

# DESMOND PACEY

*1. by Fred Cogswell*

**D**ESMOND PACEY was born in Dunedin in New Zealand, but at an early age his mother, widowed in World War I, returned to England where he attended school at Nottingham. Before he could complete his studies, she emigrated to Canada and married a man who ran a small farm near Hamilton, Ontario. As a result of this unsettled upbringing and his days as a lonely farm boy, Desmond Pacey developed, I feel, one of the cardinal ambitions of his life, later to be splendidly realized, that of being a member of a large family and of sinking permanent roots in the life of a community.

Desmond Pacey was a bright boy, fond of reading, and his mother determined and distilled into him the idea that there was a better life than farming, that this life was to be achieved by academic prowess, and that to support it financially, scholarships and prizes had to be won. Scholarships and prizes were won, and Desmond Pacey attended the Universities of Toronto and Cambridge and on concluding his courses found himself a professor, first at Brandon College, Manitoba, and, after 1944, at the University of New Brunswick, the institution with which his name is principally connected.

By that time, the goals of his life and the road to them had become habits that were to stand him in good stead for a life-time. The first impression Desmond Pacey always gave both students and colleagues was one of energy and enthusiasm. He went through the corridors of the University of New Brunswick whistling.

His sustained energy and good spirits were often a marvel to us less buoyant colleagues, but we strongly suspected that they were rooted in the security and peace of a happy marriage and a rich family life which to his credit he worked as hard to preserve as he did at anything else.

Nor were his non-academic interests confined to the family. He participated wholeheartedly in community ventures, and his strenuous dancing and singing enlivened the social gatherings of which he was fond. Until the last few years of his life, he found time for soccer, cricket, and tennis, and was always to be found in attendance at the University's athletic events. Sometimes he could be found, too, although he was always modest and reticent about it, in the pulpit of a local church, for, like Northrop Frye, he was an ordained minister of the United Church of Canada.

As a teacher, Desmond Pacey never apologized or tried to explain the importance of literature; it was as self-evident to him as the beat of a heart or the pound of a pulse. And in a very short time he had the best of his students thinking as he did. His own life had been enriched by his perception of a growing and developing tradition, and he took it for granted that the teaching of literature ought to stress a broad humanity based upon sincere expression rather than upon intricacies of form. He took a personal interest in his students, was proud of their achievements, sustained them in their failures, and corresponded with many of them until the time of his death.

Nowhere did his respect for literature and his intrinsic modesty and shyness appear more patent than in his attitude towards his own writing. He wrote a novel, which in my opinion contains much honest and attractive realism derived from the circumstances of his life on an Ontario farm, but he never tried so hard to have this book published as he did to forward the work of other writers whom he admired. His short stories were of a high standard, and his children's verse was charming in the manner of Dennis Lee's more advertised *Nicholas Knock* and *Alligator Pie*, but he spoke seldom, if at all, about these accomplishments.

As a department head, Desmond Pacey functioned in two eras — the era of the absolute head and the era of the departmental servant, the chairman of committees. I have always felt that his actual intentions and achievements in both roles have to some degree been misunderstood in some quarters of the University of New Brunswick and the Canadian academic community as a whole. I think two traits in his character occasioned these misunderstandings. The first is that he so identified himself with his work that any attack on it seemed to him to be a personal attack upon himself and he sometimes responded in kind. Further-

more, the very identification of himself with the immediate institution he served, whether it was the English Department, the School of Graduate Studies, or the whole academic side of the University of New Brunswick, led others outside those institutions to conclude that he was being an "empire builder" when it seemed perfectly clear to him that he was merely performing meritorious service. Often, too, at Learned Societies and other meetings, when he forced himself to talk — as shy men sometimes do — he overstated his case and appeared brash to those who did not understand the emotional pressure and difficulty underlying the very fact of speaking. The cardinal test of an administrator is in his ability to pick able men and to keep them happily and fruitfully employed. For this, Desmond Pacey deserves as high a rating as any one I knew. The U.N.B. English Department over the past quarter century has lost few professors who joined it. It is a happy place to work and has few, if any, equals in Canada in the degree of freedom, harmony, and mutual respect that exists among its members.

