

Advice from Milton Acorn

I

I have forgotten the first time I saw Milton Acorn: perhaps a knowing friend pointed him out to me on Kent Street or University Avenue; perhaps his visit to town had been remarked in *The Guardian* and I recognized him in the Confederation Centre library from a photograph. Perhaps he had even been interviewed on the local television news like the Great Antonio, a Samsonesque strongman who came to the Exhibition Grounds periodically during the 1960s to perform remarkable feats of might like pulling railway cars along a stretch of disused track. (Years later, working on the freight dock of a Charlottetown trucking firm, I learned that several lesser men could perform that Herculean—or Sisyphean—exercise with only the slightest incline to their advantage; but I remained impressed by Antonio and his ilk until the summer's evening I saw the khaki-clad Cuban Assassins, a wrestling tag team whose annual tour of the Maritimes usually took them to the Sportsplex in Sherwood, roll into a Ponderosa steakhouse to replenish the inner man: mere mortals after all.)

Disheveled and bedraggled, Milton Acorn was—in visual effect, at least—as much a “character” as Antonio (or as the altogether tousled Cuban Assassins, for that matter); and if I fail to recollect the first time I saw him, I am certain that I saw him for the last time, in 1981 or '82, across the licensed lounge of the landmark Charlottetown Hotel. Whispering—though not, alas, out of the reverence which some people afforded the People's Poet—I observed his presence to my companions. At that time I had read little more of Acorn's verse than the much-anthologized “I've Tasted My Blood,” and literalist that I was, I struggled futilely to discover the relevance of that

poem—presumably about the poet’s boyhood in Charlottetown between the World Wars—to my relatively comfortable upbringing in the Brighton district of the city three decades later.¹ Even metaphorically, my schoolboy adventures in the “meaner” streets of east-end Charlottetown—King Street and Lower Prince Street and Hillsborough Square, territory inhabited by many of my friends and classmates at St. Jean Elementary School—failed to affirm the poet’s evocation of: “Playmates? I remember where their skulls roll!” (*Dig Up My Heart* 130). (A dozen years later, though, hearing of the death of one of those old friends—Capt. Jim DeCoste, killed while serving with the Canadian Forces/United Nations peacekeeping troops in Croatia—I could shudder at the lines “many and many / come up atom by atom / in the worm-casts of Europe.”)

Maybe I was not sufficiently versed in verse to appreciate Milton Acorn; even today I wince when I read that unguarded passage in Stephen Dedalus’ diary: “Mother indulgent. Said I have a queer mind and have read too much. Not true. Have read little and understood less” (Joyce 248). With more deliberate hindsight, though, I think mostly that where Acorn was concerned I intuitively agreed with Lord Henry’s insight in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

A great poet, a really great poet, is the most unpoetical of all creatures. But inferior poets are absolutely fascinating. The worse their rhymes are, the more picturesque they look. The mere fact of having published a book of second-rate sonnets makes a man quite irresistible. He lives the poetry that he cannot write. The others write the poetry that they dare not realize. (71)

Obviously, Oscar Wilde knew—from the inside out—what he was speaking of. But in all fairness, does that description fit Milton Acorn? Was he *merely* picturesque? *Merely* a “character”? Was he—*is* he—less deserving of serious critical notice than of the sort of tragi-comical notoriety that (to my mind, at least) surrounded him during his later years when he had resettled on Prince Edward Island? Or does the accounting proffered by Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh—by all reports a *character* (at times even a caricature) himself—make a better fit?

The poet is a poet outside his writing as I have often argued. He creates an oral tradition. He does something to people. I am not sure that that something is always good, for it is a disruptive, anarchic mentality which he awakens—and if we pursue him far enough we will be inclined to agree with Plato that the poet is a menace. (“From Monaghan to the Grand Canal” 256)

Certainly Milton Acorn’s verse has an anarchy-arousing aspect to it: its strident political overtones, for example—issuing from not just a card-carrying

but a card-*waving* brand of Marxist-Leninist ideology—tend not so much to provoke thought as merely to . . . *provoke*. He admits this much himself in a poem like “To a Goddam Boss”:

You proffered me soft compliments when my hand was out
for cash . . .

