/tree reedr iz my pomez havn/nenny hewmur." The eye of the reader suffers confusion but the ear does not once the poem is sounded out ("POME FER REEDNZ IN KANDA" *LM* 67). Birney demonstrates here his self-deprecating belief that his success at poetry readings comes because his poems have no humour, and that, as the poem concludes, he bores the audience to death. The poem works very neatly as an example of *litotes*, and also points up Birney's belief in the public role of the poet, and his interest in language. Similarly, he replicates Australian and Spanish-American English in several sequences of poems, sometimes for comic effect but mostly as he establishes a poetic persona, "baldheaded professor (Canada)" ("Macchu Picchu" *CP* II.74) who is sympathetic to his interlocutors and trying to represent their concerns realistically and compassionately. He had found a use for his training in linguistics and philology at Berkeley and Toronto.

More specifically, Birney's word choice in *David and Other Poems* demonstrates at least one habit which became a lifelong usage. That habit, derived from Old English word compounding, was the combination of nouns with nouns, and more commonly of nouns with adjectives, to produce new and useful poetic words. This is one of the most common and most obvious of Anglo-Saxon poetic techniques. Birney's teacher, Arthur G. Brodeur, opens his magisterial *The Art of Beowulf* with a chapter on the diction of the poem, in which he argues:

> [The poet's] diction goes far beyond the inherited stock of words and formulas. Certain words which do not form compounds in other extant poems are more or less richly used in the formation of compounds in *Beowulf*; other words which form many compounds in other poems form, in *Beowulf*, compounds not elsewhere recorded. The poet does things with words and phrases which were not done by other poets: the dominant mood of a particular passage, or its dramatic character and function, operate significantly in the poet's choice and combination of words. In both diction and manner the conventional element is indeed strong; it is the element which we may safely presume to be original that determines the quality of the diction and style of *Beowulf*. (Brodeur 6)

Brodeur goes on to catalogue the substantive as "the major element of the poetic vocabulary," and the adjective as next in importance, with compounds which are "impressive" (7). Verbs are significantly less interesting and do not in Old English poetry distinguish themselves from prose usage, whereas "[t]he richest and most meaningful content-words in the poetic vocabulary are the substantival and adjectival compounds."

Birney used substantive and adjectival compounds throughout his life. He followed Anglo-Saxon usage in picking well-known words as the root of the compound, but making the combination in some way poignant or notable. Thus the "sunalive week-ends" of the opening stanza of "David" (*CP* I.107) works because the root "sun" is both ordinary and Anglo-Saxon, as is the modifier "alive"; the combination gives life to two common words, and evokes the joy we all take in the possibility of sun and the joy of living, rather than working, at the weekends (possibly the "sun" part being of particular interest for Canadian summers). Examples of this usage proliferate in his poetry: the "moonparched husks" of "Song" (*CP* I.89), the "draggletailed farmwife" of "Man on a Tractor" (*CP* I.96), the "beardusky woods" of "Bushed" (*CP* I.160), the "boneknobbly goats" in "Letter to a Cuzco Priest" who are "gut-swollen" (*CP* II.78), the description of the dinosaur on the university campus in Perth as "stumptailed & sunset-mottled" (*CP* II.104), and even the description of the kiwi as "hunchbacked splaylegged shuteyed" in "Kiwis" (*CP* II.125). In every case, Birney uses strong Anglo-Saxon nouns as one element of the compound, and most of the modifiers are also Anglo-Saxon in origin. The Old English technique of variation, of piling up descriptors which are themselves often compounds, even appears in the two antipodean poems. All of these compounds, which are randomly-chosen samples, are also substantive or adjectival compounds, and it is clear that Birney found the use of ordinary words in unusual new ways as productive as his Anglo-Saxon ancestors.

