

SALUTING GEORGE WOODCOCK ON HIS 80TH BIRTHDAY

David Watmough

I HAVE KNOWN GEORGE WOODCOCK since the mid-1960s, which is to say, for the best part of thirty years. Not surprisingly our conversation, indeed our friendship, has evolved considerably since that time. In those early days there was much chat and reminiscence about the literary life of London which we had unknowingly shared fleetingly when our time in the city briefly overlapped.

The area we mutually knew is called *Fitzrovia*, that part of North London embracing such literary watering holes as The Fitzroy, The French Pub, and The Wheatsheaf. These pubs saw the patronage of the likes of the poet Louis MacNeice, an eccentric gay couple, the Scottish painters McBride and Calhoun, the Indian dancer, Ram Gopal, Tambimuttu (the editor of *Poetry London*), and the crime-writer and critic, Julian Symons — not forgetting such energetic literary lushes as Nina Hamnett and Sylvia Gough.

These nostalgic and somehow always humorous discussions were wont to end with his wife, Ingeborg, upbraiding us and insisting we return to the demands of the contemporary world, of international problems and the challenges of our Canadian present!

From the vantage point of hindsight I can now say I saw George then primarily as an exciting participant in a somewhat offbeat literary demi-monde that had always fascinated me. A world I had only observed latterly and from the fringe, whereas George had been in the thick of the fray from its inception.

I was thus delighted and thrilled to encounter here in Canada the man who had experienced a literary rat-run I had found glamorous in its positive prospects yet scary in its melancholy roll-call of boozy lives and plummeted reputations. After all, it wasn't simply a matter of the George Orwells, Dylan Thomases, and Anthony Powells. There was a lot of failure to be sniffed in that linoleum world of artsy London pubs during the Blitz and through the immediate postwar period.

Here, possibly bloodied but certainly unbowed, was the fabled George Woodcock, known to me by reputation as anarchist standard-bearer, uncompromising pacifist

and intrepid editor of the doughty magazine *NOW* which I read eagerly as an undergraduate. Moreover, this legendary literary figure from the cold and damp of a blighting austerity era could shrug off those ugly vicissitudes meted out to him for being uncompromisingly at odds with a wartime authoritarian state.

It is no exaggeration to say — though I have never told him to his face — that I found him a well of hope. That hope, that uplifting sense of buoyancy, is always present when I am in his company.

The George Woodcock who has wittingly backed losers, encouraged the most equivocal of literary talents, who has laboured unstintingly for those in need in desperate areas around the planet — aware that that is often where corruption blatantly flourishes — remains a reservoir of undiluted idealism.

IF I HAVE ADMIRED SOME of my literary acquaintances to excessive degree (I think primarily of W. H. Auden and François Mauriac) in the context of George Woodcock I am on safe ground. For here is a man who himself puts no trust in princes and who is keenly aware that all human idols have feet of clay. You hero-worship this man at your peril! My long-term observation convinces me that all excess of this kind is anathema to him.

Another false perception of my friend. I think that not a few younger Canadian literary lights see him essentially as a nice, bookish old gent, who in the balm and beauty of British Columbia, enjoys sitting back in a comfortable (if not quite *rocking*) chair and, with an adult beverage to hand, shares social pleasantries with visiting literary luminaries, while exchanging mildly malicious gossip.

Doubtless he does. Doubtless he loves British Columbia and its perennially threatened “autocephality.” Doubtless he is equally one of the most generous in encouraging youthful *littérateurs* from across the country, and doubtless he is indefatigable in his covert actions for writers in dire need.

But that is only a fragment of the picture. The historical background to which I have alluded, spills certain light on Canada’s most prolific serious author, its most savvy critic, who is also a skilled and patient editor, and — as incredible bonus this — a remarkably resonant poet.

In sum, from the pacifist and anarchist Woodcock who carried such unpopular causes manfully through the dour years of bombarded London, has evolved the professional man of letters of truly renaissance proportions from whom we all benefit today.

