

REVIEWS

Alden Nowlan in Perspective

Patrick Toner, *If I could turn and meet myself: the Life of Alden Nowlan*. Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 2000. 339pp.

If I could turn and meet myself must have been an extremely difficult book to write. It is also an extremely difficult book to review, especially when the review is directed to readers of *Canadian Poetry*. I must elaborate on these difficulties before proceeding.

• • •

First, who reads literary biographies? If, as in the case of Alden Nowlan, the subject was also a public personality, the answer is likely to be: far more people than those seriously interested in good writing. Such readers are fascinated by the anecdotal, by the absurdities and scandals that punctuate the lives of the famous and the "Bohemian." Too often, one suspects, their interests are only a cut above those of readers of *National Enquirer*. They certainly do not want discussions of the art of poetry, nor do they show much desire to read the stuff. These are hard facts that, in uncertain economic times, weigh heavily on both publishers and authors. Goose Lane Editions and Patrick Toner must have been keenly conscious of them in this instance. Nowlan, after all, was a colourful, provocative figure, as well as something of a mystery, and the temptation to emphasize the more bizarre and raunchy aspects of his life was obviously considerable. On the other hand, his poetry is his enduring achievement, so any biography that neglects the literary, even (horrors!) the aesthetic, will in the long run be doomed to inadequacy.

What, in an ideal world, would a literary biography present? It must, to be sure, include the major biographical facts, but the emphasis should fall on those facts that have a special bearing on the writing. To what extent are poems that sound autobiographical in fact autobiographical? How does a biographical detail light up a puzzling image or allusion within a poem? In such a biography, a

meeting with a potential publisher may well be more significant than an account of an ephemeral romance. By the same token, a good story, but one that is irrelevant to the writing, may be less deserving of space than an account of the subject's reading and literary influences. Alas, such preoccupations do not make for best sellers.

Moreover, for those who know that, ultimately, it is the writing that matters, the reading of a literary biography can be a disillusioning experience. Too often the artistic persona is so much more impressive than the fallible human being behind the writing. Confining myself to Canadian examples, I think of Earle Birney, so disappointingly inferior as a man to the engaging voice behind the poems, or Margaret Laurence, revealed in the recent biography as so less reliable and likeable than the narrator of her best (early) novels.

In Nowlan's case, the writing of a literary biography is further exacerbated by the poet's uneasy relations with the academic world which he both depended upon and mistrusted. Many of his remarks need therefore to be interpreted with caution. Add to that, much of the biographical evidence, particularly of his early life, depends on Nowlan's own say-so, and he was, by his own admission, an inveterate elaborator on the strict truth in the (perfectly legitimate) interest of poetic myth. Toner had to pick his way between various and varying versions of many of the reminiscences presented here.

Having said all that, I shall now offer as objective an account as I can of what Toner gives us, and then consider what, had readers of *Canadian Poetry* been the prime readership, he might have provided.

• • •

In writing the first full-scale biography of Nowlan, Patrick Toner has made detailed use of the Alden Nowlan Papers in the University of Calgary as well as various collections at the University of New Brunswick. In addition, he has conducted numerous interviews with relatives, early neighbours in Stanley, Nova Scotia, and Hartland, New Brunswick, and various friends, colleagues and acquaintances of his later years. He has also consulted Nowlan's extensive journalistic contributions to the Saint John *Telegraph-Jour-*

nal and the *Atlantic Advocate*, many of which were autobiographical in nature. And he has naturally made use of the available academic scholarship.

The result is a well-researched and accurately presented book that brings together far more information about Nowlan than has ever been assembled before. The book is illustrated by a number of evocative photographs (most of them, understandably, from his later years), and interspersed through the narrative are pages reproducing various Nowlan poems that illumine the immediate context. A nice balance is maintained between his simultaneous lives as poet, as journalist, and as family man. The early years are put into what seems like an accurate and cogent perspective, and his later career is chronicled in all its wild diversity. Moreover, Toner is scrupulous in recording alternative versions when Nowlan's own versions are incompatible or when the memories of others conflict in the account of a particular event.

