STUDIES
West Coast Nocturnes: Earle Birney's *David and Other Poems*

by Tracy Ware

In a career of many changes, 1940 was a key year for Earle Birney. Four years earlier, he said, "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" ("To Desmond Pacey," 8 Apr. 1957, "Lives" 102). He married Esther Bull in March, resigned from his position as literary editor of the *Canadian Forum* in November, reconsidered his Trotskyite commitments (*Spreading* 47), and joined the University of Toronto's Officer Training program as a cadet (Cameron, *Birney* 184). As Elspeth Cameron argues, "It was out of this clear turning point—a fall from hope and faith—that 'David' and most of the other poems that would eventually be collected in his first volume *David and Other Poems* were forged" (*Birney* 193). "His method," Cameron writes,

> was to revive poems he had published and resubmit them and to go back to notes he had made in the 1920s and 1930s for poems he had wanted to write. Whether this was the cause or the effect of a sudden and profound bout of homesickness is unclear. But in his crisis that fall, Birney's bitterness focused strongly on the loss of his youth, a loss symbolized for him somehow by the loss of the western landscapes in which he had once been young and hopeful and free. Those were the landscapes of the earlier poems he had written or had planned to write. In revising these now, Birney brooded upon the tragic passage of time. (*Birney* 184)

He told Desmond Pacey that his regional stance was not deliberate: "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." And while he admitted that "one is never as original as one thinks he is going to be" (letter of 4 Feb. 1957, "Lives" 93), the poems in his first volume made him "the first significant Canadian poet to have been born west of Ontario" (Pacey 296). Cameron believes that

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"The war did him a disfavour by encouraging the public to focus unduly on the war poems he began writing instead of on those poems like 'David' in which he was struggling to say something more personal and complex than his war poems communicated" (*Birney* 204-05). By contrast, I believe that critics have focused unduly on the title poem, and that the war poems, because of their "sense of urgency," show Birney moving away from the impersonal manner of E.J. Pratt, his mentor.

Although Birney had experienced difficulty publishing the poems independently—he claimed that "David" was rejected by fourteen journals (Preface x)—he had remarkable success with his first volume, which soon went into a second printing, and received the Governor-General's Award. The tone of the book's reception was set by the dust-jacket blurbs: Pratt, then at the height of his career, and G.G. Sedgewick, Birney's professor at the University of British Columbia, praised Birney's originality and artistry, while Louis A. MacKay placed Birney in "the front rank of contemporary Canadian poets." Others were quick to join the chorus, including William Arthur Deacon, the literary editor of *The Globe and Mail*, whose review began "The great Canadian poem of the war has been written," then quoted at length from "On Going to the Wars," the concluding poem of the volume (10); Northrop Frye, who felt that "'David' is the best thing of its kind that I have seen in current poetry—and for some benighted reason its kind is rare" (Rev. of *David* 39); and Pratt, who expanded his blurb into a review in *Canadian Poetry Magazine*. Even more strikingly, E.K. Brown ended his historical survey in *On Canadian Poetry* (1943) with Birney, the "newest of new voices," who has "authentic originality" (85-86). As Laura Groening argues, Brown's praise "could not be any stronger unless he declared him one of the masters" (118), like Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, and Pratt. While I agree with Frank Davey that Birney's affinities with the incipient myths of Canadian criticism help account for the extraordinary appeal of his first book (53-54), I would argue that the influence of Pratt is more extensive than has been generally recognized. A dubious and lingering interest in the terrifying qualities of the Canadian landscape has diverted attention from what may be the strongest case of influence between two Canadian poets. After tracing that influence, I will study *David* in terms of its "contexture," Neil Fraistat's term for a collection as "a larger whole fabricated from integral parts" (*Poem* 4).[1] In my account, these poems are primarily regional and international, not national, while the shadow of World War II that haunts the volume distinguishes it from the commemorative poems for World War I that Pratt wrote at the beginning of his career.