The genesis of the doughty warrior who gives praise for accomplishment as prodigiously as he devastatingly deflates the spurious, is further evidence that such critical attributes were honed in one of the most exigent of all writing schools —

that populated by impoverished free-lancers in the literary London of the 1940s and 1950s.

Our veteran of foreign literary wars is thus no instant-coffee phenomenon. On resuming his maple-leaf heritage and settling to the writer's task on these further Pacific shores, he started straightaway to address a dynamically different literary canvas with a pen blessedly informed by a richly substantive past.

BUT HERE I HAVE to give pause. This man of whom I write gives fresh meaning to the Latin tag *sui generis*. For this is no account of a stereotypically British immigrant dutifully exchanging his union jack for a maple leaf. To the contrary, Canada's literary elder statesman is the fiercely anti-nationalist enemy of mindless chauvinism — from whatever source.

Nor is he one of that prolific brigade of university-nurtured authors in Canada whose interests are limited by a campus boundary. No college environment could ever satiate the gargantuan Woodcock appetite for diverse knowledge and the communication of it. Certainly he numbers professors among his closest friends but rarely in session with him have I not heard some cool comment about academics. His campus pals tend to be the kind who do not take themselves with risible seriousness.

It would be equally misleading to describe our senior scribe exclusively as a journalist — even if he is no stranger to Grub Street in articles and reviews, and long ago learned to be a skilled and successful script writer for CBC radio and television.

Any description of George Woodcock which derives only from the subjects he has written about will always prove a misnomer. One may absorb the contents between the covers of his books but still find the personality of the author elusive.

For beyond this poet and playwright, biographer, historian, anthropologist, and travel writer, is the sum of these and more. A literary *presence*, who in the aggregate is perhaps best defined simply as an *Homme de Lettres* with the specific connotation that the French phrase connotes. Even in the English sense it is not too grandiose to describe him, then, as Canada's primary Man of Letters.

I do not intend to be fey in admitting to a perception of my old friend as a *badger*. However, I refer specifically to that creaturely image evoked by *The Wind in the Willows* variety of *Meles meles* rather than the smaller *Taxidea taxus* native, like Woodcock himself, to this continent.

If I emphasize the precise *genus*, it is because I speak of a man who is the opposite of slovenly in his natural history and botany. Indeed, he is as much the foe of the slipshod in this context as in any other.

I once casually referred to the 'chickweed' I harvested in the neighbourhood

for my voracious canary. George was quick to pounce. "I think you are referring to groundsel, not chickweed." He was one hundred per cent accurate. Then he invariably is with such matters.

But if Woodcock *the man of letters* is reminiscent of Kenneth Grahame's badger in his old-fashioned courtliness and sage evaluations, he can from time to time exhibit other qualities where there is no sense of *badgerdom* at all!

When aroused or enraged by anything sham or scurrilous, it is the ferocious stoats and weasels of Kenneth Grahame's "wild wood" that spring to mind!

There is yet another mammal he summons up for me — one lone representative of which I discovered far from its natural habitat. A few miles from the Mexican border there lives in the happily feral environment of the San Diego zoo, a Scottish wildcat. This native of the Highlands is a rare animal with a reputation for being wholly untamable. A truly untrammelled creature, it springs to mind whenever I read the particular Woodcock who inveighs against some unfair and boorish adversary who runs afoul of our gentle author's skills in ferocity.

There was the case of the unsuspecting anthropologists of the University of Victoria whose professional snobbery animated an attack upon a brash interloper who had the temerity to publish his opinions about the Indians of the westcoast.

There was the importunate Vancouverite who cast a slur at George's professional integrity by suggesting he had colluded with a reviewer in Central Canada. (I myself wrote in complaint of that particular offensive passage to the magazine in question, but needn't have bothered.)

Our dexterous dualist took good care of all that and the academic snobs and the local journalist were all duly despatched by the "Scottish wildcat" who once more "found the jugular" with his usual precision.

I tingle with pleasure whenever I observe the Woodcock epistolary weapons unleashed with the cleansing force of *Drano* on the cant that discolours many of the literary debates appearing in our few magazines and even fewer correspondence columns.

