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Review Article
Canadian Poetry Chronicle: III

Frankly, as far as the poor reviewer is concerned there is just too much activity on the poetry publishing scene: PR can't keep up! There are close to 30 books discussed in the following pages; PR has read and reviewed another 10 to 20 elsewhere during the past half year, and he knows he's missed at least 50 others. That's a lot of poetry books. Moreover, although quite a few books deserving negative reviews have undoubtedly appeared, PR finds that there is something good to be said about most of the books under review. How to organize this review then? PR wonders. Quite inchoately, he decides, but at least try to put the books in some sort of order. The result follows; let us hope there is something in this cornucopia to appeal to every reader; PR certainly believes there should be.

In one sense, the title of Alan Pearson's new book of poems, *Freewheeling Through Gossamer Dragstrips*,¹ gives the whole game away. If you like the title, you'll probably like the book. (I find it a bit too cute and feel the same way about most of the poems). Many of Pearson's poems have obviously different personae, yet the tone, the language seems the same. Few of the poems are wholly satisfying, and the humour so many of them attempt seems forced.

A few poems, like 'Greece' and 'Paros Island', work as complex and whole articulations, they are gentler and more craftily understated than the norm of this collection (where Pearson often appears to be trying to become another Irving Layton). 'Poetry should never fail to surprise and please the reader whose reading time is precious,' says Pearson. I agree; and my time is too precious to waste on re-reading of this book.

'Look,' says Helene Rosenthal in *Listen to the Old Mother*,² 'I'm not your mother/I'm not your wife/of Bath/I'm not a class/of women or/your lover/Hell, I'm just a fuckin real/good poet.' I would wish it so. On the basis of this 'selected and new' poems, however, I cannot say it. Ms Rosenthal is not without talent and craft, and in the best of these poems she displays these with wit and integrity. But she is also given to cheap shots and cute rhymes, neither of which belong here.

Helene Rosenthal is a political woman, and many of these poems are statements of women's liberation. As such I cannot argue with them, but I do

not find they work as poetry. When she relaxes the rhetoric and allows herself simply to describe a scene clearly, as she does in 'The Kosygin Dinner', the specificity of her perceptions tells us all we need to know of the political realities she is exploring. Since her poems are devastating to the degree they are subtle, I think it sad that elsewhere she fails to use her real subtlety and wit. In too many of the poems the wit seems laboured because it labours too obviously to make a point; yet when, as in 'Bearing How It Is', the language leads both poet and reader deeper into new insights, the delight of discovery is real. There are good poems in *Listen to the Old Mother*, but you have to wade through a lot of lesser ones to find them.

If you're 'halfway to the factory' you're almost crazy, which is where Norman Poole is in his poems from prison. His book has power because it appears authentic in its presentation of prison life as seen from the prisoners' point of view. Poole presents a series of 'takes' on that life and the characters who live it. There is a savage humour to many of these pieces, especially the monologues attributed to 'haro' and 'dave,' the two men Poole speaks most about.

*Halfway to the Factory*³ tells a story of sorts, the story of Poole's incarceration, his battles with 'the bulls', the suicides and fights, the boredom, the tales the other prisoners tell, and finally of his own suicide attempt which gets him shifted to a psychiatric ward. Essentially he sees the prisoners as heroic in their fight to preserve their individuality within a dehumanized system, yet he does not romanticize or glorify these criminals. The language is tough, idiomatic, in no sense 'poetic', yet its air of authenticity wins the reader's acceptance, finally, to a view of a situation seldom seen from the inside.

Six young new poets gather together in *Now We Are Six*,⁴ at least 3 of whom are worth noticing. Anthologies such as this serve a useful purpose for new poets and readers alike. I know I'll probably pay attention to future work by Alan Davies, David Leicester and Ken Sherman; I'll be more wary about that of Steve Hume. Laura Anne Holden and Dwight Tanner.

Tanner's poems suffer from the fact that they telegraph their rather too soft punches. Hume is still flailing about looking for a mannerism (not that mannerism is a good thing); as a result, he shifts mannerisms awkwardly and inconsistently from poem to poem. Holden's poems are mostly of the one word per line variety; they lack sufficient variety of tone or idea.