The most familiar poem in the book is of course the title poem, a tragic narrative of the loss of youth in a sublime mountain setting. One year after "David" was published in book form, Frye used it to support his idea that "the outstanding achievement of Canadian poetry is in the evocation of stark terror" (138). More specifically, and more surprisingly, Frye argues that in "'David' a terrible tragedy of wasted life and blasted youth is enacted on a glacier, but there is no 'pathetic fallacy' about the cruelty of the glacier or of whatever gods may be in charge of it. It is just a glacier" ("Canada" 139). How can the glacier be "cruel" without a pathetic fallacy? As Birney explained later, "It's not stone that lures and betrays, but man the animal, carrying within him both zest and grief, youth and age, love and hate, life and death" (*Cow* 7-8).[2] Birney's extensive personification notwithstanding (Davey 93), his western setting was often seen as authentically Canadian. For Margaret Atwood, "where there is a David in Canadian literature there is usually a Goliath, and the Goliath, the evil giant (or giantess) is, of course, Nature herself. David has been challenging it to combat by fighting his way up the mountains, but as in many Canadian David-and-Goliath stories, Goliath wins" (58). If "David" moves away from "a vision of Nature as at least indifferent and sometimes beautiful, a Nature that man may exist in and enjoy if he is strong and careful," as Atwood argues (57), the volume as a whole restores that vision by moving away from "David."

It is not a coincidence that the best reading of "David" comes from the critic who is most sensitive to Pratt's influence. In a series of studies of poets from Pratt to Atwood, Sandra Djwa argues that "Pratt is central to any discussion of the development and continuity of a modern Canadian tradition" (*Pratt* 3).[3] At the start of his career, Djwa writes, Birney "tended to look to E.J. Pratt for direction just as younger poets of the fifties and sixties…to a greater or lesser degree, were to look to him" ("Developing" 32).[4] In "David," Birney works through the influence of Pratt's "The Titanic" (1935): just as Pratt's iceberg is described with "facade and columns with their hint / Of inward altars and of steepled bells / Ringing the passage of the parallels" (*Poems, Part One 305;* ll. 77-79), and then as reduced by light and warmth to "A sloping spur that tapered to a claw" (l. 91), so the mountain in "David" is described as a "sunlit spire" (3) before it becomes a "wind-devilled peak" above "greenthroated crevasses," "blinding seracs," "spectral larches," and a "glooming lake" (9-10).[5] In both cases the change is part of an "encompassing structure in which *hubris* is followed by tragedy": the Titanic races to set a record time while

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David and Bob climb in the exuberance of youth. Djwa clinches her case in this passage:

> The dominant metaphor in both poems is that of a shining icy peak.... In both cases, this central image is at first a Romantic vision (one of shining spires for Pratt, one of shining peaks for Birney), but one which is quickly undercut by a hidden and destructive Darwinian image, Pratt's "claw," Birney's "talon." (46)

Compelling in itself, Djwa's reading is even stronger in the light of the new information available in Cameron's biography of Birney and elsewhere. We now know that when Birney met Pratt in 1936 at U.B.C. "They had taken to each other at once" (Cameron, *Birney* 181); that the two became colleagues at Toronto four years later; that Birney ended his 1940 review of *Brebeuf and His Brethren* by saying that "Pratt's own achievement continues visibly to rise into what may be the first of our Rockies" ("Canadian" 52); that Pratt was Birney's "model" both poetically and academically (Cameron, *Birney 182*); that after having urged Birney to collect his poems, Pratt "telephoned his personal recommendation of the book to [MacMillan of Canada's] editor-in-chief" (Birney, *Cow* 36); that Pratt saw Birney "as his personal protégé" (Pitt 357); and finally, that Birney sketched "the mountain he had in mind...for Thoreau MacDonald, the artist who designed the dust-jacket for [*David*], modelling it on the iceberg he had used for Pratt's book" (Cameron, *Birney* 203).

F.R. Leavis said that when a poet encounters another "whose problems bear on his own," "the recognition of affinities is at the same time the realization of differences" (195). Birney's differences from Pratt emerge in the title poem and increase elsewhere in the volume. The conclusion of "David" is more subjective than the conclusion of "The Titanic": Pratt's poem ends with the omniscient speaker's account of "The grey shape with the palaeothic face" (l. 1032), but "David" ends with a landscape that wears the colours of Bob's guilt: "I remember / Only the pounding fear I would stumble on It / When I came to the grave-cold maw of the bergschrund...reeling / ...alone and pursued / By the Finger's lengthening shadow" (9-10). As Richard Robillard argues, "The Bob of the last section anticipates the crazed trapper in 'Bushed'" (17), and so he hardly speaks for the author. And since the appeal of the West Coast landscape is so important in other poems in this volume, it is tempting to say that the enthusiastic descriptions of nature early in "David" are neither more nor less true than the later descriptions of a threatening nature. But that argument is qualified by the famous concluding lines:

> I said that he fell straight to the ice where they found him,
> And none but the sun and incurious clouds have lingered
> Around the marks of that day on the ledge of the Finger,
> That day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains.
> (11)