Birney's metrical practice, both in his general predilection for alliteration as a unifying feature of the line or stanza and in his use of the formal structure of the Anglo-Saxon verse, has been much discussed (for example, Aichinger 1979.123-5; Robillard 25-8). I will confine my comments here to a few minor points. First, although Birney many times during his life repeated that "Anglosaxon Street" was "written in Anglo-Saxon metre" (e.g. Nesbitt, "Epilogue" 211), the poem is really an adaptation of that metre (1942 version, 49 lines). The metre itself, with stresses on nouns, adjectives and perhaps verbs, scans relatively well in Old English; however, as Birney well knew, the Anglo-Saxon line did not permit the principal alliteration to be on the fourth stress of the line. Ornamental alliteration such as transverse alliteration (yxxy) in “No *c*oonsmell ***r***ankles ***r***eeks only *c*ellarrot” or in “*F*aded ***h***ousepatterns ***h***oary and *f*inicky” are perfectly acceptable (8 times in total). So is the cross-alliteration (yxyx) in “*L*ook where a ***m***irror *l*oops back a***m***oebic” or “in *s*lumbertrough ***a***dding *s*leepily to ***A***nglekin” (4 times in total). The double alliteration (xxxy) which he accomplishes in 22 lines, fully 45% of the lines, is a signal achievement; in *Beowulf* the classic variant of Type A (stressed, unstressed, stressed, unstressed) verses in the first half-line has a percentage only slightly higher at 50% (Bliss). However, Birney very commonly has the last stress alliterate (14 times), a choice impermissible in Old English verse but allowed in poetry of the alliterative revival of the fourteenth century. Birney takes the feature to extremes even by Middle English standards, since double alliteration in the second half-line occurs 12 times in the poem. The poem is therefore something of a pastiche in its formal structure, though the diction in its use of compounding and kennings is pure Anglo-Saxon.

Other poems in Birney’s first collection come very close to Old English metre. “Kootenay Still-Life” (*David* 22) depends, except for two half-lines, on a trochaic foot that closely resembles in its scansion the admissible variations of Type A. The one iambic foot “On the yellow fang” thereby gains tremendous weight as it moves the poem to its climactic moment, the violent potential of the crow eyeing the mouse from its seat on the bullpine’s “yellow fang.” Robillard points out that “War Winter” has less regular patterns than “Anglosaxon Street” (though he does not realize that they are in fact wholly acceptable as Anglo-Saxon metre), and that its theme is also thoroughly Anglo-Saxon, reflecting on the bleak uncertainty of the individual adrift in an unfeeling world (27-8). The poem even invokes the Old English “Wulf and Eadwacer” in form, with two stanzas, single words standing outside the regular verse, and a rhetorical but deeply-felt question closing the first stanza.

Birney’s most impressive poem in Anglo-Saxon metre is, however, “Oil Refinery” (*CP* II.60-1). Fred Cogswell describes it as “Anglo-Saxon in form and imaginatively mythopoeic in the best sense” and as “a masterpiece” (Nesbitt 177). Metrically speaking it is very close to Old English poetic form, perhaps slightly closer to the poetry of Cynewulf because of the increased number of unstressed syllables than to *Beowulf.* Double alliteration is rare, which is also typical of the looser metrical structures of Cynewulf. Birney even keeps to Kuhn’s Law, which is a complicated way of explaining that—except in very specific circumstances—each of the two feet in a half-line should have one unstressed syllable, but when more unstressed syllables are necessary in the half-line they cannot be littered about; rather, they are obliged to be corralled into one place, so that the basic structure of the verse is not compromised. This is not an easy metrical law to follow in modern English, but Birney manages to do it here. He also manages to produce a poem with an envelope pattern, another structural device in Old English poems which is rarely attempted elsewhere. The classic treatment of the device is Adeline Courtney Bartlett's 1935 thesis; Brodeur also discusses envelope patterns in his book, and presumably in his lectures since the concept predates Bartlett's development of the idea. An envelope functions as a kind of large-scale chiasmus, in which a word at the beginning of a given passage appears at the end, a second word appears in a significant penultimate place, a third word or phrase also appears in an antepenultimate location, and so on. The centre of the envelope pattern is generally a line which is also the centre of the imagery and meaning of the passage. In Old English poems, envelopes can overlap, and they do not necessarily correspond to what a modern reader would call a narrative segment. In "Oil Refinery," the envelope covers the whole poem. It is slightly complicated by the fact that in Old English the techniques of compounding make it easier to use the same word a second time in a compound; Birney has to resort to synonyms to make the envelope work here. However, line 2 has "spellbinders" and the last line refers to the "spell of his loopings," in both cases references to what would otherwise be a lesser attribute of the dragon. Line 4 has "balebreath" and the antepenultimate line has "breath of that sly snake." The opening line of the second stanza, line 5, has "Worms" and the last line of the third stanza, line 14, has "Nadders"; both of these are Old English words for serpents: *wyrm* and *nadder*. The envelope coalesces over the three central lines of the poem, lines 10-12, which describe the actual working of the oil refinery. These lines have the most sophisticated alliteration in the poem: line 10 has transverse alliteration with "*bl*asts the ***w***orld air ***w***ans all *bl*ue day" (additionally alliterating *bl*, and using the archaic "wans" as a verb), line 11 has opening ornamental alliteration, and cross-alliteration with "*H*o! a *h*andful of ***th***anes in *h*elmets ***th***reaten him," and line 12 has double alliteration, and a kenning since the thing that is dark and shiny is oil: "in *s*ilver keeps *s*tab him the old *s*wartshiner." Here we are at the heart of the oil refinery, with the handful of men or warriors of the oil-field tackling the job of transmuting the oil into modern gold.