Ken Sherman is at least interesting, especially in the personal poem, 'My Father Kept His Cats Well Fed'. There's a certain comic tone to his work that is engaging, and an occasional flash of verbal music that suggests better things to come. David Leicester writes funny and alive political poetry, not an easy thing to do. He misses the mark as often as he hits it, but the hits hint of future successes. Alan Davies's 'After Ed Dorn's Love Songs' is the most interesting section of the book. Davies is entranced by language, and he already knows the meaning of 'song' in poetry. Though not uniformly successful, these 'songs'

reveal a talent willing to submit to language's tidal pull and to submerge in it.

*The Shrouding*⁵ is Leo Kennedy's one and only book of poems. First published in 1933, it is now restored to us with an appropriately nostalgic Introduction by Leon Edel and a short, witty, and somewhat self-mockingly sad, note by the author. The Golden Dog Press is to be thanked for fulfilling a scholarly role here, making available a work long out of print. But *The Shrouding*, though it is all too obviously a product of its time, can nevertheless still speak to ours. For all that its formalism is essentially time-bound, there are still poems within its pages lively enough to entertain us yet.

For the student this is a useful book, not least because of Leon Edel's witty memoirs. Kennedy belonged with the Montreal Group of the Thirties yet he was not entirely of them, as he was self-educated and Catholic. Still, the wit displayed in these poems quickly won the group's applause. If death is the large theme of this collection, it is as often the *petit mort* of sexual love as the larger darkness all men must finally enter. There is a real vitality to the best of these poems which remains engaging even today. Kennedy is a minor poet, yes, but his one published book is still of more than mere academic interest.

In *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*,⁶ Alden Nowlan continues his sensitive reporting of the ordinary unordinary. As usual, Nowlan's insights are touching and lucidly expressed, his points well-taken. So I enjoyed this new collection of Nowlan's because the man's generous and humane perceptions and feelings reach out and touch me. And yet, and yet, I can't help feeling that there's a general flatness of language, rhythm and music in this collection which suggests Nowlan is simply marking time, and I'm disappointed. I hope that this feeling of routineness will disappear in future, but for the moment it keeps *I'm a Stranger Here Myself* well below the heights Nowlan's earlier books achieved.

On the back-cover of *Rain-Check*⁷ we are told that this book is 'A gathering, for collectors and friends, of 105 early poems, all first issued in small editions by the poet, and all long since out of print.' In his short Introduction, Souster thanks Michael Macklem and Oberon for taking him on a few years ago and for making possible such a collection. Souster now has in print all the verse up to 1972 he wishes to preserve. This is a good thing, for Ray Souster is both a popular and important poet of the mid-century.

Nevertheless, *Rain Check* is basically for collectors and friends. Anyone seeking an introduction to Souster's work would be much better off buying his *Selected Poems* or *The Years*, for *Rain-Check* is a flawed collection. There are good mainstream Souster poems here, of course, full of humanity and personal observation of the surrounding scene, but there are also far too many squibs which only barely made the grade as jokes or insults when they were first published and simply do not deserve to be preserved. Still, *Rain-Check* has enough good poems to make it worthwhile to those 'collectors and friends'.

And just what is one to do with the prolific, protean, provocative and often pretentious Layton? one might ask. The best answer in some years has been provided in the double-barrelled package of *Selected Poems, The Darkening Fire*⁸—covering the years 1945-1968—& *The Unwavering Eye*⁹—covering the years since 1968. God knows — and if He doesn't Layton will waste no time informing him—that Irving Layton is a monumental figure in modern Canadian poetry; the problem is that the monument is constructed as much out of garbage and debris as out of beautifully crafted marble and precious metals. There are 2 ways of looking at this fact: the first is to say, with Yeats, that without a thorough knowledge of the 'rag and bone shop of the heart' poetry cannot be created at all, and therefore Layton has been honest in the celebration of all sides of the beast, mankind; the second is to continue to point to Yeats as an exemplar of those who always sought to write from the ladder, not the dung heap at its bottom. Layton has often done no more than reveal rags and bones, failing to give them significant form. Thus, when confronted with his monumental *Collected Poems* of 1971, the PR shudders at the prospect of sifting through so much dung to find a few jewels.