In these lines, and only here, Bob uses the first person plural, and that gives the whole poem an emphasis consistent with Pratt's and, for that matter, with Frye's. But rather than merely agreeing with Brown on the "magic" and "unpredictable extension of meaning" of the ending (*On* 86), I would argue that its elegiac tone is consistent with other poems in the volume, which repeatedly turn from the West Coast landscape to more pressing exigencies.[6]

With one exception, the other poems in *David* may be indirectly influenced by Pratt, but they contain no specific allusions to his work. "Slug in Woods" demonstrates the same kind of curiousity and scientific vocabulary ("pinguid," "encoral," "Azygous") that Pratt had extended to less conventionally attractive aspects of the natural world (Marshall 61), and "Kootenary Still-Life" finds a crow on a pine tree as ominous as the crags and smashed rudders in Pratt's "Newfoundland" (*Poems, Part One* 99-101). But the key poem is "Vancouver Lights," which was immediately singled out by Pratt and Frye, and which remains a favourite (in its various revisions) with anthologists. The poem is a late example of both the Prometheus myth and what M.H. Abrams calls the "greater Romantic lyric," in that it begins with the view of Vancouver from Grouse Plateau and then moves to a meditation that "remains closely intervolved with the outer scene" (Abrams 77). The burden of the meditation is the fragility of civilization as suggested by the wartime blackouts:

> Welling from Europe's bog, through Africa flowing
> and Asia, drowning the lonely lumes on the oceans,
> tiding up over Halifax, and now to this winking
> outpost, comes flooding the primal ink.
> (36)

For Birney in 1941, when the poem was written (*Cow* 82), the lights of civilization are at best "beleaguered", and at worst on the verge of an extinction that will hardly be apparent in an indifferent universe: "this twinkle we make in a corner of emptiness, / how shall we utter our fear lest the black Experimentress / never in the range of her microscope find it" (36)? Three details suggest Pratt's influence. First, the phrase "this mountain's brutish

forehead" (36) recalls the "paleolithic face" of Pratt's iceberg even as it runs counter to "the mood of nostalgia for mountains" which Birney experienced during its composition (*Cow* 82). Second, he measures the evolution of human intelligence in cosmic terms: "From blankness and cold we fashioned stars / to our size, rulered with manplot the velvet chaos / and signalled Aldebaran" (37). Pratt frequently raised these issues, and in "The Highway" (1931; *Poems, Part One* 256; l. 6), he made particular reference to Aldebaran, the bright red star of the constellation Taurus. Third, as Cameron notes, "Much in the poem resembles Pratt's *tour de force* 'The Truant'" (*Birney* 215). To Birney's "These rays were ours / we made and unmade them" (37), she compares this passage from Pratt:

> We flung about the graphs about your flying feet;
> We measured your diameter—
> Merely a line
> Of zeroes prefaced by an integer.
> Before we came
> You had no name.
> (*Poems, Part 2* 128-29 ; ll. 110-15)

Less confidently defiant, "Vancouver Lights" ends with a bitter revision of a familiar myth:

> In the fathomless heat of our dwarfdom, our dream's combustion,
> we contrived the power, the blast that snuffed us.
> No one slew[7] Prometheus. Himself he chained
> and consumed his own bright liver. O stranger,
> Plutonian, descendant, or beast in the stretching night—
> there was light.
>
> (37)

Starting with Pacey, critics have tried to find hope in this nightmarish vision: "Man may be a tiny glowworm in a world of darkness," Pacey argues, "but he is the source of his own light, and if the light fails it will not be because it was quenched by external force but because he quenched it himself" (308; see also Aichinger 18). Birney parodies the divine fiat in Genesis 1:3 by replacing divine with human agency, but as D.G. Jones argues, "to have outwitted Leviathan by destroying oneself is a dubious virtue indeed, though one consistent with Birney's frequently sardonic view of man" (125). The contrast between Pratt's "flinchless" (51) and Christ-like Truant and Birney's "unique glowworms" (37) stands for the

differences between the exuberant Pratt and his more sceptical admirer (Marshall 61).