After all, the workers’ due . . . We can’t live on air.

Then you looked at me with a musing stare

Saying, “Milt, why be so rash?

This world’s not going to crash.

Why not stick to your lovely love poems

Which would be welcome in the proudest homes?

The trouble with you’s you don’t just jibe—you slash.”

If your system was so secure, why were you afraid?

Asking for a gentler social criticism?

Today, as for essentials, I’ve got it made;

Don’t bother coming back with your sad wisdom.

How can you buy me now in these times when it’s sung

How I ripped lyric fragments from the devil’s bloody tongue?

(*Jackpine Sonnets* 34)

But possibly that “disruptive” potential was always there, even “outside his writing.” For even out of the immediate literary limelight, Milton Acorn seemed hard not to *notice*; in fact, I am sure that long before I knew the man to see him, I actually *had* seen him, perhaps as early as the early 1970s on one of his visits to the Island, reading *The Globe & Mail* (or so I now suppose) on one of my weekly pilgrimages to the library to devour *The Hockey News*. And I suspect that most anecdotal recollections of Acorn by nostalgic Charlottetonians would take the form of a vignette involving a steeling figure making its distinctive way past Rogers’ Hardware or Holman’s or the Old Spain—the poet out to cadge a ride somewhere from the good-hearted men at City Cabs (to whom he dedicated his volume *Dig Up My Heart*). I wonder, though, if I am the only graduate of UPEI’s class of ’77 who noticed that Acorn, on stage in flowing academic regalia to receive an honorary degree (former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker gave the actual Convocation Address), observed the dignity of the occasion by complementing with red high-top basketball sneakers the People’s Poet medal hanging around his neck.

To my mind, then, the notion of Milton Acorn as writer of poems was—and to some significant extent still is—inevitably complicated by my perception (and, I think, the general public reception) of him not simply as a

person who wrote poems but as a *persona* of sorts. Yet, just as inevitably, I have found myself turning and returning to Acorn's poems in recent years as I have begun to make my own commitment to writing poems—and have thus begun to reflect on the implications and the complications of being a Prince Edward Island poet. Whatever that means.

II

Whatever that means, indeed. When I, Island-born and -bred, scan the literary landscape of the only place I will ever call “home,” I feel almost as if that gravitational pull, that centripetal force that draws uprooted and transplanted Islanders back in droves every summer has turned centrifugal, leaving me not even in transit toward but in dizzying elliptical orbit (sometimes near, sometimes far) around a foreign-seeming world. I feel displaced—almost lost. Or, more accurately, I feel literally at a loss for words: that is, for the words and the forms and the euphony—for the *poetry* that must surely belong to that place. Whether walking my boyhood streets of Charlottetown, its motley of public building and coffee shop façades changed and changing yet still so much the same, or standing stock-still among statuesque great blue herons on the russet sandbars of the south shore, whether racing along the pot-holed TransCanada for the first boat (in the good old days . . . before the Fixed Link) or sluing along a graveled byway like the Brothers Road, named for my maternal grandfather's grandfather, I am aware of—and have indelibly imprinted—that sense of place specificity articulated so suggestively by D. H. Lawrence:

Every continent has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality. (“The Spirit of Place” 5-6)

Of course, as a translation of *genius loci*, “spirit of place” originally alluded not to the peculiar atmosphere, ambiance and associations related to longitude and latitude or any other coordinating identifier but to the tutelary spirit—the *guardian*—of that place (and *thus* of that place's “spirit” in the sense that it is popularly referred to); and not just metaphorically but perhaps literally the poets and the fiction writers and the dramatists of a particular place are its “guardians”—the observers and the preservers of its past or its present, and possibly (allowing for the ancient concept of poet—

vates—as synonymous with “prophet”) the predictors or the projectors or even the predicators of its future.

