PURDY: MAN AND POET

George Bowering

IN HIS INTRODUCTION to another poet's book,[1] Al Purdy speaks of some possible superficial descriptions of Canadian writers. He says that he himself might be thought of in that mode as "a cynical Canadian nationalist, a lyrical Farley Mowat maybe." It's a disarming suggestion, and a useful one. We should always remember that any single tack we take on a large writer is going to be at least somewhat superficial, and we should especially remember such a thing in Purdy's case, because he makes a habit of surprising a reader or critic with unexpected resources or interests. So I ask you to be careful, too, with my superficialities, such as this one I'll have to begin with:

Al Purdy is the world's most Canadian poet. Doug Fetherling, a young American refugee who has written that "Al Purdy knows more about writing poetry than anyone else I have ever met, heard or read about,"[2] goes on to remark on something I once told him in conversation: "Purdy cannot help but take a lot of Canada with him. He is even so typical looking, as George Bowering points out, that everybody in the interior of British Columbia looks exactly like Purdy." I would like to tell you what Purdy looks like, at least the way this B.C. boy first saw him, but I'll have to begin with an event a half-year before I pressed flesh with him the first time.

It was a day or two before Christmas 1962. Along with another young poet I was visiting the fine old bookstore of Doug and Hannah Kaye, across the street from the Vancouver Public Library, when the mailman arrived. Among the letters and packages of books there was a long cardboard box with the words "Books" written all over it. But when it was opened (and it was opened before anything else) it was seen not to contain books but rather, in a Seagram's 83 bottle, some dark purple fluid with heavy sediment swaying at the bottom. We

novices were informed that this was a famous Canadian literary libation, Alfred W. Purdy's home-made wild grape wine. With perhaps assumed alacrity, the Kayes drank some, and with some trepidation the novices did too. The taste was our first of Prince Edward County, and the purple-stained mouth lasted for a couple of days.

The following summer I somehow convinced the University of British Columbia English department to invite Purdy to give a reading, and I was finally to meet the robust poet I had been reading for a few years. Once again I was with the Kayes. Purdy stepped out of Doug's funny little car, all height and elbows, hand extended for mighty grip. There he was, the small-town Canadian, about six feet two inches, hair shaved up the sides, slightly grey and combed straight back by fingers, or sticking out to the sides, sleeves of an unstarched white shirt rolled up above the elbows, an old tie in a tight four-in-hand, but loosened and bent to one side, and funny old-fashioned sunglasses, in the days before funny old sunglasses were fashionable.

With him he had two ramshackle suitcases. One contained a few bottles of home-made Purdy wine (it had been full when he got on the train in Ontario), and the other was stuffed with underwear, socks, a portable typewriter, an electric frying pan, and five hundred sheets of paper with unknown letterhead. He was planning to stay in a tiny house he had title to east of the city along the railroad tracks, and write a novel about his days in Montreal among the poets and mattress-makers of the Fifties.

During the train ride across the country, he had experienced one of those Purdy experiences, half-alarming, half-humourous, that ineluctably find their way into his poems. He had been surprised by a woman who sat beside him, her mouth chewing on nothing, and asked him over and over again whether he took drugs. It turned out that she was a madwoman being taken to Vancouver against her will, and frantically attended by her sister, who also tried to take care of the madwoman's frightened children. The most meaningful miles passed while the woman slept with her head on the poet's large shoulder, and he slept too, but

> the madwoman
> shakes me softly awake again and, "Yes, I do take drugs,"
> I say to her and myself. "I get high on hemp and peyote biting
> at scraps of existence I've lost all the smoky limitless marbles
> I found in my life once lost long before Vancouver —"
>
> I've forgotten that child, his frantic scratching and biting

for something he wanted and lost — but it wasn't marbles.
I remember the Mountie waiting, then the conductor's
"Vancouver next! Vancouver!"
(*The Cariboo Horses*)

That afternoon was much taken up with the drinking and spilling of wine, and talk about the poetry scene. Purdy's first full-size volume of poems had come out in 1962, and my review in *Tish* would be among its generally hospitable welcomes. It was the first of many meetings with the man, all of them characterized by the presence of booze and cheap cigars, and lots of loud raillery.

