

“Just Endure, Fear, Hope”

Nicholas Bradley, ed. *“We Go Far Back in Time”: The Letters of Earle Birney and Al Purdy, 1947-1987*. Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour, 2014. 479pp.

“We Go Far Back in Time”: The Letters of Earle Birney and Al Purdy, 1947-1987 illuminates the life and poetry of two colossal writers. For younger scholars, Earle Birney and Al Purdy are, as the editor of the book, Nicholas Bradley, points out, part of Canadian literature’s “historical context” (28). Bradley’s regard for them as such suggests an emerging narrative of twentieth-century Canadian poetry that is more critically and temporally distant than what has come before. The critics whose careers took form during the same periods in which the stars of poets like Purdy and Birney rose had the opportunity to be part of the history about which they wrote. Sam Solecki, for instance, includes many of his own letters to Purdy in *Yours, Al: The Collected Letters of Al Purdy* (2004); they are, in fact, some of the best letters in that collection. In his own scholarship, Solecki mostly seems interested in Purdy as a solo virtuoso; Bradley does differently. Bradley’s investment is in the era, rather than in any one figure. The result is a volume that—like the Layton/Creeley letters edited by Ekbert Faas and Sabrina Reed—offers a dynamic image of literary partnerships, networks, and histories. The volume is meticulous in its contextualizing of the era and generally inspiring in its choice of letters. More than anything else, though, *“We Go Far Back in Time”* is a thoughtful commentary on what it means to write letters and poetry and how rewarding it is for readers to study the act of doing both.

If Bradley’s collection of letters will benefit the reputation of one poet more than the other, it is that of Birney. To be sure, Purdy is the more entertaining correspondent but the letters that give the greatest surprises here are by Birney. I imagine the first and only encounter most readers have had with Birney’s letters (if they have had any encounter at all) was the hostile voice that peppered the letters collected for *Imagining Canadian Literature: The Selected Letters of Jack McClelland* (1998). Bradley’s book preserves that bellicosity; Birney slickly corrects Purdy’s assessment of Watson Kirkconnell as a “progressive-conservative” by noting that Kirkconnell is actually “an incipient fascist” (50). But there is so much more to Birney in these letters. His unexpected modesty is among the best things in the whole book: “if you’d been quite sober you wouldn’t have called me a great poet, because on sober thought I’m not. [...] there aren’t and there never have been poets in Canada in the same street with Dylan Thomas or

Auden or Eliot or Browning or Emily Dickinson or or etc. Let's keep those names in mind when we use the word 'great'" (57). The expressions of self-doubt may tire some readers (they occur frequently and intensify as Birney ages), but there is a rare wisdom in those lines that tells readers a great deal about the fragility of even the most sought-after poets of the centennial era. Birney is as grounded when he talks as an academic, reminding Purdy in the same letter that the "quaint Victorian concept of a professor" is a fallacy (59). The occasional tension that surfaces in Canadian letters and criticism between the university-educated poet and the autodidact is absent here; these are two writers who had profoundly different educations and still managed to treat each other as equals, whether as loyal confidantes or as mirthful combatants.

The general tone of the volume, though, is one of genuine affection. Birney touchingly compliments Purdy quite often: "I wasn't really intending to be more than kidding with my assaults on you. I couldn't needle you if I didn't feel so close to you. You are the younger brother I never had" (194). Purdy often responds in kind: in the early letters as a devotee and in the later letters as a loving friend. Purdy's early letters are so unsure and apologetic that it's hard not to smile while reading them: "Do you mind my thinking you've written better stuff than Pratt?" (62). His later letters portray a poet whose profile is changing, a poet finding his voice and learning to assert himself even when he praises his mentor: "I think I'm joining Birney as a father-figure, since young poets keep writing about their troubles, asking advice etc. So many poets are out and out nuts, not sane sober like you and I, eh?" (212). These declarations of friendship and camaraderie counter the more common characterization of these two poets as acerbic and sharp-tongued. Indeed, Bradley has published one of the most rounded collections of letters in Canadian literature if only because he gives his readers a myriad of gentler vignettes to accompany the more traditionally aggressive representations of these two major figures.