Desmond Pacey as a department head will always be noted for at least two solid and far-seeing achievements. The first is the degree to which he pioneered and enlarged the scope of the study of Canadian literature at U.N.B. The second is his decision, in conjunction with the University of British Columbia, to embark upon the Ph.D. programme in English, thereby breaking the monopoly on that degree in Canada held previously by the University of Toronto, an institution which at that time did not look very favourably upon Canadian studies. In both these actions, he helped to prepare the way for the spate of interest in Canadian literature that has now overtaken nearly every university in this country.

As an administrator, Desmond Pacey served the University of New Brunswick as Dean of Graduate Studies, Acting President, and Vice President Administration. He did his work ably and unstintingly. However disappointed he may have been when he was not made full-time president, he gave his successor unstinting loyalty and resisted attractive opportunities to go elsewhere. He died, at it were, "in harness".

As a scholar, Desmond Pacey was not, I felt, a great seminal mind with a deep intuitive grasp of pattern in the midst of complexity, but he did have more than a usual degree of foresight. He, before any one else, was beating the drums for the greatness of Frederick Philip Grove, hailed Grove as a major novelist. Before any one else, too, he acclaimed Irving Layton as a major poet. His work on Leonard Cohen's *The Beautiful Losers* shows an acumen and insight in dealing with complex material that are at odds with the opinions of those who are inclined to dismiss him as a mere "literary historian". Throughout the past thirty years his

has been a voice of sanity in Canadian criticism, and he has resisted such “bandwagon” attempts to make one aspect of literature the whole of literature as the cult of mythopoeic poetry, Northrop Frye’s “garrison mentality”, the Canadian followers of the Black Mountain school of poetry, and the work of such thesis-makers as Margaret Atwood and D. G. Jones. Before any one else, although he now has plenty of company, he turned his attention backward to an important second look at the unjustly neglected major poets of nineteenth century Canada.

Always Desmond Pacey kept in his mind the vision of a great good place, a kind of repository for tradition and all the grace and beauty embodied by it, a place to which he turned for restoration when summer holidays and sabbatical leaves permitted, and to which, I suspect, he planned to go when he had retired. That place to him was Cambridge University, seen through the halo of pre-War graduate school memories, and reburnished by the unstinting courtesy and hospitality he received there while a visitor in more recent years.

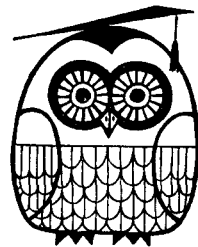
It is difficult to be objective about a friend, about a man who in so many ways moulded me into the man I am. I did not always agree with Desmond Pacey, and the effect of his excessive personality upon me was at times abrasive, but these things seem as nothing now compared to the many kindnesses, often unsolicited, I received from him. Thinking back through the years of our long relationship, a trivial, almost ludicrous incident comes to mind. I am glad now that I did not drop the ball but made the catch at the boundary in a cricket match against a pick-up side from Mount Allison University. This enabled Desmond, a rather poor bowler, to dismiss the opposing team’s most dreaded batsman. Had I dropped that ball, would I still have been in a position to write this memoir? I think so — but our friendship for a spell would have been severely

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tested. Desmond was a keen competitor. He did not go easily to his grave, and I for one hope that all the traditional beauty of Cambridge University is but a shadow to the glory of where he is now. I hope, too, that it will give him scope for activity, for an idle Desmond Pacey would be absolutely unthinkable.

2. *by Roy Daniells*

WE WERE RETURNING from Switzerland and, stopping in Florence, walked through the cypress-shaded Swiss Protestant cemetery where names familiar to literature are carved with loving care as memorials. That afternoon, arriving in Rome, we found a cable with the news of Desmond Pacey's death.

It was characteristic of him that, a few weeks earlier, he had written to us, not concealing the seriousness of his diagnosis but putting the best possible construction on it and hoping to continue his work during the next months and years. The news was therefore an unexpected shock; it did not seem possible that so continuous a line of effort and achievement could thus come to a close.