To shift from prosody to theme, "Oil Refinery" most obviously reflects Old English verse in its central trope, whereby the oil refinery is described in terms which evoke Beowulf's fight against the dragon. The dragon in

Beowulf does indeed seek out a treasure-hoard, called a *goldhord* "gold-hoard" and does wound Beowulf, although the protagonist manages to kill the serpent. Using the trope of the snake to describe the oil as it arrives in sinuous waves, unwilling to be harnessed by humankind and forced to die for human benefit, the oil is also "black gold" (though Birney is never so crass as to use the term), and the dragon and its gold function together to signify a glorious and magical world which is pulled down to the everyday. Nonetheless, as the last stanza asserts—even using the Old English interjections "Hwaet!" ("Lo!" "Behold!" "Look!," or literally "What!") and "Eala!" ("Alas!") to emphasize the point—the oil which is the dragon still circles around and controls large parts of our civilization. Birney plays the present against the past, the heroic against the mundane, the work of the group of men at the refinery against the work of Beowulf and one retainer (the others having run away), a primeval world against a technological one, the world of magic against the modern world which is ignorant of the magical—or perhaps the vatic or the poetic—impulse. D.G. Jones argues that the attitude against a destructive or hostile universe in Birney's poetry is "vigorous defiance," since "the world of Birney's poems is an Anglo-Saxon world, in spirit and not only in diction and rhythmic device" (124). "Oil Refinery" certainly exemplifies that defiance.

Indomitable bravery in the face of great odds and perhaps certain destruction marks Anglo-Saxon poetry as a whole, and *Beowulf* in particular. The daring exploits of the young man who kills Grendel and Grendel's mother balance against the mature courage of the old king Beowulf when he fights the dragon, knowing that he probably will not prevail. Brodeur, Birney's teacher, states:

> In the contemplation of Beowulf's unshaken courage in the face of certain death and his full awareness that in death he achieves his greatest victory, we are moved by the old man's fortitude as we are never moved by the young Beowulf's triumphant conquests. (105)

Birney certainly explored this theme, in "David" and in *Down the Long Table*, which ends with the protagonist's decision to "speak it out, neither in fear nor guilt nor pride, but because it was himself and he was a man alive, staring down the long table" (298). The long table is the table of a modern inquisition, a McCarthyite investigation, but it could as well be the table of an Anglo-Saxon hall. On the benches by those tables, men declared their oaths, swore their friendships and loyalties, accepted gifts of gold from their lords that cemented the lord-retainer relationship, and reclined in the meadhall safe from the horrors of the outside world. The desecration of a meadhall, the table at the centre of the Anglo-Saxon world, was the worst crime: when Grendel attacks Heorot, the meadhall of Hrothgar, and when the dragon burns down the meadhall of Beowulf, they are attacking the centre of the civilization.