Where, then, are the literary guardians of my place? Where—more specifically—are the *poets* whom aspiring Prince Edward Island poets might look to as precursors for their own desire to sit like W. B. Yeats’s bird upon the bough of Island life and register “what is past, or passing, or to come” (“Sailing to Byzantium” 194)? For better or for worse (depending on who you ask), Lucy Maud Montgomery has inscribed a very specific version of “Island life” in her enduring (and I think endearing) novel *Anne of Green Gables* and its various sequels and spin-offs. As a poet, however, Montgomery hardly inspires emulation as even her best-known piece of verse—“The Island Hymn”—endures primarily as a result of Faith McKenney’s rendering of it (in the tradition of “My Old Kentucky Home”) before the Gold Cup & Saucer harness race every August:

Fair island of the sea,
We raise our song to thee,
The bright and blest.
Loyally now we stand,
As brothers hand in hand,
And sing “God Save the Land”
We love the best.

I memorized those lines in grade school—along with the words to “Farewell to Nova Scotia” and the Newfoundland sea shanty “Jack Was Every Inch a Sailor”: an obvious regional bias to our learning. But the only piece that I can recall which resembled an actual *poem* was John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields”—composed by a Canadian (we were reminded yearly as Remembrance Day approached) but still not in any way exemplary of poetry’s capacity to speak both to us and about us.

That is not to say that there have been no poems written on or about PEI by Islanders: in fact, both *The Poets of Prince Edward Island*, an anthology published in 1980, and its sequel, *The New Poets of Prince Edward Island*, published eleven years later, testify amply to poetic activity on the Island. Yet one effect of surveying that exact activity underscores what may be the crucial dilemma for the latter-day Islander with a poetic bent. For, the inevitably uneven “quality” of the selections aside, these collections seem to emphasize how *very* few Islanders, including those with entire volumes to their individual credit, could (or would) claim the writing of poems as a *vocation*—as a true and primary *calling* in life, an *essential* part of their

identity—rather than as a purely pleasurable avocation. In fact, no doubt contrary to editorial intentions, anthologies like these document not so much the flourishing of poetry on the Island but rather the utter absence of a poetic “tradition”—the virtually negligible role that poetry has played in the Island cultural landscape over the past two hundred years.

The reasons for this absence are surely various and complicated. But I think that one simple explanation may be found in—or behind—a piece like Montgomery’s “The Island Hymn”: that is, in the “ethic” that it evidently emerges from. For as much as *Anne of Green Gables* may lament, as social historian David Weale has argued persuasively (“No Scope” 3-8), how the Presbyterian culture which prevails in Montgomery’s Island experience allows “no scope for imagination,” Montgomery’s verse itself seems firmly rooted in the very conventions of the hard-working, hard-praying society which her red-headed heroine would so blithely subvert. And yet as even those songmaking farmers Larry Gorman and Lawrence Doyle—celebrated products of Irish Catholic culture on the Island²—reflect, the Presbyterian ethic of Montgomery’s Cavendish may be only a pronounced version of the general temperament of a people whose way of life, historically premised on strenuous labor on the land and on the sea, has not generally invited the cultivating and the harvesting of subtle poetic sensibilities. Perhaps Oscar Wilde knew—once again—what he was speaking of after all when, during his visit to PEI in 1882, he held forth upon the importance of “Decorative Arts” in everyday life: “we should strive to make our own age a romantic age,” he declared to the restless crowd gathered in Charlottetown’s Market Hall, advocating by way of attention to architectural detail a valuing of “the joy and loveliness that should come daily on eye and ear from a beautiful external world” (“Decorative Arts” 156-57).