The surprise is that the influence may go in the other direction, as Cameron argues, since "Vancouver Lights" was published first: it appeared in the *Canadian Review of Music and Art* in June of 1942, while "The Truant" appeared in *The Canadian Forum* in December of that year (*Birney* 605 n63). Moreover, as Cameron also notes, "the two writers discussed their ideas on numerous occasions and read each other's works in progress" (*Birney* 215), and "it is probable, though not certain, that Birney heard" Pratt read part of "The Truant" "long before" it was published (605 n63). What we know for certain is that when Frye heard Pratt read the poem at Birney's apartment, of all places, he "felt, not simply that I had heard the greatest of all Canadian poems, but that the voice of humanity had spoken once more, with the kind of authority it reserves for such moments as the bombing of London…" ("E.J. Pratt" 9). Frye's extraordinary praise may explain why Birney was so modest about his own poem, which he later said "is not deathless, and must be understood in relation to the time of its writing" (*Cow* 81). If "Vancouver Lights" was written in a spirit of competition with "The Truant," Pacey's affirmative interpretation of the former and Frye's praise of the latter may have made Birney feel that he had failed to communicate his concern. He said as much when Dorothy Livesay wrote, in a letter of 1943, that "Vancouver Lights" depicts "men as everywhere destroying and betraying nature. That is your philosophy." "What I want to say," Birney replied, "though I grant I may not have said it, is something much more complicated and tenuous—that man has now reached a stage in his development in which for the first time he has created the conditions for his own destruction—or at least let us say civilized man" (qtd. in Cameron, *Birney* 216-17). To an extent, the shift from an indifferent nature to an indifferent universe obscures these political concerns. Nonetheless, since the poem is one of several that bring the war home to Birney's beloved west coast, it is a crucial poem in the volume.

I have no external evidence that Birney was responsible for the arrangement of *David and Other Poems*, but as Fraistat argues, "The fact is that most prominent poets since Petrarch—and many before—have given thought to the organization of their volumes" (Introd. 13) Birney's arrangements are evident in the very structure of his next two volumes: *Now is Time* (1945) is divided into three sections—"Tomorrow," "Yesterday," and "Today"—while *The Strait of Anian* (1948) is divided into two parts—"One Society," and "One World." Fraistat suggests that even a "randomly ordered collection" gives some attention to the opening and closing poems,

which are often "the longest or most impressive pieces," while a more carefully arranged volume will have a "centrepiece" that "brings into sharp focus the central thematic concerns of the volume" (*Poem* 37, 39). The longest poems in *David and Other Poems* are the first ("David"), the last ("On Going to the Wars"), and the eleventh ("Eagle Island"), the mid-point in a book of twenty-one poems. In the first eleven poems, Western settings predominate, though "October in Utah" is set in the U.S., and "Anglosaxon Street" could be anywhere in Canada. After "Eagle Island," a West Coast idyll, the last ten poems consider World War II. Many use West Coast settings, but now this region's differences from the East are less important than the involvement of Canada and other countries in the war in Europe. "On Going to the Wars" brings the book to a close with Birney's declaration of his reasons for enlisting. As Fraistat writes, "as we read a volume by a single poet, part of the outer structural energy of each poem will be directed toward fashioning and reflecting an image of the poet" (*Poem* 16). The image that Birney fashions confirms Cameron's sense that "he set out deliberately to put his geographical region on the literary map in much the same way that Pratt had done for his" ("Influence" 61), though finally his concerns are more than cartographical. His stance is not consistent—it is neither possible nor desirable to reconcile the attitudes towards nature in "David" and "Eagle Island"–but the general movement from an absorption in the Western landscape to a reluctant engagement with the war is clear. I call these poems "West Coast Nocturnes" because the darkness is so strong in the last ten poems, and because the "traditional and archetypal pattern" that D.M.R. Bentley traces in Roberts' *New York Nocturnes* is a helpful frame of reference ("Half" 60). Where Roberts' speaker takes a "night journey through a hellish and fearful realm towards the dawn of assurance and revelation," Birney finds it difficult to envision a hopeful dawn in the darkness that surrounds him. His most sustained attempt to do so returns to the West Coast and ends the volume.

Commenting on the influence of Frye and Atwood, Susan Glickman admits that "Horror may indeed by the final response to the unknown rather than being the first stage in one's experience of the sublime. But we have tended to be too quick to assume that any Canadian representation of fear or awe at nature's power is of the terminal rather than the transitional kind" (55). Such assumptions help to explain why the most well-known poems in *David and Other Poems* are also the two in which the natural setting is most oppressive: "David" and "Vancouver Lights." We have only to turn to "Waterton Holiday," the poem that follows "David," for a more attractive landscape. Here Birney's memories of a pleasant summer work-

ing in Waterton Lakes National Park (Cameron, *Birney* 34) are the basis for a poem that provides the release traditionally provided by pastoral. In an opposition that would figure extensively in the work of Atwood (see *Survival* 123-24) and James Reaney, the straight lines of civilization are mocked by the less rigid order in nature:

> And now while I am escaped from the straight
> shrieking roads, the square fields,
> the cubed implacable factory and the unendable hurry,
> I too shall spread myself anyhow,
> presenting these dry legs
> scraggly as a saskatoon bush
> to whatever comic Canadian bogle
> has arranged this trance.
>
> (12)

Perhaps if he had barred himself in his cabin and waited for the bogle to come singing into his heart, "Waterton Holiday" would have received more attention. It is followed by "Slug in Woods," which is written less out of "stark terror" than out of fascination for the way in which a slug "spends a summer's jasper century" (13). Anyone who was raised in Banff would be aware that "jasper" is both a synonym for "opaque" and the name of another western national park.