The book is attractively produced by the publishers and is more than usually free from typographical error. However, I cannot resist noting, given the tendency in some quarters to emphasize central Canadian ignorance of the Maritimes, that this can be a two-way street: the names of poet Jay Macpherson and critics Dennis Duffy and (Maritime-born) Northrop Frye are all misspelt.



If this were a brief non-specialist review with a strict word-limit, I could leave it at that. But how useful is the book as a scholarly tool for the researcher in Canadian poetry? It is, as I have already indicated, essential for its wealth of factual and illustrative information, but, when detailed searching is involved, problems can arise.

First, all references to letters, interviews, etc., are properly cited, as one might expect, in the end-notes. Yet quotations from individual poems are not identified. Now Nowlan wrote and published literally hundreds of poems in his relatively short life, and even the specialist cannot be expected to remember the location of all of them. In the absence of a bibliography or check-list, if a poem isn't reprinted in *An Exchange of Gifts* (which provides a title-index), one has to search the contents-pages of many volumes in order to locate a reference. I found this constantly frustrating during a reading of this book: a brief extract was quoted, or a title cited, but it was dif-

ficult—sometimes impossible—to locate the whole text. In several instances, I can only assume that these were uncollected poems; all the more reason, then, for the location to be made clear.

Again, I regret to have to report that this is one of those disillusioning biographies to which I have already referred. We have heard so much about the warmth of Nowlan's hospitality and his reputation as a loveable figure. But, especially in the last part of the book, we are presented with an irascible, often unforgivably rude, and generally boorish drunk. Toner is, of course, obligated to tell the truth, and I am not suggesting that these aspects of his character should be smoothed over; but a *literary* biography need not present the gory details of every alcoholic brawl. This makes for depressing reading.

Instead, I wished for more commentary that would shed light on the poems. To be sure, I found myself making succinct cross-references in my own working-copies when I recognized a comment that illuminated a poem. But Toner himself offers little direct help with such insights. For instance, he mentions without comment Nowlan's *Telegraph-Journal* and *Advocate* columns championing the anti-abortion cause, but gives no references (one is reprinted in *Double Exposure*), and does not remark how these form illuminating prose-contexts for his poignant poem "It's Good to Be Here" in *Smoked Glass*.

Or, to cite a negative example, also involving *Smoked Glass*, one of my favourite poems in that collection is "The Unhappy People," which Toner never mentions. He cannot, of course, gloss every poem, but this one has a ring of biographical allusion, and I would like to know if Cory and Brent were in fact "my wife's cousins" or whether the whole poem is an elaborate backwoods Maritime myth. This is surely the kind of information that one hopes to receive from a poet's biography. (I would also have liked more quotations from Nowlan's journalism which, with the exception of the pieces reprinted in *Double Exposure* and the recent publications by Robert Gibbs of contributions to the *Telegraph-Journal*, is not readily accessible.)

In conclusion, I cannot help feeling that, despite Toner's M.A. thesis on religious imagery in Nowlan's verse, discussion of Nowlan the poet is not his strong suit. It may or may not be significant that the poems reproduced throughout the book are rarely among Nowlan's best ("The Red Wool Suit" is a notable exception). They

tend to be casually anecdotal to fit the anecdotal quality of much of the narrative. Similarly, when a newly published volume is being discussed, Toner is generally content to give a digest of critical response drawn from contemporary reviews rather than offering detailed comments on stylistic development or increased maturity of viewpoint.

Still, I realize Toner's difficulties. As Nowlan himself said, "*If there comes a time when truck drivers read poetry, mine will be the poetry they'll read.*" True, but the time is not yet, and present-day poetry-readers cannot complain if, in order to serve those interested in Nowlan's personality rather than his work, space is devoted to the superficial eccentricities of the Flat Earth Society and the club devoted to restoring the Stewart Monarchy at the expense of a sophisticated discussion of Nowlan's poetic art or some account of his poetic reading and influences. In the world in which we live, this is doubtless as good a biography of one of Canada's most skillful and popular poets as we have a right to expect.

W. J. Keith