Indeed, as one newspaper account of his lecture intimates, Wilde might have guessed from “the redolent smells of stale butter, eggs and cabbage” that awaited him in the merely functional market building that his message would be delivered in vain; and the exasperated remark offered from the floor by one *attentive* member of the self-distracting (and ultimately unconverted) audience that “two thirds of the young men of Charlottetown were rogues” (“Oscar came last evening . . .” 3) may offer insight into yet another—and perhaps more distinctly intrinsic—reason that the “decorative art” of poetry has had virtually no foundation on the Island. Undoubtedly, the impatient reaction to Oscar Wilde related to his flaunting of “aestheticism”

in its own right; probably, though, it had even more to do with his unabashed banking (international banking, no less) on personal notoriety—his hardly caring to discriminate between message and messenger—which would have been so much at odds with the social phenomenon prevalent on PEI that David Weale devotes a chapter to in his wonderfully observant book of Island codes and customs, *Them Times*: that is, the communal stigmatizing of so-called “Big Feelin’” which (until recent years, at least) served as governor on the ego-fueled engine of social pretension . . . or even of modestly vaulting ambition. As Weale describes it, this “tyranny of egalitarianism . . . produced a powerful disincentive to exceptionality of any kind”:

If you showed any serious inclination to rise above your station or do things differently, you were liable to feel the cold hand of community disapproval pulling you back down to where you belonged. And, if you persisted in your presumption, there would be many just waiting to see you crash so that they could celebrate your fall. (*Them Times* 57)

Looking back not much more than a decade, I can see close-up the workings of that “governor” in my allowing my barber to believe, summer after summer *for five years*, that I was unemployed—“on the pogy”—rather than letting on that I was in graduate school; and heaven help us if my teammates on the Servicemaster fastpitch softball team ever got wind—then *or now*—of the “rarefied air” of my “other world” beyond the leftfield fence. Looking back much further and wider, I can also imagine how for generation upon generation the stigma of “big feelin’” has arrested the development of virtually *every* form of original artistic expression on the Island—not just poetry, but fiction and drama, painting, dance, music . . . with the possible exception of the craft of the local fiddler. Thinking of just one example of that singular breed—my mother’s uncle “Pearl” Brothers, who so indulged his passion for fiddle-playing (and its attendant temptations and vices) that he lost the family farm—I am inevitably reminded of John Tanner’s description in Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman* of how “The true artist will let his wife starve, his children go barefoot, his mother drudge for his living at seventy, sooner than work at anything but his art” (61). Even adjusting the lens for hyperbole, I find it hard to locate such sanguine *commitment* to the art of poetry on Prince Edward Island: and from my perspective, the self-evident paucity of “big feelin’” poetic artists to serve as imaginative forebears—models, exemplars, guides—represents the dilemma of the *aspiring* PEI poet today.

III

Even in steadfast Avonlea—Lucy Maud Montgomery’s fictionalized Cavendish—the romantic orphan Anne Shirley finds in the person of Diana Barry a “kindred spirit” (a phrase immortalized in the long-running stage musical version of *Anne of Green Gables*) to validate her belief in her “poetically” re-imagined world: the White Way of Delight, the Lake of Shining Waters, Lover’s Lane, Willowmere, Violet Vale, the Birch Path. . . . How, though, does the would-be Island poet, with no kindred spirits, no ready tradition to engage with—to speak to, to respond to (whether to embrace or to reject)—even begin to imagine Prince Edward Island as valid or viable poetic territory? What is the effect of this relative isolation? On the one hand, the poet need not worry on the local level about T. S. Eliot’s corollary concerning tradition and the individual talent:

It is true that every supreme poet, classic or not, tends to exhaust the ground he cultivates, so that it must, after yielding a diminishing crop, finally be left in fallow for some generations.

. . . Not only every great poet, but every genuine, though lesser poet, fulfils once for all some possibility of the language, and so leaves one possibility less for his successors. (“What Is a Classic?” 125)

On the other hand, if immune to any such “anxiety of influence,” the Island poet may yet suffer from a deficiency of healthy and helpful *influence* pure and simple—or perhaps of reassuring *confluence*, its collateral relative. In either case, the symptoms are the same and may be recognized in a refrain familiar to virtually anyone who came of age on PEI in the 1970s. Who could forget how night after night without fail at 9:30 (or was it 10 o’clock?) the rarely varying “Canadian Content” lineup on the Island Hit Parade on CFCY radio—The Stampeders, Edward Bear, April Wine, Bachman Turner Overdrive—gave way without apparent irony to the evangelizing strains of “Back to the Bible! Back to the Bible! Back to the Word of God!” heralding the start of *The Family Bible Hour*? Who could forget how night after night for year after year Pastor Perry F. Rockwood insisted that with our help he would build his new Family Bible Center (in Don Mills, Ontario, as I recall) “without style and without debt”?