These 2 volumes of *Selected Poems* provide the best approach to the phenomenon that is Layton's poetry simply because in them the worst of the dung has already been removed. Yet they still contain examples of every kind of Layton poem, from the silly or obscene squibs to the great works like 'A tall Man Executes a Jig', 'The Skull', or 'The Unwavering Eye'. For at his best Layton achieves a diction which articulates the courage of looking death in the face and smiling. At other times he speaks for every kind of man, and if that means he must not only appear a buffoon but a silly, drunken buffoon at that he does so. Layton is, and shall remain, a major presence in our midst: these 2 volumes testify to the lively power of that presence.

A few years ago, Louis Dudek's massive *Collected Poetry* appeared and was largely ignored. The poet has become the largely unknown and unacknowledged member of one of the most important triumvirates of Canadian poetry: Raymond Souster, Irving Layton and Dudek. While the other two publish and sell and get write-ups in *Weekend Magazine*, Dudek follows a lonely path. He does not deserve such critical obscurity, for he has pioneered the modernist long poem in Canada and offered a critical vision which, if narrow, has consistently challenged accepted thought.

It would be nice if his *Selected Poems*¹⁰ rectifies this lamentable situation: it provides a good overview of Dudek's career, with various of his shorter poems plus excerpts from his major long works, *Europe*, *En Mexico*, and *Atlantis*. I would have preferred the whole of *En Mexico* instead, but given the editorial preference for excerpts, they are good ones. The reader of *Selected Poems* will gain a clear idea of the kind of intellectual and philosophically complex poetry Dudek excels at. If this book truly serves its purpose it will send readers

scurrying to find the *Collected Poetry* so they can read the long poems in full. I believe it should, and I hope it will, do this. Louis Dudek has earned far more critical attention than he has been granted, as *Selected Poems* demonstrates even in 55 short pages.

Ice Age,¹¹ Dorothy Livesay's first collection of new poems in over four years, is a welcome event. As her *Collected Poems: The Two Seasons* richly demonstrated three years ago, Dorothy Livesay has been a central voice of 20th century Canadian poetry throughout her long career. And that voice is still speaking poems which command our attention. The range of subject, mood and tone in *Ice Age* is remarkably wide, attesting to the diversity of Livesay's passions and interests. She appears as a grandmother aging, as woman (in this last guise I feel she occasionally strikes a somewhat too didactic pose), as individual of subtle personal perceptions of life and as sensitive chronicler of others' lives. Her passion is always felt, whether it be in her intellection or her emotional empathizing or, best of all, the two simultaneously. If a few poems suffer from her need to lecture, that is not enough to harm the book as a whole (and perhaps she has earned the right to lecture us anyway.)

'The validity of my life / is a few poems caught and netted,' says the poet. Among those 'few' I'd list the following from *Ice Age*: 'Perspectives', 'Breadline', the incredible 'Morning Rituals', and 'The Survivor'. But almost all the poems in this book will touch a reader in some way. Livesay is never less than honest with her readers and herself. Her ability to speak directly to our hearts is demonstrated throughout *Ice Age*. 'Open or closed,' she says, 'my eyes possess the pattern/green oak leaves/vibrating branches'. At their best, her poems map this living, ever-shifting pattern and enter it into our lives.

If for no other reason than that it is by George Woodcock, *Notes on Visitations*¹² would be an important document. In fact, it is a fascinating collection of poems from 1936 to 1975, interlaced with personal observations on his craft by Woodcock and sporting a lively Introduction by Al Purdy. Woodcock's poetry reveals how deeply he belongs to that generation of writers associated with Auden and Spender; yet from the very first it bears the marks of his own unique personality. Although most of the early poems are formal almost to a fault, the sharp, often pessimistic, occasionally biting humor, political intelligence of this anarchist autodidact always shines through. The poems cover a wide range of concerns, from anarchism, to mythology, to memories and the lost past, to tight and imagistic insights, to apocalyptic visions of the end of man, and finally in the poems, written recently after a decade's or longer silence, to an almost Yeatsian sense of the tragic joy of being human.

Readers will discover poems they like and don't like here, but that is not really the point. *Notes on Visitations* reveals a powerful synthesizing mind in a new light. I find the new poems especially moving, but perhaps that's simply because they achieve a difficult simplicity of statement I don't always see in the

early poetry. As a tour of one of Canada's widest ranging and most thoughtful minds, *Notes on Visitations* is a welcome addition to anyone's library.