The next three poems move away from pastoral and from English culture in general. A dislike of the latter is unmistakable in "Anglosaxon Street," a parody of Old English heroic verse that foregrounds the colonial bigotry of its benighted residents:

> Imperial hearts heave in this haven.
> Cracks across windows are welded with slogans;
> *There'll Always Be An England* enhances geraniums,
> and *V's* for a *Victory* vanquish the housefly.
>
> (14)

Birney may have written the poem as "a playful description of Hazelton Avenue, Toronto" (Cameron, *Birney* 237), but he could just as easily be mocking Vancouver. Consider the passengers in the following poem, "West Vancouver Ferry": a "chippie" (slang for a prostitute), a "knock-kneed hiker," "Women with bags and babies," "Four loud boys and a lady in red, / Yankees in slacks, a squaw, and a hollow-/ Cheeked Chinese," and then, and presumably least, "at last, and unbreathing, complete with cane, / An Englishman" (16). As the ferry departs, it leaves

the bobbing cans and ruck
Of sawdust, butts, and fly-kissed slaughter
To nudge along the piles and wait,
And tentacled weed to wave in the water,
And one small tourist, angry and late.
(16)

These people threaten to ruin the scenery of a "mottled town / And woods that rise and shrink to moss / Around the steely peaks of Crown" (16). In "Reverse on the Coast Range," there is no such interference, and the mountains maintain their sublimity:

With a crack and the roar of a thousand howitzers,
Out from the mountain's writhing camouflage
Roared the full broadside of the enemy,
The flooding and fanning avalanche.
(17)

Later in this volume, Birney will contrast the destructiveness of war with the regeneration in nature, and even this poem ends with "oblivious maples" in a placid landscape, though it is troubling that it first uses military metaphors so extensively. Nature really is terrifying here, though terror is only part of the story.

The four short poems that follow—"October in Utah," "Grey-Rocks," "Smalltown Hotel, and "Kootenay Still-Life"—reflect Birney's wanderings in the thirties. The first consists of three quatrains on the turn of the seasons in Utah, where he taught "from 1930 to 1932 and again from 1933 to 1934 as an Instructor at the University of Utah" (Pacey 300), the second is one of Birney's few published sonnets, the third depicts a "yellowed stiff hotel" in a small prairie town (21), while the fourth finds a haunting natural image in the region of British Columbia that borders Banff. A more important poem, though Birney himself later belittled it, is "Eagle Island," the eleventh and central poem in a book of twenty-one poems. He told his mother that the poem came fifth out of 450 poems submitted for a competition in the *Canadian Poetry Magazine*: "the joke is that my poem was a comic 'attack' on the dullness of Ontario and its scenery, and a wish to be back in British Columbia…Eagle Island (where we spent some days in a summer cottage…)" (Cameron, *Birney*, 185-86; the second ellipsis is mine). He told Pacey, "I will have to confess to some belated Georgianism, probably Rupert Brooke, in such things as 'Eagle Island.' I suppose I liked Brooke in the Twenties, without really admiring him, if you know what I

mean" (letter of 4 Feb. 1957, "Lives" 93). For those who still like Brooke, "Eagle Island" is successful light verse of a kind that we do not find elsewhere in this volume, and a long way from "David." Birney's model is probably Brooke's "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester," written (as the subtitle tells us) from Berlin in 1912. The poem is an ironic pastoral, in which the homesick speaker remembers Grantchester as more than it could ever be (Perkins 211):

> The women there do all they ought;
> The men observe the Rules of Thought.
> They love the Good; they worship Truth;
> They laugh uproariously in youth;
> (And when they get to feeling old,
> They up and shoot themselves, I'm told) . . .
> (Brooke 158; his ellipsis)

In a similar mood, Birney's speaker turns from the mosquitoes and churchgoing manners of Ontario to the "golden warmth" of Eagle Island:

> Where not the smallest spot's reserved
> For Gentiles, cows, or the unnerved,
> And no one's heard of raped Muskoka.
> (23)