Given that the meadhall is the joyous and treasure-laden seat of civilization, the outer edges of the Anglo-Saxon world are explored by those exiled from the hall. These are the wanderers, the figures of pilgrimage and journey, those who travel the rim of the world. Birney's most famous explication of the theme of the wanderer is "Mappemounde" (*CP* I.92), written on the hospital ship which brought Birney back to Canada across the Atlantic in 1945. Woodcock proposes that this poem

> belongs to a group of poems in which the focus is really on earth itself, on place, considered not as static setting but as dynamic environment alive with natural and cosmic forces, in which the wanderer becomes the observing peripatetic philosopher rather than—as in most of Birney's best wandering poems—the traveller intent on the meaningful human contact or the episode potent with historic implication. (1981.88)

Certainly the stance of ironic wanderer, of uncertain visitor to strange lands, generates tremendous poetic power for Birney. The sea in "Mappemounde" is a "whalehall," a meadhall only for the Leviathan, a place of desolation and destruction. Cameron suggests that the poem was the darkest and bleakest that Birney had written so far, compressed to almost unbearable intensity (1994.240-1).[9] The poem is a bleak evocation of the futility of human endeavour, framed in the terms of a medieval world map.[10]

"Mappemounde" states outright the pessimistic conclusion that is more slowly developed in many of Birney's meditative laments on the human condition. These lyrics have as one of their points of departure the Anglo-Saxon elegy, a term used for some seven poems in which the first-person narrator contemplates the human condition. The lyrics circle round and round, each verse-paragraph opening a slightly different aspect of the protagonist's misery and exploring it. The elegies contemplate the uncertainty of human existence from the point of view of an individual with no defined place in society. His situation leads him to reflect fruitlessly, again and again, upon the misery of the human condition. That reflection takes the form of a soliloquy which moves from the individual suffering to a somewhat more general lament about the uncertainty of human accomplishment and the way in which *lif is lœne*, "life is transitory," or "fleeting" or, etymologically, "on loan."

This theme lends itself well to expression by way of variation or apposition. Apposition, according to Fred Robinson's *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, juxtaposes two concepts, implying a relationship between them but not stating it explicitly. Robinson points out the fundamental role of apposition both on the microcosmic level of nouns or noun substitutes being apposed, without connecting material, to antecedent nouns or noun substitutes and also on the larger structural level as a way of making an argument implicit rather than explicit. He argues that "when a character in the poem wishes to suggest logical relationships without overtly stating them, this suggestive power of apposition becomes a part of the dramatic action" (4) and that apposition works to make the poem a "profoundly retrospective narrative" (7). The editor of the standard edition of *Beowulf*, Friedrich Klaeber, describes the action of the poem as "one step forward, two steps back," and notes that the fundamental structure of the poem is interrupted progress ("lack of steady advance" and "rambling, dilatory method" are Klaeber's exact words, pp. lvii-lviii). Towards the end of the poem, Beowulf himself dwells at so much length on his own situation in the world that his final soliloquies are described as elegies, and are often pulled from the poem as set-piece examples of philosophical lament upon the human condition. Although Birney describes "the *Beowulf*" as a narrative, its lack of forward progress and its tendency to dwell upon a given subject at interminable length cannot have escaped him. In fact, Birney uses what an Anglo-Saxonist would call apposition in his reflective poems.