Without style and without debt, indeed. Or, causally, vice versa—for how, without accumulated artistic debt, can a hopeful poet with a conspicuous regional identity confidently display a refined artistic style? When even Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney (as one example) acknowledges how the

self-assured lyricism of a poet like fellow rural Ulsterman Patrick Kavanagh “gave you permission to dwell without cultural anxiety among the usual landmarks of your life” (“Placeless Heaven” 9), where can the innately dubious Prince Edward Islander look for similar poetic license (as it were) to have faith in the familiar, in the local, in—*truly*—one’s home and native land? What voice of authority—and of authenticity—might entitle the upwardly yearning Island poet to test newly-fledged wings over the virtually untilled fields and uncharted seas of life on PEI? As the opening lines of “I, Milton Acorn” suggest, the answer seems obvious—or obvious enough:

I, Milton Acorn, not at first aware
That was my name and what I knew was life,
Come from an Island to which I’ve often returned. . . .
(*Dig Up My Heart* 148)

Certainly, more than a decade after his death, Milton Acorn—as both People’s Poet and Governor General’s Award winner the only Islander to achieve significant national recognition for poetry—prevails as the very *symbol* of poetic expression on PEI, with both a yearly festival and an annual poetry prize named for him. Given the absence of a poetic *tradition*, Acorn’s posthumous prominence in the contemporary literary scene (to the degree that such exists) on the Island might even be described in terms of one of his more intriguing Island-based poems: “The Figure in the Landscape Made the Landscape.” In fact, while reflecting his literal engagement with Island history and especially with landlord-tenant tensions and friction during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this poem—set in “Pre-Confederation, pre / Any moment you might wish to be in or not”—may actually provide an apt metaphor for Acorn’s own wary awareness of the poet’s tenuous “tenancy” on PEI. Imagining a painting of a beleaguered but resolute farmer, he writes:

. . . He’s never worked long
Anytime in his life with his head always down.
Always straightened for thirty seconds every five minutes
To scan the landscape for any strange object,
And as a vacation for maybe five seconds
Bathing in its beauty like it was his own sweat.
Islanders to this day retain this habit.
(*Dig Up My Heart* 152-53)

Echoing the sentiment not only of the ultimately suspicious and fractious “I, Milton Acorn” but also of “If You’re Stronghearted,” another poem first

collected in the same volume, the Governor General's Award-winning *The Island Means Minago* (1975)—“If you're stronghearted put your ear to the ground / to hear the lilt and cut of soft voices / discussing enemy moves without fear” (*Dig Up My Heart* 150)—“The Figure in the Landscape Made the Landscape” surely resonates as more than merely a Marxist-Leninist reading of social and economic history on PEI.

One way or the other, even as a single poem it clearly (or clearly enough) speaks proverbial volumes about the extent—the *limits* as well as the range—of Milton Acorn's legacy for Island poets. As for the former, Acorn undeniably commands respect for the passion of his convictions—social, economic, literary: all political in their own ways. Presumably, his unequivocally stated belief that “The Craft of Poetry's the Art of War” (*Jackpine Sonnets* 29), made manifest in the defensive-aggressive stance of so many of his poems, reflects the combative spirit of the poet as private *person*, and as such may have served as his invocation to the Muse, allowing him in his early manhood off-Island to break the code of poetic silence which (I expect) he internalized during his Island boyhood. (“When my look leaked out / thru the moisture of youth,” he writes in “Autobiography,” “afraid they'd discover / it was really me, / I threw out a confusion of words” [*Dig Up My Heart* 187].) But the anger—frequently righteous, occasionally self-righteous—thus associated with Acorn's public *persona* as poet-about-town actually seems somewhat at odds with the more temperate “humor” that I at least associate with the Island; and in this respect his polemical pronouncement of poetry's bellicose nature, illustrated throughout “The Figure in the Landscape Made the Landscape,” but presented with particular emphasis in his heavy-handed interpreting in the final line of the very contour of the land—“every part of it was laid out for war” (*Dig Up My Heart* 153)—may fall short as a reasonable manifesto for present and future Island poets.³