Echoing Brooke's speaker's wish "To smell the thrilling-sweet and rotten / Unforgettable, unforgotten / River-smell" (159), Birney's speaker remembers that "everywhere's the old exciting / Rotten reek of weed and water" (24). Most strikingly, in contrast to the "eunuch sea / And pastured fenced nonentity" of repressed Ontario, Eagle Island is a place of sexual abandon: the tide strands "the naked piles" (23), the "rocks rise up with glistening loins" (23), an arbutus tree is "nude and tanned" (24),

> And there live girls who've never gone
> To Havergal or Bishop Strachan
> And who with neither care nor clothes
> Will dive to flake the phosphorescence,
> The cold and mortal incandescence,
> From warm obsidian sea, and swim
> With marbled arms a glittering mile,
> Into the moon, or standing smile
> With turquoise eyes around a fire.
> (24-5)

Eagle Island is a comic Arcadia, where "still it's possible at night / To row unstabbed by neon light / Or hounded by an auto's stench" (24), and where ten weeks of rain will enable the speaker to "slosh back" to Ontario:

> Though winter's sure, and war, or lectures
> To eastern young who've only books
> To tell them how a mountain looks,
> Or what is poverty or passion,
> I'll steal to Eagle Island first
> And slake my salt Columbian thirst.
> (25)

Since it is above all a comic foil to the civilization that it mocks, this island exists only in the speaker's vacation mood and fond memories, both of which end here.

After "Lament" shifts the tone by mourning the loss of the "petalled lips" of the addressee (26), "Monody on a Century" introduces war as a threat to youth, love, beauty, and poetry itself:

> Now bud is rot and fragrance rust
> Around the martialled bees,
> And men with boots will put an end
> To making similes.
> (27)

Since war is the subject of the poems that follow, it's not quite true that it ends poetry. The military tropes in "Reverse on the Coast Range" now seem somewhat fanciful, but Birney uses another here, altering the spelling of the verb "marshall" to compare bees and soldiers. Then "Hands," a poem that Pratt said "simply tears me up,"[8] contrasts the forces that were figuratively identified in earlier poems. The poem opens with the speaker in a canoe beneath the "still green hands" of the trees, but as he thinks through the metaphor he realizes his distance from the "illogical loveliness" of nature: "Lithe are these balsam / Fingers, gaunt as a Jew's in Poland, but green, / Green, not of us, our colours are black and red" (28). The chief difference is that our hands are more deadly: hence the cedar's "webbed claws / Drooping over the water shall focus no bombsight / Nor suture the bayoneted bowel" (28). Whatever his misgivings, the speaker knows that he must return to "the safe dead / Wood of the docks" to manipulate tools ("the militant typewriter, / The self-filling patriot pen"), to applaud, weave, and point "the witch hunt" (28-29). Unlike Pratt, who

tends to regard war as a regression to the state of nature, Birney realizes that the problem with modern war is that it is unnatural: as he wrote in the first version of "Man is a Snow," "I tell you the wilderness we fell / is nothing to the one we breed" (*Strait* 80). In the closing lines of "Hands," the differences between West and East, or between Canada and Europe, are no longer of interest:

> We are gloved with steel, and a magnet is set us in Europe.
> We are not of these woods, we are not of these woods,
> Our roots are in autumn, and store for no spring.
>
> (29)

"David" ended with a reference to "the last of our mountains"; "Hands" suggests that they are not ours at all, and that is time to put away the childish tropes of a North American exceptionalism.

"Hands" is followed by "Dusk on English Bay," which Robillard contrasts with "Vancouver Lights": the two poems "offer complementary, if not opposing, attitudes toward nature and society. In ['Dusk on English Bay'], nature is seen to have a purposeful order, whereas man's order is arbitrary and sterile. In 'Vancouver Lights,' however, nature is black chaos, and man is Prometheus the light-giver" (7-8). I find less of an opposition than Robillard does, since the allusion to Prometheus is so bleak when it is read in context, but I find opposed views of nature throughout the volume—between "David" and "Reverse on the Coast Range," on the one hand, and "Hands" and "Eagle Island," on the other hand. In "Dusk on English Bay," Birney again uses military tropes, this time to describe the picturesque English Bay. The point is to set up a contrast between this pleasant sunset and the horrors of war: so the "rain of quiet coolness," the bathers trotting on "legs / Unsexed by distance, waving arms severed / With twilight," and the sunset that is "quenched" here anticipate the "rain of iron / Cooling the flesh," the limbs literally "unsexed and severed," and the sailors "quenched" there (30-31). Pacey (307-08) and Robillard (22-24) demonstrate that the contrast extends throughout the poem, perhaps too schematically: surely the only reason to describe the bathers in this manner is to contrast them with dead soldiers. In any event, the point is not just that the terrors of war surpass those of nature, but that there is no sanctuary from this war: "tomorrow's sun is clean escaped," and it rushes through "Asian skies," "Libyan sands," Norway, the Mediterranean, England, and across the Atlantic: "And there is no Joshua can brake his flight, nor / Any clutch of ours can hold this precious night" (31). Accordingly, the distance

between English Bay and England is less notable than the distance between "Dusk on English Bay" and "David."