There is also no shortage of letters that have the light gravity of poetry. Some of these are the letters from the 1970s, in which both Purdy and Birney talk at length about aging, mortality, and legacy. Birney's seventies letters are especially powerful (and they show off his spectacular memory):

I should do as you did, in 1955 [7 Mar.], when it was you who wanted to talk with me but you doubted if I would be able to engage you in a talk because 'a professorship or doctorate makes too much difference.' Now here am I, having shed both those states, an old man in a cold month, wondering if you still maybe think I 'haven't written anything good since *Strait of Anian*,' and me the bashful one. (296)

And Purdy gradually comes to express a similar state of existential wonder, what he more straightforwardly calls “[o]ld-age depression”; some of Purdy’s advice to Birney is, unsurprisingly, to drink more (399). Some of this comical philosophy appears even in the early letters, especially those from Birney: “The whole enormous mass of Canadian Squaredom is poised to crush us for daring to feel our obscene, comic, incestuous, tremendous, racially impure, determined unputoutable LOVE. We dare confide in no one, get help nowhere, just endure, fear, hope” (121). There are dozens of examples in this collection of this playful erudition and shrewd poetic sense.

“*We Go Far Back in Time*” also deserves praise for Bradley’s introduction, which thoughtfully recounts the life and poetry of Birney and Purdy in ways that will appeal both to those familiar with these writers and to those just discovering them. Bradley reflects on their lives, the ways in which their literary and life circumstances intersected or deviated, and the growth of their friendship over a four-decade period. There is a wealth of biographical and literary information in the extensive introduction and in Bradley’s plentiful footnotes.

As much as Bradley’s diligence deserves praise, I found myself lingering on his justification for the volume as a recovery project. The statement that comes at the end of his introduction is debatable: “Both poets have suffered a remarkable reversal in critical fortunes: the great enthusiasm with which their works often were received during their lifetimes, and the general acknowledgement of their significance, have been replaced by neglect” (28). Bradley’s notes on critical neglect really beg the question: neglected in comparison to whom? Certainly in comparison to Margaret Atwood. But are Birney and (especially) Purdy really neglected relative to Barry McKinnon or the recently deceased Florence McNeil (two remarkable and, today, largely unknown poets)? Birney still shows up in anthologies and his *Selected Poems* was republished quite recently (*One Muddy Hand: Selected Poems* [2006]); criticism on Birney has slowed to a near halt, true, but his work is still in print, and that is more than many other (and sometimes better) Canadian writers can say of their work. With regard to Purdy, there has been a years-long media blitz to preserve his A-Frame house in Ameliasburgh (which yielded *The Al Purdy A-Frame Anthology* [2009]) and a conference at the University of Ottawa in 2006 that led to the publication of *The Ivory Thought: Essays on Al Purdy* (2008). There are also his *Collected Poems* (2000), a volume of letters, *Yours, Al* (2004), a book-length study (*The Last Canadian Poet* [1999]), and essays in journals such as *Essays on Canadian Writing* (I’m thinking specifically of Mark

Silverberg's "The Can(adi)onization of Al Purdy" [2000] and Linda Rogers's *Al Purdy: Essays on His Works* (2002). And that's just in the last fifteen years! Few poets could say that they have had that much attention paid to them.

During the 1990s, the field of Canadian modernism was novel enough that critics such as Sam Solecki, Brian Trehearne, Sandra Djwa, and Zailig Pollock were able to note convincingly the neglect of both Canadian modernism as an area of study and of individual authors such as Al Purdy, Irving Layton, E.J. Pratt, and A.M. Klein. Since the end of the nineties, the field has changed dramatically. If at one time the claim for neglect was too easy to make, today it is too common. The problem with those claims is that they foster a continual search only for neglected writers or they encourage misrepresentations of (rather than appreciations for) the major figures of Canadian literature. What critics need more than those approaches are justifications for their studies that build on what exists and explicate what more can be done. We need criticism that stresses the great depth and international appeal of Canadian literature instead of the seemingly unceasing need (which I think we have, as critics, *enjoyed* as appearing unceasing) to recover obscure writers or to exaggerate the need for recovery.

Oddly enough, Bradley does—without acknowledging it forcefully enough—demonstrate the depth and international appeal of Birney and Purdy as writers. The letters centre on Birney and Purdy, but at the periphery are the controversies of Canadian literature (e.g. bill bissett's infamous trouble with the law in the late 1960s), the internationalism of Canadian writing (Birney's interactions with Eliot, Purdy's thoughts on the Black Mountain poets, and the general cosmopolitanism of Canadian writers during the centennial era), and a deep consideration of the many hats that centennial-era writers wore (as editors, public speakers, mentors, referees, professors, amateur journalists, civilian historians, and so forth). Bradley offers mounds of evidence that there is much left to do with Purdy and with Birney, even though much has already been done. That revelation, more than the warning of neglect, is what one should pull out of Bradley's truly exceptional collection: he shows that Canadian criticism is at last demonstrating ways of sustaining rich and varied discourses on the voices that now belong to history.

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