Richard Outram's *Turns and Other Poems*¹³ is the second full-length collection for this poet, although he has published a number of exquisitely designed and illustrated pamphlets. In some ways, those private press publications reveal precisely where the poet's interests lie. A conservative, he wishes to preserve the forms and modes of the past in his poetry as well as his book-making.

Outram is a traditional poet, then, and very good at this craft he is, too. His rhymes and rhythms emerge from a mind steeped in the poetry and thought of the western literary heritage. Tackling, as the jacket informs us, some fairly large themes like evil, death and passion, he is at his worst when he deals with them in the abstract. Thus I find that 'Hunt'; despite its obvious 'wit', is far too obvious in the satiric point it makes. The same can be said of a number of the shorter poems in *Turns*.

In his better poems Outram creates genuinely interesting personae, whose feelings about larger concerns emerge by implication. The title sequence is especially good this way. Continually expanding on its central metaphor of the sideshow, 'Turns' presents a variety of characters who reveal more than any barker would have known or dared to promise. Here Outram's wit and sense of traditional language shine, and his clever lines continually engage our intelligence. Like *Notes on Visitations*, *Turns* serves to remind us that a good craftsman can always regenerate old and neglected forms.

Two of Québec's finest poets found translations in 1975, but even to someone as poor in French as I am it is clear that only one found a translator. Nevertheless, both books provide a welcome introduction to the poetry of our other tongue.

Anne Hébert's poetry is rich in allusiveness and a sense of other worlds always threatening to break in on 'the humility of this one. The familiar is made unfamiliar, the unfamiliar unsettling familiar, in her poems. Alan Brown's translation of her *Poems*¹⁴ indicates where her power lies clearly enough, but he fails to capture the poetic feeling and movement of the original verses. Even though I don't know the originals, I feel a tense awkwardness, an insensitive use of syntactical inversions, for example, which get in the way of the poems' unfolding. A quick check of F.R. Scott's little book of translations of poems by Saint Denis Garneau and Anne Hébert (Klanak Press, now sadly out of print) reveals that in every case Scott's handling of a poem, though perhaps somewhat freer than Brown's is the more effectively poetic. But then Scott is a fine poet in English, as Brown is not.

John Glassco is also a fine poet in English, and his version of Garneau's poems reveal throughout his sensitivity to tone and rhythm in both languages. *Complete Poems of Saint Denis Garneau*¹⁵ is a beautiful hardcover book, but more than that it is a full and admirable introduction to the writer who brought

Québec poetry into the modern period. This is a large book, and it would be impossible to suggest all the riches within it in a few paragraphs. Glassco's intelligent Introduction does a masterly job of suggesting the wonders and limits of Garneau's art and placing it in the tradition of Québec literature. His translations of Garneau's poems are fine poems in English; they sing and one reads them in English for the pleasure they provide in that language as much as for the knowledge they offer of the work of one of Québec's leading modernist poets. *Complete Poems of Saint Denys Garneau* is a book for everyone interested in the literature of our country.

According to Georges Zuk, as translated (so it seems) by Robin Skelton in *Georges Zuk: The Underwear of the Unicorn*,¹⁶ 'the poem . . . creates the author, and not vice-versa.' Moreover, 'all information is false' while existence 'is essence.' In Essence, then, it becomes an irrelevant academic conjecture whether or not Skelton exists, let alone Zuk. The book exists, one of the first from Oolichan Press, a new west coast concern, and I have to wonder whether or not the many typographical errors affect Zuk's being. Not too much, I guess, for he is present, and presents himself as sensualist first, poet and philosopher second. There is much sexual wit in these pages; though when it comes to the Zuk letters in part 3 I must confess that both Kierkegaard & Carlyle are greater creations of their writing than is Zuk. On the other hand, Zuk appears to recognize this and borrow their clothing, so to speak, to flesh out his own attitudes.

Georges Zuk: The Underwear of the Unicorn is a witty book much of the time, but both Skelton and Zuk betray their age in remarks like 'Is it not better to give a man an erection than a headache?' What about the women who might read Zuk? Ah well, if you enjoy the conundrums of art that Zuk's continuing disappearance and nonexistential portentousness propose you will surely enjoy this book. While you read it, moreover, Zuk, and perhaps even Skelton, will live.

