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The Inner Lives of Al Purdy and Earle Birney

We Go Far Back in Time: The Letters of Earle Birney and Al Purdy edited by NICHOLAS BRADLEY

Harbour Publishing, 2014 \$39.95

Reviewed by MATTHEW ZANTINGH

It was eight years ago that I first encountered Al Purdy's poetry in an undergraduate course on Canadian literature, and I distinctly remember thinking, "Yes, here is something I can identify with—I get this poetry." The impression was so strong that I promptly purchased *Rooms for Rent in the Outer Planets*, and I am almost certain that this is the first book of poetry I read from cover to cover. My views of poetry have since evolved, but it was a great pleasure to encounter Purdy, the man of letters, in Nicholas Bradley's edited collection of most of the extant letters exchanged by Purdy with another Canadian luminary, Earle Birney. In the foreword to *Beyond Remembering*, Michael Ondaatje writes "There had been no poetry like it yet in this country . . . here was a voice with a 'strolling' not 'dancing' gait or metre, climbing over old fences in Cashel township" (19). *We Go Far Back in Time* not only gives ample evidence of Purdy's strolling gait in letters, but it also documents the ways this gait developed and the many places and voices which were crucial in this development. In reading these letters, I felt again that sense of "Yes, here is something I get." For the sake of full disclosure, I should say that my attraction to the volume was Purdy, although my admiration for Birney has grown greatly.

Drawing on W.H. Auden's comments on the letters of writers, Bradley suggests

that these documents are "of historical significance," and his observation is correct as these 300+ letters chronicle not only the two poets changing personal lives, critical views of their fellow writers, snippets of cutting self-scrutiny, the importance of Canada Council and League of Canadian Poets' grants to the creation and dissemination of poetry, but they also record the evolving fabric of Canadian literary culture as it grew post-World War II and flourished following 1967 (9). These letters will be a rich source for scholars of either poet, those interested in the material contexts of Canadian poetry in the mid-twentieth, and, as Bradley also points out, "readers of the poems . . . who wish to know more about the lives of the poets and the friendship between them" (30). While some may question the value of *We Go Far Back in Time*, as it is the fifth published volume of Purdy's letters, it is the first collection of Birney's correspondence and certainly offers a new angle on his creative and academic work, his role in the Department of Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia, and his work as a mentor for emerging poets in Canada, including Purdy himself. Moreover, as Bradley points out, the majority of Purdy's letters included in this volume were not published in *Yours, Al*, the largest collection of his correspondence.

Bradley's critical apparatus is a delight to read. He offers a persuasive justification for his volume alongside a concise summary of how the letters reflect Purdy and Birney's changing relationship in the "Introduction." His explanations of methodological and editorial decisions are prudent, striving to make the volume accessible to both the general reader and the English scholar. However, it is in the letters themselves where Bradley's work is

at its best. He inserts the expected editorial comments explaining the material conditions of the letters, postcards, and the legibility of the handwriting/typing in footnotes, but he also includes short biographies of any reference either poet makes to another person in the letter. I found these notes incredibly helpful in providing crucial context for what either poet is saying and for tracing out the web of interconnections among poets, writers, academics, and public figures. The experience of reading the letters and these notes creates a rich sense of the texture of Canadian literature between 1950 and 1987, the date of Purdy's last letter to a then-convalescent Birney. Further, Bradley has also painstakingly cross-referenced the letters with the other published collections of prose and any written work that the poets were working on, completed, and/or published. Bradley's attention to detail is highly commendable and this volume will make future work on both poets far easier.

In reading the book, a few overriding themes emerge that are worth noting in brief. The first is how much Birney and Purdy travelled in later life. Once both were established writers, they travelled frequently across the country on seemingly never-ending reading tours and globally to read and write. Second, the letters offer insight into Purdy's poetic process as it becomes clear that he often needed to travel to find inspiration for his work, that he tended to write in bursts of creativity, and that he was a fierce critic of his own work, revising it heavily. Third, in a helpful appendix of excerpts from Purdy's other correspondence that speaks of Birney, Purdy reveals a very different view of Birney's work from that of letters to his fellow poet. Finally, these comments also reveal the way that Birney himself tends to

be somewhat of an enigma in his letters, preferring to remain fairly hidden unlike Purdy's own uncensored and unabashedly autobiographical style.

The question remains, what is the value of this book for ALECC scholars? Purdy and Birney both have a crucial role in any discussion of Canadian environmental literature in the 20th century, yet these letters may not prove that useful for such a discussion. They certainly attest to Purdy's interest in place, which, somewhat surprisingly, is place in a shifting, global sense as he travels to various locations and describes their history and culture. Although he was closely connected with his A-frame house outside of Ameliasburgh, the letters reveal his own conflicted relationship to this home. For those scholars working on either poet in light of ecological topics, this book may prove useful. Having said that, *We Go Far Back in Time* will be a key resource in continuing to push forward discussions of both poets and their work, Canadian poetry in the second half of the 20th century, and the evolution of Canadian literature more generally.

Works Cited

Ondaatje, Michael. "Foreword." *Beyond Remembering: The Collected Poems of Al Purdy* by Al Purdy. Ed. Sam Solecki. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2000. 19-20. Print.

MATTHEW ZANTINGH is an Assistant Professor of English at Briercrest College and Seminary in Caronport, Saskatchewan. His research focuses on the imprint and impact of nature on culture in Canadian literature. He is particularly interested in the ways it manifests itself in urban nature, imagined environmental futures, and wilderness narratives.