Yet in its attention to *detail*—the topographical accuracy of “the landscape rolling like a quilt,” for example, as well as the recognizable actuality of Islanders' in-bred furtiveness—“The Figure in the Landscape Made the Landscape” inevitably recalls “The Island,” a poem from a decade-and-a-half earlier which, unlike many of Acorn's Island-specific poems, speaks not just *about* but also *for* PEI in a potentially exemplary way:

Since I'm Island-born home's as precise
as if a mumbly old carpenter,
shoulder-straps crossed wrong,

laid it out,
refigured to the last three-eighths of a shingle.

Nowhere that plough-cut worms
heal themselves in red loam;
spruces squat, skirts in sand;
or the stones of a river rattle its dark
tunnel under the elms,
is there a spot not measured by hands;
no direction I couldn't walk
to the wave-lined edge of home.

In the fanged jaws of the Gulf,
a red tongue.
Indians say a musical God
took up His brush and painted it;
named it, in His own language,
"The Island."
(*Dig Up My Heart* 52)

Written not long after Acorn had sold the tools of his first trade—carpentry—to commit himself unconditionally to the craft of poetry, this poem shares with so much of his verse an unabashed lyrical impulse: both the need and the capacity of the poet to locate his subject in intimate relation to himself. In this respect, it is no less bona fide an example of Acorn's voice and vision than even a signature piece like "I've Tasted My Blood." Yet in inscribing the Island not as expedient background for the poet's politics but as the experiential foreground of the poet as native Islander, it also self-evidently differs from many of his later, more contentious Island-grounded poems. In fact, "The Island" seems to exemplify Seamus Heaney's analysis in *The Place of Writing* of how poets most persuasively engage with place. Deriving metaphors from the schoolbook definition of *work*—"to work is to move a certain mass through a certain distance" (36)—and from Archimedes' claim that "he could move the world if he could find the right place to position his lever" (19), Heaney observes:

In the case of poetry, the distance moved through is that which separates the historically and topographically situated place from the written place, the mass moved is one aspect of the writer's historical/biographical experience, and each becomes a factor of the other in the achieved work of art. The work of art, in other words, involves raising the historical record to a different power. (36)

Unquestionably, Milton Acorn has found in "The Island" the right spot for his lever. Bringing into compatible focus the calculating eye of the carpenter-

turned-poet and the nostalgic eye of the Islander-in-exile writing *home* (“writing home,” as it were), he not only evokes but provokes—*sets into motion*—the “spirit of place” with an effect that not even the Great Antonio could match.

IV

Still, that is not to suggest that in epitomizing Milton Acorn’s accomplishment as a poet writing “about” PEI “The Island” somehow invalidates the “instructive” potential of his more characteristic less moderate poems for current Island poets-in-waiting. Indeed, while such a poem may alleviate “cultural anxiety” about the Island as poetic subject, and thus may affirm any confluent, like-tempered appreciation of the Island’s “vital effluence, vibration, chemical exhalation, polarity,” Acorn’s greatest influence may actually and simply involve his commitment to the writing of poems—Island-centered or not. Whatever else might be said of Milton Acorn, he obviously recognized his vocation—his *calling* in life—and he responded literally wholeheartedly. “I shall be Heartman—all heartmuscle!” he writes in the closing, title poem of *Dig Up My Heart*: “Strongest and of longest endurance / I’ve acted” (212). Reading and re-reading those lines, and looking back over the years to the last time I saw Milton Acorn in that hotel lounge in Charlottetown, I feel more than a twinge of regret for my puerile irreverence: if only I had known then as I do now my own aspirations as a Prince Edward Island poet—again, whatever that means.