The Victory of Judy Fitzgerald's *Victory*¹⁷ is the torn-down burlesque house in Toronto. Ms Fitzgerald pays a kind of homage to the place now that it's gone, stripping in a different fashion, fashioning a dance of words, baring her inner self to us through the poems and prose pieces of this book. It is a whole, this book, meant to be read whole and not in separate parts. It charts a number of strangely familiar places in one person's journey of the present. The childish past and its losses, the loving/loveless present and its losses, and the Victory, with all the discardings such a place evokes, these and other elements intersect and interact throughout the book. Exactly what is happening is not always clear, but usually the emotion of each piece comes through.

On the whole I like this book: its desperate awareness of the power of language to hurt or heal, its insight that words are like the clothes a stripper sheds to bare herself only to prove nakedness a mask: that is, language is necessary clothing for all we know and feel. *Victory* engages my emotions as

Listen to the Old Mother manages only fitfully to do. There are also some marvelous drawings by Geraldine Scalia.

John Ferns's *Henry Hudson or Discovery*¹⁸ is another, and worthy, addition to the documentary file of Canadian poetry. Ferns has taken great care in organizing original documents, extracts from Llewlyn Powys' biography of Hudson, found poems and his own lyric interludes into a convincing collage of impressions and perceptions. I believe Ferns has properly chosen to involve himself in the unfolding documentary drama of his poem: his personal intrusions from the perspective of mid-20th century Canada provide a focus for the reader upon the events of Hudson's final voyage, where 'all they found was the rain crying,/snow falling on freezing seas,/breath-stopping cold,/their bloodied mouths stuck to the bars/of the north's impenetrable doors.' His handling of the various persons involved in the events of the mutiny is also sharp, especially in the precision and objectivity provided by quotations from the original documents. *Henry Hudson or Discovery* is not a major work, but it is a solid one, evoking the harsh, stern realities of then and now in satisfying counterpoint.

Doug Beardsley's first Canadian publication, *Going Down into History*,¹⁹ reveals an interesting if still somewhat unfocused talent. The epigraph is from Ralph Gustafson, and too many of these poems from Europe seem overly influenced by Gustafson's clotted poetic line. Gustafson usually manages to carry off this kind of heavily allusive phrasing, but Beardsley isn't always so successful: many of these poems fail to clearly present the inchoate mass of history-still-here that so much of Europe presents to the new-world traveller because they are themselves inchoate.

I confess we have already had so many fine traveller poets, Birney, Purdy, Gustafson, et. al., that I am not that easily won by yet another. Nevertheless, some of these poems flash with genuine wit and intensity of vision. The two Paul Klee poems suggest something of the feeling one gets from Klee's drawings, and there are parts of the longer poem, 'The Fool Saint', which move it powerfully along. Still, is it only perverse of me to find the one poem of return, 'The Only Country in the World Called Canada', the most engaging poem in the book? Here, Beardsley's ellipses, his quick shifts of perspective, and his often heavy irony cohere to create a really marvelous whole. I hope his next book of poetry will find him firmly rooted in that 'only country'; it's where he belongs.

Eugene McNamara continues to consolidate his craft, as the sequence *In Transit*²⁰ reveals. This small book, the first from Calgary's new Pennyworth Press, is a 14-part love poem, and in its shifts and swoops of vision and statement it is effectively evocative. McNamara has long been perfecting his line, and he can now use its breaks and rhythms to energize the language of his real power. His internal rhymes and quick shifts from death to love-making to lonely visions of a circus or a dream—all held within the basic metaphor/situation of a single man moving through airport security—all work

to impress the emotional truth of the love articulated here upon us. *In Transit* is only a pamphlet, really, but it is a good one, worth more than some of the much larger books of poetry under review simply because it is so clearly authentic a song.

Kevin Roberts, in *West Country*,²¹ tends to do two things: tell stories and explore emotional situations. Sometimes he does both at the same time. As he has lived in Australia, Britain and Western Canada, the poems in *West Country* emerge from all 3 landscapes. I find his Canadian poems clearest in their perception of physical place, and indeed some of these are powerful renditions of personality in place. The British poems have to fight against the fact that the landscape being involved is already so poetic. There is one long poem about building a railway across the Australian badlands that is very impressive in parts but doesn't quite cohere as a whole.