The next four poems offer bleak reports on the war. In "France, 1941," the speaker finds it hard to break through "a grey and rotting spell," though he hopes that he heard "a shout in the ship forlorn." In "War Winter," another adaptation of the alliterative style of Old English poetry,[9] the speaker has "to scan sky" amid "snow" to locate the "Sun, / proud Bessemer, peltwarmer, beauty" (33). In the second section, however, the faintness of the sun has more to do with war than with Canadian geography, and so the poem enacts the movement of the whole volume from the regional to the international:

> Not chiefly the month moulds you, heartcharmer,
> to scant hammerdent on hardiron sky,
> not alone the latitude to lodgers on this
> your slantwhirling lackey, lifecrusted satellite,
> this your one wrynecked, woedealing world.
>
> (33)

It is less of a *tour de force*, but "War Winter" is a more compassionate poem than the frequently-anthologized "Anglosaxon Street." "In This Verandah" depicts the poet and his readers as "ravelled in the wool," and the wars, of the three Fates (34). Somewhat unexpectedly, the poem ends by suggesting that nature is stronger than the Fates: "the beautiful bright coyote / will outflank the awnings / outsit the three bitches" (34). Here Birney differs from Pratt both in his choice of animals (and perhaps in his choice of mythologies) and in his refusal to align natural and human instincts. "European Nocturne" depicts the present as "gophering into fresh tombs," and, in an odd use of Arabian mythology in a poem about Europe, asks "what Scheherazade will set soaring again / our dusky carpets / or beat them on the innocent line?" (35). After "Vancouver Lights" reaches a nadir, the volume ends with the more hopeful "On Going to the Wars."

Although this poem was praised by Deacon and received enthusiastically when it was read on the C.B.C. in January of 1943 (Cameron, *Birney* 200),[10] it has not fared well with later critics. When Pacey called it "diffuse and embarrassing" (309), Birney responded that even though he became a Personnel rather than an Infantry Officer, as he had hoped, he nonetheless came "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 rea-

sons" (letter of 20 Apr. 1957, "Lives" 107). Perhaps the most suitable response is Munro Beattie's: "it is churlish to censure a poet for wishing to place his skill at the disposal of decent aspirations" (763). I will conclude by noting that since "On Going to the Wars" is a first-person meditation that encourages an identification of speaker and author,[11] it is a striking contrast with Pratt, who wrote impersonally about wars to which he was a concerned but distant observer. Birney states that he goes to war to preserve the landscapes of several regions and more than one nation—"Old English orchards and Canadian woods…Acadian / And Columbian roofs"—and to join "those who strive to chart / A world where peace is everyone's" (39). Birney's sense of structure demands that he conclude by returning to the West Coast, and he does so by vowing to take strength "from the patient land" and hope from "our spirit's book," "The sun unquenched within our clay" (40). In the last lines, he uses the tundra as a metaphor for the bleak present, through which he must journey to return to the West Coast light:

> Across the tundra of our dread
> We must beat on, windbitten, to
> The unseen cabin's light, and through
> The glooming western firwoods thread,
> In hope to pass the peaks terrific,
> And win the wide sundrenched Pacific.
> (40)

Here and elsewhere in the volume, we move from the mountains to the ocean shore, but whether that movement is an oscillation or a deliberate pattern depends on how much weight we give the arrangement.