"November Walk Near False Creek Mouth" (*CP* II.43-51) falls into this category of philosophical introspection. Frank Davey argues that this poem is not one of Birney's best:

> In form it ["November Walk"] attempts to be open, but in theme it is closed from its beginning, and this closure tends to paralyze the form. Nothing can really happen in the poem because, while leaving the form open, Birney has preconceived what the poem will "say." The opening lines tell us about our atomic doom; the remainder embroider but do not advance. Birney seems to have come to both the personal lyric and the projective form too late to be consistently successful. (109)

It might, however, be possible to approach this poem from a different direction, and one which might suggest a more positive evaluation of Birney's work here—apposition. The poem has many overt Anglo-Saxon features: the opening reference to those who "tippled mead in Alfred's hall," extensive alliteration, the curtailing of articles in some stanza-paragraphs, the use of anaphora to mark the opening of others, and even the reference on p. 46 to the Lockeys of *Out*garden. (The emphasis on *Out* in *Out*garden is Birney's; the place-name is from Old English *ut-geard*, referring to those outside the *geard*, the world of humanity. This brief conversation, in which two women recognize a mutual cousin by marriage in a gossipy exchange, manages to refer to two Norse gods in three lines: Loki the trickster "Lockey" and his brother Thor, god of thunder in "Carl Thorson.") Of greater importance here is its slow development, which does, as Davey says, start with the final conclusion and then restate that conclusion in a variety of different ways. The basic structure of the poem is appositive. Birney opens with an apocalyptic image, and through the poem explores the nexus between time and eternity, using antiphonal voices to conjure present and past, possibility and destruction. The vignettes show individuals searching for meaning in various ways, reading, travelling as tourists, swimming, writing books, dreaming, but the imagery of futility and nihilism overwhelms them all.

The central passages of paleolithic and neolithic history, and of the narrator's reflections as he walks with the water steadily closer and closer to him give way to a recapitulation of the opening walk. Human activity, absent through the central passages of the poem, resumes as the poem cycles into its final series of apocalyptic images. The opening strophe of the final section refers to the "fall's first fury of air," the triple alliteration of winter warning juxtaposing against the ensuing reference to the greatest triumph of human accomplishment, men being on the moon. Without establishing a subordinating connection, Birney simply moves on to describe the moon's sway over the tides on the earth. The narrator, in a small bid for optimism, walks up the stairs away from the water and towards the "human-encrusted reefs" of the galaxy of humanity rather than the unknowable reaches of time. Fittingly for a poem that I am arguing to have Anglo-Saxon overtones, the text ends with "the sliding edge of the beating sea"; the last antiphon turns the wanderer on the shore as he ascends to the "brief night's ledge," the smallest possible sign of hope for humanity. Birney plays point and counterpoint throughout the poem, not making the connections which are social commentary and dire forecast for humankind explicitly. He makes all the links implicit, with apposition piling up not only the larger structures of the stanzas, but also the smaller syntactic structures of the poem, so that the human reefs rise "higher than firs or singing" (something natural and something human), "up to aseptic penthouse hillforts" (modern humanity juxtaposed with Neolithic settlements), "to antennae above the crosses/pylons marching over the peaks/of mountains without Olympus" (the antennae, the pylons rise over the one symbol of Christianity and human belief but also over the mountains of nature and not over the mythic possibility of Olympus). Birney plays one image against the next, incorporating them into a seam-filled whole so as to force the reader or listener to make the implied connections, think through the possibilities. Al Purdy argues in the introduction to *Last Makings* that Birney "takes responsibility in both life and literature" (xiii). In this poem he is taking that responsibility with an allusive series of appositive juxtapositions whose purpose is to warn humanity about how close to the edge of the abyss we really are.

Earle Birney described Geoffrey Chaucer as the "most serene of English humorists and poets" (*Creative Writer* 7). While humour is certainly a hallmark of Birney's poetry, and he follows Chaucer's self-deprecating first-person narrative stance in many of his poems, serenity is not a salient feature of Birney's *œuvre*. Rather, his *Weltanschauung* juxtaposes the indomitable courage and fierce uncertainty of the Anglo-Saxons against the slovenly ignorance and unthinking mental squalor of the modern world, railing against the ways in which humanity so seldom perceives its potential, let alone fulfills it. All his life, Birney strove to awaken his audience, to connect with individual human beings through his poetry, to fulfill a role as commentator upon the activities of society, to "make" with his words not just an accurate record of human accomplishment but a "shaping" that would inspire his auditors. Although he spoke to a different meadhall, Earle Birney was a *scop.*

Notes

1 I am deeply grateful to the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto, which allowed me access to MS Collection 49, the Earle Birney archive. The 1976 accession is catalogued in Debra Barr (1987), which also analyzes Birney papers in other Canadian locations. Wailan Low, literary executor of the Earle Birney estate, graciously provided permission to refer to material in this archive and to include quotations from Birney's poetry.