Quite frankly, I like Robert's personal poems more than his narrative ones. There are some deeply moving love poems here, poems in which the description of the lovers' physical presence takes on metaphysical emotional overtones. Roberts demonstrates fine control of tone in these poems, as he explores the inevitable difficulties of love with a fresh eye for images and song. The love poems emerge from both the British and Canadian experience, and in each place the language and the details articulated the fitting and proper. Roberts is an emotionally acute poet in these poems of the people he has loved, and they are what makes *West Country* for me.

Rhythms,²² Les Arnold's second book of poems, marks the arrival of another talent who bears watching, I enjoyed this book; its rhythms reached me. The epigraph is from Robert Creeley, and a poet could choose worse progenitors: 'It is all a rhythm.' Against various forms of stasis Arnold presents the rhythmic shift and play of his vision and its expression, through time, in these poems. *Rhythms* is divided into 3 parts. 'Bloodline' is concerned mostly with family, his father, his children, a family album, and finally the whole family of living creatures, especially those 'extinct/things rising by night/out of a sense of/their own/uselessness'. Arnold's witty sense of metaphor plays through these poems with often exciting results. He also reveals a fine sensitivity to the patterns of sounds in his best poems.

In 'Ancestors', Arnold pays homage to earlier artists. Most of these are visual artists, and the poems are often witty analogues of their work. Again, the only poet he mentions is Creeley, and 'entering' is a lovely little homage to the man. In some ways the last section, 'Rhythms', is the weakest, if only because the poet too obviously parades his 'poet-ness' before us. There are some good lines and stanzas here, too, however, and one jewel, the beautiful and powerful 'pool'. *Rhythms* is by no means a perfect book, but it is, on the whole, a good one, containing a goodly number of poems I intend to visit from time to time.

The idea for *Money and Rain: Tom Wayman Live!*²³ is a neat one: produce a book (and for some extra cash, a cassette recording as well) that is presented

just like a poetry reading, with the poet's little personal introductions to each poem right there on the page. Yes, it's a neat idea, until it has been done. We can thank Tom Wayman for showing us that it's not one of the best ideas for producing a book of poetry that this decade has produced (the cassette, now, that's a different story). It does derive from Wayman's belief that poetry is just another way of talking to people, however, and therefore it is fitting that he is the one to try it. On the page, the introductions tend to get in the way of my reading the poems. A book is not like a reading; the reader can choose his own pace and does not need the relaxation between poems which a poet's patter provides in a public meeting.

But what about the poems? Well, the poems range from middling to very good Wayman, and the latter is moving and powerful poetry indeed. In the latter category stand the 'Chilean Elegies', poems which positively glow with an awesome and tender energy; the language comes to rhythmic life as if it absolutely must reach out and touch us with its truth. This sequence of seven poems is a testament to the power of humane speech in the midst of human violence.

As if the power of the 'Chilean Elegies' had endured beyond their creation, the final poems of complex losses and loves continue to move with an assurance missing from the earlier parts of the book. They make a fitting close to Tom Wayman's third book of poems for people, a book that wins the reader despite its faults with its honesty, humour and humanity.

In a completely different vein, Steve McCaffery's *Ow's Waif*,²⁴ like this earlier *Dr. Saddhu's Muffins*, is a relentlessly experimental volume, revealing the writer's craft and sensitivity to language on every page. *Ow's Waif* contains poems 'translated' from the other texts in English. Since the original texts provide all the 'content' necessary, in the sense of a prepared word-supply '(a "supply-text")', McCaffery is freed to exercise his 'creative concentration on the invention of the poems' forms as verbal fields free of presupposed or prerequisite rule structures or grammar and syntax.' The results are of great theoretical interest.

McCaffery notes that the poems in *Ow's Waif* are meant to be read aloud, that they will, in fact, work only if read aloud. I found this to be true, and greatly enjoyed so reading them. The repetitions, the rhythms of the poetic line, the complete break with normal syntax, all effect a kind of rough and entertaining music. Somewhere behind this music I hear Gertrude Stein's voice, but these poems are McCaffery's and they are of the seventies. *Ow's Waif* won't have a wide appeal, but I enjoyed it, not least because its formal qualities suggest a poetic mind whose range is far wider than these poems reach.

Born in South Africa, Jeni Couzyn made her name as a poet in England and now teaches at the University of Victoria. According to her Canadian publisher, J.J. Douglas, she intends to become a Canadian citizen. Her most recent book, *Christmas in Africa*²⁵ (published in Britain by Heinemann), deals with her past

experiences and imaginative life in Africa and Britain.