Only later did one realize that his customary courage and confidence had never failed, even in the presence of the last enemy, had been strong enough to comfort the very friends from whom he had the most right and need to expect sympathy and support.

In this he was acting true to form. I had first met him when he was an English student and I was a very junior instructor in Victoria College, Toronto. We soon had friends in common, and ties among members of that group have endured for over forty years. They were ties of common interest in common subjects — English, History, the Canadian past and the future of Canada — and they were predominantly intellectual interests, without the bias of partisan politics, religious dogmatism or personal ambition.

In due course Desmond won an award that took him to Trinity College, Cambridge, and I moved on to the Department of English in the University of Manitoba. We kept up a correspondence and, to my great joy, he was appointed to fill a similar position at Brandon College. We had now a professional relation that flowed as smoothly as our old friendship. Desmond's pervasive saving grace,

that triumphed over all difficulties in those lean and academically desperate years of the early 1940's, was his inimitable combination of cheerfulness, courage and candour. Every difficulty — of climate, communication, curriculum, accommodation, conflicting views of colleagues — each was faced with the same imperturbability, the same energy, the same resource and the same confidence that the standards of Toronto or of Cambridge could be established and upheld on the Western Prairies. These were difficult years, happy years, years of accomplishment. In many of his students Desmond awakened a love of literature and a life-long gratitude.

He left us in 1944, when he became head of the English Department in the University of New Brunswick. There were, however, many opportunities of keeping in touch in addition to correspondence. The learned societies met every summer, in one major centre or another, and for days on end there was that kind of personal and academic interchange of news and views that acts as blood stream in the body of our widely dispersed Canadian community. One had often the double pleasure of seeing both Desmond and Mary and sensing the harmony and mutual stimulation of that most fortunate union.

During these years the work was being done that led to his *Creative Writing in Canada* and his *Ten Canadian Poets*. Their critical significance has already been dealt with elsewhere. The tactics he used, in terms of objectives, of method and manner, were no less important. He drove at essentials. His first book was a milestone placed beside the road that led perforce to a comprehensive literary history of Canada. This enterprise early claimed him as an associate editor, a role he never ceased to fill. At the time of his death, a greatly expanded edition of the *Literary History of Canada* was going to press. To his soundness of judgment all those associated with it are eager to pay tribute.

His greatest influence, across the years, has been in the example he set. His choice of subjects was always close to central problems of the culture of this country and his patient investigation of such figures as Grove and Roberts was aimed at establishing the dominant characteristics of our diversified heritage. Consistency, reliability, integrity, centrality — one searches in vain for the adequate characterization of his life-long endeavour.

His great virtue as a friend and as a colleague was his utter dependability. One knew where to find him and one could count on his support in times of difficulty, his advice in perplexities, his sanity and common sense in scenes of confusion and the invariable warmth of his response to one's needs.

I shall never forget our last meeting, which extended over several days, on his

own ground of the University of New Brunswick. What shone out was the respect and affection felt for him by his colleagues and others associated with the campus. As a teacher, an administrator, a champion of academic values in the community, it was clear that his influence was widespread. The same qualities that had made him, forty years earlier, stand out among honours students were now fully apparent. Centrality without ostentation; warmth without sentimentality; heartiness without affectation; robustness of judgment without loss of fine distinctions; an instinct for essentials without any forcing of issues.

## MAIDEN AUNT

*Anne Corbett*

Seems all right if the going down  
to die happens at home where blood  
and relatives can dandle the emptying  
body safe from the alien click  
and snapping shut of clinics.

The trappings of an event  
bring in the family. I am an  
event in passing, lying here not  
wearing the proper colour for the time  
of day, not stressed and strutted for  
the occasion. Everything I was set out  
to do is done: every possession accorded  
my right to stay within the family. It's  
knowing one's place that's important, from six  
feet down to three stories up, the length  
and width of the boundaries. This business of  
dying is only a process, a sort of making room.

It's all right knowing where and with whom  
I'll lie. I have my place, relinquish  
nothing, but then I've reconnoitred for years.