2 Biographical information about Earle Birney comes from many sources. The most extensive analysis is that of Elspeth Cameron (1994), but I have also made use of the information in the monographs by Frank Davey (1971) and Peter Aichinger (1979), the pamphlet by Aichinger (undated), and the comments made by Birney in various published sources throughout his life, including his memoir *Spreading Time* (1980). Most useful for his university career was the typescript of the first chapters of Birney's planned autobiography, from Boxes 198, 205 and 206 in the 1996 accession to the manuscript collection. I will refer throughout this paper to the archive in the format box.folder.page (where available).

3 I have tried to use the *Collected Poems* (henceforth *CP*) as the standard edition of Bir-

ney's poetry. However, the NCL Selection (*SP*) has some poems that are not in the *CP*, and some of the individual books also have texts to which I have found it useful to refer.

4 The *encomium urbis* became a staple of Birney's poetic production, though usually its purpose was blame rather than praise. See, for example, "Halifax" (*CP* I.94), "Montreal 1945" (*CP* I.128), "Sunday Nightfall in Winnipeg" (*CP* II.38-9), "Buenos Aires" (*CP* II.81-4), "Caracas" (*CP* II.94), "Perth, Australia, I love you" (*CP* II.102-4), "Christchurch, N.Z." (*CP* II.123), and "Way to the West" (*CP* II.136-8).

5 As an Anglo-Saxonist, I have to enter a *caveat* against the detailed analyses of diction that Jakes proposes, which play fast and loose with the Old English word-hoard. For example, her analysis of "bigthewed" starts with the correct etymology that "thew" means "muscle or sinew," but goes on to tie in several etymologically unrelated words. Similarly, "clip" is from the Anglo-Saxon "clyppan" meaning "to kiss, to embrace" and has nothing to do with crying out or imploring.

6 Metrical analysis of Old English verse has changed substantially in the last thirty years, but the system that Birney learned, based on the one developed by E. Sievers at the end of the nineteenth century in Germany, still has some currency. It proposes five types of Old English verse: Type A /x/x, Type B x/x/, Type C x//x, Type D //\x or //x\, and Type E /\x/ (where / = stressed element, x = unstressed element, \ = half-stressed element).

7 A whole sequence of these poems is to be found in *CP* II.99-125. They include "Today's your big pubic reading," the mistaken title for a public reading by Birney, a poem in which he incidentally notes that he was asked "to run the Chaucer seminar." In a later poem he seems particularly irked to have been asked to run a seminar on T.S. Eliot ("The Gray Woods Exploding," *CP* II.114).

8 Broustra's thesis is in the Fisher Library in two copies, the second of which has corrections and commentary by Birney himself. He notes in the margins, for example, that "he was failed out of the Ph.D. course in Berkeley" (29), and when Broustra wonders why he went to England for a year in 1958, he notes "Chaucer articles."

9 If Birney ever mentioned organized religion I would be tempted to think that *Cetegrande*, the great whale, might refer in part to the Leviathan. The hellmouth in early medieval depictions of the Last Judgment is a whale's mouth, the fulfilment in the New Testament of Jonah's whale. However, according to Cameron, the whale was the idea of Margaret Crosland (241).

10 I have not here discussed the parallels between the Anglo-Saxon world-view (as it is commonly depicted) and the classic depiction of Canadian literature as being a grim fight against nature, the brave but hopeless attempt to survive in the dangerous world that is the Canadian landscape. This argument, if not the comparison to Anglo-Saxon precedent, has been made with respect to Birney many times before; for example, Northrop Frye, citing Birney's "David," argues in a classic essay that many Canadian texts "have a primeval grimness about them that is not romantic or even modern fashion" (192).

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