Christmas in Africa is divided into four parts, each of which reveals another facet of Ms Couzyn's protean talent, 'Christmas in Africa' is a series of loosely narrative reminiscences, structured on a long flowing line. The poems are powerful, especially the fascinating familial power politics of 'The Punishment'. In 'Inside Outside' Ms Couzyn plays some remarkable variations on themes derived from science fiction, most specifically the stories of Brian Aldiss. I particularly enjoy the attempt because I too love sf, but I feel some of these poems are too specifically tied to their originals to truly become the poet's own. This is not true of the title poem of the section, however, a subtle exploration of varying states of perceptual being, nor of the two giant poems.

Some of the weakest, as well as some of the strongest, poems of the book are found in 'The Needy'. The weak poems are too obvious in their political statements, too rhetorical, but 'My Lantern of Darkness' and especially the savagely brilliant 'Leper Rejects the Missionaries' are as fine as anything in the book. The final section, 'Graces', is full of strangely effective, though sometimes overly-Romantic prayers of praise to the living body of the world. Taken together, the poems of *Christmas in Africa* offer a reader a wide range of entertaining and provocative poetry. Welcome to Canada, Ms Couzyn.

*The Lost Surveyor*²⁶ is Stuart MacKinnon's fourth and strongest book of poems. It incorporates both the best qualities of his early short poems and the structural gains he made in the long poem, *The Intervals*. This new book's greatest success is the success of its longer poems, poems which make *The Lost Surveyor* a powerful announcement of talent achieved.

The Lost Surveyor is really two collections in one: the title section, and a self-contained, blackly comic series of 'takes' on the concept of 'Africa'. In the first part, MacKinnon writes as a man who knows too well the suffering of existence, yet can say 'the blissful headache goes on'. It is with the perceptions such a blissful headache provides that he can see so feelingly in poems like 'The Hand', 'Frontenac Axis', 'Escalation', 'Halfway There and Back', and 'Kohoutek'. Within these longer poems, the rich ambiguous vision which MacKinnon now writes from is fully articulated. Their power emerges from the personal emotional specificity that achieves universality because it is so clearly spoken. 'Frontenac Axis' provides a good example of MacKinnon's poetic: it begins with a description of the Precambrian Shield, shifts to personal observation of river and lake, then to the person with the poet; at this point he philosophizes upon the emotional situation, moves to a vision of loss of friendship tied to land as real-estate only, and finally to his conclusion: 'I watch people now/and hardly ever look at views.' That this statement is also a declaration of MacKinnon's mature poetic is made clear by the majority of poems in the book.

'Afric' is different in tone from the first section; it is a satiric mélange of all the Whiteman myths concerning 'those Englishmen/who have the urge to survive/impossible hardships' in their imperial drive to own all they have

surveyed. Thus Tarzan and Jane, Livingstone and Stanley, even Bwana MacKinnon, let alone the crew of the starship Enterprise (every Whiteman, when seeing a place for the first time, has 'that feeling of power/as if he was creating as he looked' before naming the 'new' place), exist together in this dark continent of the mind. "Afric" is a dark comedy of imperial manners, full of hate and pain, and compassion too. The whole of *The Lost Surveyor* should establish Stuart MacKinnon as an important voice in contemporary Canadian poetry.

Much of the most exciting poetry appearing today is concerned with process to a degree seldom seen in earlier literature. Poets such as Daphne Marlatt, bp Nichol and Steve McCaffery immediately spring to mind. The final three books under review all come from writers dedicated to the exploration of various forms of process; and they all speak volumes of lovely energy.

Fred Wah, one of most rooted poets in Canada, has for years now lived and written out of his home in the Kootenays. *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*²⁷ is his latest exploration of his rooted ground, a series of poems which engage a number of Indian Rock Paintings. Talonbooks has done its usual beautiful job of book-making with this marvelously visual book: there are 42 prints of individual pictograms, with a poem of Wah opposite each one.

Wah's poetry in this book is richly allusive and sensuously ambiguous. The reader is continually challenged by the poems to meditate upon the pictograms; yet the poems, elliptical and chthonic, are not simply reservoirs of passionate attention—they demand such attention themselves. Wah's awareness of language, the large language of pictographic speech as well as the historically allusive language he writes in, is present in all these poems, the forward, nearly-concrete ones and the subtle little narratives.