Djwa argues that "in Canada, as elsewhere, romantic poetry was to survive although the poets involved in the modern movement did not always recognize this quality in their own work" ("The 1920s" 56). Precisely because she is so faithful to their work, Djwa does not always recognize it either. Thus when she discusses "David," she refers to the "carelessness engendered by a falsely Romantic view of nature" ("Developing" 46). That argument suggests that Modernist insight followed Romantic blindness, and critics of Canadian literature have been all too willing to agree, though they have rarely discussed influences with Djwa's rigour. After all, why worry about Pratt's influence on Birney if both expressed "the Canadian imagination" (the subtitle of Frye's *The Bush Garden)*? In such a context, the differences between Romanticism and Modernism are as irrelevant as the differences between British Columbia and Newfoundland. The next

step, increasingly common in recent polemics, is to argue that at best a writer like Birney takes his place in the middle of a sequence that runs from invention to mapping to argument (Richler), and that at worst his poetry is as irrelevant as the idea of a terrified Canadian imagination. If instead we resist the cartographical metaphors and combine a historicist approach with a recognition that a running argument with Wordsworth is at the heart of Romanticism, we are better prepared for Canadian Modernism in general, and Pratt and Birney in particular. Discussing Blake and Shelley, Harold Bloom argues that "Nature...has its own life, but apart from us, and is necessarily false and inconstant to us. Or to put it as a contrary of Wordsworth's language, Nature always will and must betray the human heart that loves her, for Nature...is not adequate to meet the demands made upon her by the human imagination" (286-87). In this sense, "David," "Hands," and "Vancouver Lights" are all examples of the persistence of a sceptical Romanticism. Writing in the buoyant spirit that followed World War I in Canada, Pratt, W.W.E. Ross, F.R. Scott, and Smith, like the Group of Seven, hoped that they could leave "behind the wasted lands of the battlefields of Europe for the fresh, clear northland of Canada," in Djwa's words ("The 1920s" 57). Writing in the anxious spirit that followed the Depression and the outbreak of World War Two, Birney could not follow that path. Even in his first volume he is well on his way to becoming more eclectic, more sceptical, and more Romantic than his older Canadian contemporaries.

Notes

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1 The idea would not have been news to Brown, who noted that the title poem of Duncan Campbell Scott's *The Green Cloister* (1935) gives an "unconvincing answer" to its questions, and that "The real answer is given elsewhere in the book" ("Memoir" xxxvii). For other studies of such arrangements, see D.M.R. Bentley on Charles G.D. Roberts' *New York Nocturnes* and on A.M. Klein's *The Rocking Chair*, John Van Rhys on Al Purdy's *North of Summer*, and Antje M. Rauwerda on Dorothy Livesay's "Zambia."

2 Birney's emphasis differs in a letter to Pacey of 11 Feb. 1957, in which he refers to "the

static dumb hostility of the non-human world" ("Lives," 95).

3 Though sympathetic to Frye, Djwa recognizes that he was strongly influenced by Pratt, whose "attitude to nature is atypical of Canadian poetry as a whole.... But if we approach Canadian poetry from its first manifestations working forward...there is abundant evidence that poets writing in Canada see nature as both beneficent and fearful" ("Forays" 140).

4 In a letter to Djwa in 1981, Birney said "I was very anxious not to be influenced by Ned, just because I was so close to him & I didn't want to appear to be poaching" ("Pratt's Modernism" 72-73). Earlier, he said, "Although I'm not conscious of any direct influence of Pratt on my work, his example had encouraged me to adventure into the writing of a narrative poem with a Canadian wilderness setting" (*Cow* 35). Even Birney seems to imply that the influence may be more extensive than he knows.

5 All quotations from *David and Other Poems* are from the original edition. Birney extensively revised some of these poems, though not the title poem, for his 1966 *Selected Poems*, replacing conventional punctuation "with space rather than typographical spatter" (Preface ix). Such poems as "Eagle Island" and "On Going to the Wars" were not included.

6 According to Birney, in 1940 "I began to see that it was the passing of my youth I was mourning, which peace would not bring back, not to me nor to any of my generation. I felt a deep need, a compulsion, to express this inevitable change from carefree happiness, this loss that none escapes unless he die young" (*Cow* 7).

7 Birney later changed "slew" to "bound" to bring "the reference more into line with the legend" ("To Pacey," 20 April 1957, "Lives" 106).

8 Pratt said in a letter of September 30, 1947 that Birney's later poem "Joe Harris" "simply tears me up as 'Hands' does. That last poem is worth more to me than all the bilge that has appeared in the *Northern Review* in many a moon, or in the general run of contemporary verse."

9 M.J. Toswell writes that "its theme is also thoroughly Anglo-Saxon, reflecting on the bleak uncertainty of the individual adrift in an unfeeling world. 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" (27).

10 It was published under the pseudonym "Richard Milnes" in the *Dalhousie Review* in October, 1941, "lest it become an embarrassment to him if he were never posted abroad" (Cameron, *Birney* 200).

11 In the letter to Pacey, Birney notes that the poem was not strictly autobiographical: "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." He adds that "if you regard this as a private poem, you must take care to be accurate about my private life" ("Lives" 106).

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