If only, instead of whispering to my companions across a table strewn with glasses and peanuts and bottles of Schooner beer, I had gotten up the nerve to approach the People’s Poet and ask his guidance. I wonder how Milton Acorn might have responded: what encouragement, what words of wisdom—or just of common sense—might he have given me? Perhaps he would have held forth about how “The Craft of Poetry’s the Art of War.” Perhaps he would have kept his counsel simple: “Assorted mottos are ‘I call ’em as I see ’em.’ Another immortal Irish word is ‘Irish poets learn your trade / Sing whatever is well-made. . .’” (Wright, n.p. [1]). Or perhaps that born-and-bred Islander who has written poems *after Auden*, *after Brecht*, *after Hikmet*, would have mused at greater length on the legacy of that “big feelin’” poetic exemplar from another island (one renowned for its poets) and offered this . . .

ADVICE FROM MILTON ACORN

after Yeats

Island poets, ply your trade,
Take the measure, test the grade
Of lumbering life beneath your feet,
Lower Queen or Grafton Street,
A journeyman's job without blueprint,
Still in need of a level squint
Or a plumb bob weight strung along
A jackpine stud shored-up strong.
Next look east across the bridge—
White blossoms on a blood-red ridge!—
And reckon what hard labor yields
To a heart-shaped spade in muddy fields;
Or to rope-burned hands, salt-encrusted,
Their daily catch of lines entrusted
With hope that we, inscribed in verse,
Remain inimitable Islanders.

One motto that Milton Acorn probably would not subscribe to is the official one scrolled beneath the Prince Edward Island coat of arms: *Parva sub Ingenti*—"the small under the great." Picturing that coat of arms, however, and its widely visible version on the Island flag—a trio of diminutive oaks representing the province's three counties sheltered by a larger, acorn-laden tree emblematic of the Mother Country—I can retrieve from my uncatalogued store of boyhood memories two other "mottos" that might inform his legacy. For certain, the commemorative medallions distributed during the Fathers of Confederation centenary celebration in 1964 imprinted on an entire generation of PEI schoolchildren the grammatical archaism "They builded better than they knew." Allowing that more than three decades later my mind may be more inventive than retentive, I also associate with that memorable year a verse from an obscure poem, "Lines Written for a School Declamation" by early New England belletrist David Everett, from which budding poets of that generation—the literary successors of Milton Acorn—may well take heart: "Tall oaks from little acorns grow."

NOTES

- 1 Apparently Milton Acorn spent some of his early years first around the corner and then just up the street from where I grew up. I thus assume he has my neighborhood in mind when he refers disparagingly to “Boughton” in his autobiographical prose narrative “My Life as a Co-Adventurer”: “To this day I never use the name of the Boughton district of Charlottetown as a noun. I use it as an adjective; and the noun is ‘vermin” (*Jackpine Sonnets* 90).
- 2 Folklorist Edward D. Ives has provided thorough accounts of the life and the times of each of these men in his books *Larry Gorman: The Man Who Made the Songs* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1964) and *Lawrence Doyle, the farmer poet of Prince Edward Island: A study in local songmaking* (Orono, ME: University of Maine, 1971).
- 3 Taking a cue from Patrick Kavanagh, Seamus Heaney makes a distinction between mere poetic “craft”—the learned “skill of making”—and poetic “technique” that may begin to illuminate both the authority and the liabilities of Milton Acorn’s poetry in this regard:

Technique . . . involves not only a poet’s way with words, his management of metre, rhythm and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality. It involves the discovery of ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate: a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art. (“Feeling Into Words” 47)

At times Acorn’s poems suffer from a surplus of “his stance towards life”—suffer from the poet’s apparent disinterest in accommodating the “definition of his own reality” to the engaging artifice of a well-crafted poem. Obviously, though, this dimension of Acorn’s poetry both demands and deserves more detailed discussion than the present occasion allows.

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