Pictograms from the Interior of B.C. is one of the most beautiful books I've seen this year. Both a demanding and entertaining series of poems and pictographs held in exquisite tension on each opened page, it engages a reader on many levels simultaneously. I can't imagine how anyone could fail to derive pleasure from this book.

Penny Chalmers' *Trance Form*²⁸ announces in its very title that it is going to be 'a real changey trip' for the reader. As indeed it is. P.K. Page's perceptive Introduction (which steals all the best phrases a reviewer might have come up with) points out how the title prepares one for metamorphoses, multiple meanings, homonyms, puns and complicated word play in the tradition of middle eastern poetry. Moreover, the book delivers on these promises in a concentrated, energized manner that can lift you off your feet.

Trance Form is divided in four parts. The first poem in 'Matter Mater' is a list of 'trance' words, all transformed by the very act of listing them together with their new prefix. It announces the book's plan, its act. The rest of the section records, in chant, song, and almost ordinary verse, Ms Chalmers' perception of the everchanging lived world she inhabits. 'Moon Phase' moves to

a more personal recording of felt sexual reality, yet it also renders the sensed shifts of the night world 'out there' as well as 'in here'. 'Familiars' suggestively transforms even those, and 'Bone Poems' make of even the end a process which becomes a mantra for our chants (our chance?).

These poems are not meant to be left on the page: they demand our involvement, chanting and singing them aloud. Thus they ask us to join in the tranceformation they enact. Mystic and mysterious, the language Penny Chalmers knows is an active principle of being, which is changeless only in its infinite changes, for there is always an active trance-formation taking place. *Trance Form* is a delightfully different book of poems.

Roy Kiyooka's massive and marvelously rambunctious *transcanadaletters*²⁹ articulates process as the act of written communication, to friends and lovers and now, to readers who wish to participate. *transcanadaletters* traces Kiyooka's always changing life during the past ten or so years, a life open to the human universe so utterly it is always touching it with love, tenderness, joy and pain. All these emotions and more pass through these rich and lively 'letters'.

transcanadaletters is the largest book of poetry Talonbooks has ever published, a giant potpourri of letters to various friends and others, poems, documents, and photographs. It is Kiyooka's testament to the life he has lived and the people he has shared it with during the years 1966-1975. It is also a joy to read. It proposes that Roy Kiyooka's letters (even heavily revised to remove obviously irrelevant personal notes and to make them even more a poetic speaking) are as much a form of public speech as more obvious poems, and that they speak to the common reader just as most poems today can. I think Kiyooka is correct to propose this, for much of the most exciting poetry today emerges precisely from that impulse to communicate the perceptions of a life in process as they come to the writer. Letters: forms of response to the human universe we all live in, are such communication.

In Kiyooka's case they are anyway. Although he has changed some of these letters for publication, they do, I believe, provide honest glimpses of his life as he has been living it. He does not write simple notes; even the shortest of these letters come across as an attempt to express something of his artistic vision, a vision always in flux and alive to the moment of writing. Thus the letters emerge as personal poetic statements full of verbal chiaroscuro, wit and intelligence, laughter and rage, and always, a caring expressed towards those addressed in the words.

I found the trip through the life these letters document exciting and profoundly moving. Kiyooka's wordplay is delightful in itself (though I know some will find it a bit pretentious—they will be wrong, but so what), but it also continually leads the man to new thoughts, ideas emerging from the play of language itself. The sense of discovery accompanying the reading of these letters seems to be shared with the writer; and this is another aspect of their vitality. His wide reading and wide seeing are always coming through, testifying to a

lively mind and heart speaking with love to and for the world and those within it to whom he corresponds.

He is a large man, the Roy Kiyooka who speaks from one coast to the other, and to us all, in this book, and he contains multitudes, *transcanadaletters* stands for me as one of the most incredibly alive books I have read in a long time.

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20. Eugene McNamara, *In Transit* (Calgary: The Pennyworth Press, 1975), np., np.
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26. Stuart MacKinnon, *The Lost Surveyor* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1976), pp. 78, \$4.95 / \$2.50.
27. Fred Wah, *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1975), pp. 86.
28. Penny Chalmers, *Trance Form* (Victoria, B.C.: Soft Press, 1976), pp. 70, \$5.95.
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