SO MUCH FOR THE ADVERSARIAL figure. I must now address the paradox of someone who is truly a pacific and reconciling figure, too. One of the extraordinary features of the *Woodcockian* enterprise is its absolute refusal to bow supinely to fashion and thus embrace either the literary chic or the necessarily politically correct.

I have referred to the *British* Woodcock, the one extant before a return to a native land — when he stuck to his lonely anarchist and pacifist guns, when even the radical Left supported an Erastian and militaristic alliance of the western democratic states against the totalitarian ones of continental Europe. So alliances

have changed, as have populist opinions about the nature of war — but to the true individualist such as Woodcock the *VOX POPULI* is as dangerously illusory now as it was then.

Only I think today that our protagonist would be attacked more for his positions on literary matters than necessarily for his political and social ones. So that his poetry would be more likely dismissed as unfashionable than his trenchant warnings against the excesses of centralist federalism or his loving affirmation of Helvetian democratic patterns.

His metrical poems are surely regarded as heretical when placed under the scrutiny of the North American Poetry Inquisition with its iron clad criteria of poetic orthodoxy. But to me they carry the perfume of rebellion and Orwellian freedom like few others I read. In fact I could scarcely have undertaken this testimony of friendship and appreciation were it not for the opportunity to refer to his poem “Ballad for W. H. Auden,” which is beginning to be progressively anthologized across this country.

But for the most astute if brief commentary on these particular matters I refer the reader to Al Purdy’s Introduction to Woodcock’s *Notes on Visitations: Poems 1936-1975*. Purdy’s are lovely words.

When I began this tribute I was very aware that I could but hint at the sheer diversity of this most literary yet reticent of men. So I shall merely nod towards the letter-writer, the pamphleteer, playwright, and visual arts authority and concentrate on a few more personal references about a very private person wedded, incidentally — but I think significantly — to a very private woman.

Purdy, in that introduction, says of his friend: “He writes books like other people breathe . . .”

True. Yet it is not the *quantity* of what he has written, (although that is what invariably preoccupies the media) but the *depths* he is able to vouchsafe the multiplicity of his interests. The pace of the prose, however much of it there is, never ceases to be measured and considered.

He occasionally smiles with his words but he is never frivolous. I think George Woodcock constitutionally incapable of superficiality. Yet his eyes twinkle behind those spectacles when, with a grin, he focuses a corrosive sense of humour on some hapless charlatan or phony guru.

There have been times when I have taken issue with his political conclusions, but never for one moment with the probity with which he has arrived at them. I don’t think George Woodcock uses polling booths, but if he did it’s doubtful we would ever enter the same one. Yet in spite of my obsession with universal suffrage, I invariably feel perilously close to the motivation that keeps him resolutely away from the hustings.

In comparable vein, we might disagree about many aspects of Christianity yet I am always left with the impression when such subjects as life and death surface

between us that religion, as poetically expressed in the felicitous liturgical language of historic Anglicanism, seeps in his bones even if it doesn't take pride of place in his head.

LET ME CONCLUDE WITH a Woodcock role that he might even deny but of which I have long been a beneficiary. I refer to his persuasive power as a conversationalist. Or should I say argumentalist? I have never attended a lecture by him but I count him my most significant teacher of cosmic history. He has succeeded in arousing my concerns about our fragile and threatened planet when the romantic rhetoric of anthropomorphic, zoologically ignorant, environmentalists has left me wholly unmoved.

This tenacious man of well-honed convictions has managed to push my prejudices apart and allow the light of other places and communities — so remote from the bourgeois realm I inhabit — to penetrate my Celtic obduracy. In sum, he has lent me his eyes and ears and made me a gift of his history. Can one man give more to another?

IMPOSSIBLE THINGS BEFORE BREAKFAST

Greg J. Paulhus

Nothing rhymes with orange
so how could you write a
poem about an orange? You couldn't
so I'm not even going to try.
Why would anyone bother
doing something that can't be done?
Something like writing a poem
about an orange; it's impossible.
Why would you do something impossible,
especially before a decent breakfast.
So I'll write about a peach,
that is easily within my reach.