He was born forty-five years earlier, in 1918, in the village of Wooler, Ont. It is hard to find the village now, though there is a sign on the 401 highway indicating the Wooler Road, the settlement having nearly disappeared as so many little Canadian birthplaces do, as Ameliasburgh, where the Purdys now live, is trying to. He was born on December 30th, which sees him a son of Capricorn, the half-goat, half-fish, four days after the rebirth of the sun, *Sol invictus*, a fertile influence. He was also the son of Alfred Purdy and Eleanor Louise Purdy, descended from United Empire Loyalists, those American refugees who became the most Canadian of Canadians.

He went to school at Dufferin Public School in Trenton, Albert Collegiate in Belleville, and Trenton Collegiate Institute. He says that he has been writing poems since he was thirteen, and on the dust jacket of *Poems for all the Annettes* (1962) he is quoted as remembering "Wilson MacDonald coming to the Trenton Collegiate to read poetry and being solemnly conducted into his presence as the school poet."

Like several other Canadian poets he spent some time in the R.C.A.F., and while in the service wrote lots of poems. It was while stationed in Vancouver that he got together $200 and had five hundred copies of his first book, *The Enchanted Echo* (1944) printed for him by the Clarke-Stuart printing company. Three hundred and fifty of them were later destroyed by a company warehouseman, and Purdy has said that he hopes the other one hundred and fifty will be lost eventually. Unfortunately there are some copies in Canadian university libraries. In an interview by Raymond Fraser published in the latter's mimeographed magazine,[3] Purdy refers to his verse of the Forties as "crap." He says further, "I thought it was a combination of Shakespeare and Francis Bacon and Christopher Marlowe." The same interview presents the largest view we have yet of Purdy during his twenties. It is a picture of the non-com being busted periodically for his recurrent misadventures with women. However it is during

this time that he married one of the strongest subjects of his poetry, Eurithe Mary Jane Parkhurst. They were married in the home country, Belleville, Ont., on November 1, 1941. They have one son, Alfred.

In Vancouver the young poet was working in a vacuum as far as the craft went. He tried out the Canadian Authors' Association, but then as now that organization had precious few real authors in it. He got a dollar each for more than forty poems published on the poetry page of the Vancouver *Sun*, edited by Joan Buckley. Also during these years of war, when a married airman received no great stipend from the government, he earned movie tickets by winning advertising jingle contests in the Vancouver *Province*. But he was still a decade away from his first real poetry.

THE TEN YEARS between the end of the war and Purdy's second book, *Pressed on Sand*, were the stuff literary legends and much of Purdy's later poetry are made of. There are many references to periods when the man rode freights across the country, ran a little taxi business (and presumably bootlegging) in Belleville, and worked in mattress factories on the Coast and in the garment district of Montreal:

> The days fled into smoky weeks
> and he learned to operate
> one machine after another
> learned them all
> how to gauge
> the "spock" of a needle plunging
> hard thru cloth beside his hand
> adjusting the varied rhythms of flesh
> with the balanced shifting stance of
> a boxer anticipating
> his steel opponent
> (*The Cariboo Horses*)

The poems that deal with the mattress factories reveal the main "politics" in Purdy's poetry. One story goes that he was bounced from the factory in Vancouver because he was involved in trying to introduce a union, the Vancouver Upholsterers Union, there. One of his best-known poems, "Percy Lawson," deals with that scene in 1954, and makes the connection between Lawson the honest

fighting man of the gold-toothed grin, and Purdy, the man who wants to make poems with the same honest tenacity:

> And what's the contract news from Watt who
> if I said what I thought he was would
> sue me for damn near everything
> would sue me right now in a poem and
> get a judgement for one lying lyric
> I can't write
> (I'll be damned if I write)
> in praise of Watt
> in praise of
> practically nothing
> (*The Cariboo Horses*)

Purdy is not a "labour poet," and he is not sentimental in the bourgeois sense about the working class. (He is listed as politically connected with the NDP in *The Canadian Who's Who* of 1964-1966.) He is deeply and habitually allied with the underdogs in a country and a world that allows bosses to ignore or suppress the underdogs. So Purdy is seen with the mattress workers, with the Tsimshian Indians of the B.C. interior, with the Sons of Freedom on their freedom march to Agassiz prison, with the Eskimo hunters of Baffin Island. Along with Milton Acorn he has kept at least some of the nation's poetry at the service of the working man and in the lists against middleclass meatballism. While Purdy has supplied the robust humour without which the prole would be unrecognized as the authentic Canadian item.

But Canadian as he may be, Purdy does not go along with the idea that mindless work in itself builds strong character or a godly nation. All during the postwar time he was looking for a way to get away from hiring his muscles out, and a chance to be first of all a writer. After a long litigation he received a disappointingly small inheritance from his mother's estate. He built his own A-frame house from scrap lumber, and he set to work, writing words for money. He wrote radio and television plays (and read other people's plays for the fees from the CBC), short stories, articles for magazines such as *North* and *The Beaver*. Since his acclaim of recent years, appearances in the Canadian edition of *Time* and the rotogravures, he has had poems commissioned for the popular magazines, a rareity in this country. A recent example is his "Lament for Robert Kennedy" in the *Star Weekly*. Today Purdy describes himself as writer, without any self-consciousness. He hasn't done any physical work for pay since the end of the Fifties.

Meanwhile his reputation has grown steadily since the middle of the Fifties, so that he is generally considered top man in the popular or public areas of Canadian (read Toronto) writing circles, having taken over that position from Irving Layton, who held it from *Red Carpet for the Sun* till just a few years ago. The reviews of his three thin books of the Fifties were generally favourable, and most of them welcomed a new talent to the scene. This was the time when Raymond Souster in Toronto and Louis Dudek in Montreal were bringing about great changes in Canadian poetry, principally through their publications that let the readers in the rest of the country know that there were poets here listening to each other and to voices from the United States.

In 1960 Purdy received his first Canada Council fellowship, and typically he decided not to live off the money in Spain or France, but rather to head for the Cariboo, which he had visited while he was in the air force. He had all kinds of grandiose ideas about his project, such as writing an opera about the life of the Indians, and it was around that time that he was often reported to be writing an epic based on Haida myths as described in the works of Marius Barbeau published by the Canadian government. Very Canadian stuff. All that has surfaced from that time are Purdy's poems about the northern interior of British Columbia, but they are enough to pay off the Canada Council investment.

After that he returned to Montreal, which by this time was crawling with poets of every persuasion. A long line of magazines, mainly mimeographed, introduced such newcomers as Milton Acorn, Seymour Mayne, Henry Moscovitch and dozens of younger bards, to a city that already had to make room for Layton, Dudek, Scott, and many others who had already come to the attention of readers in other parts of the country. Dudek had started a series of books by young Montreal poets, the first of whom was a McGill student from Westmount, Leonard Cohen. Poets were even reading from greasy pages in bars and coffee shops.

Purdy himself is a little confused about his various sojourns in Montreal, maybe because of the heady atmosphere full of poets. In his introduction to Acorn's selected poems, he says that he first met Acorn in 1958 in Montreal, and three paragraphs later says that they talked and partied together all through the winter of 1956-1957. In any case the two poets, brought together by Layton, hit it off, and spent a lot of time arguing, sometimes in poems such as Purdy's "House Guest." In 1959 they used some of Purdy's wages from the mattress factory, and a mimeo machine that Acorn rescued from anonymity somewhere, to produce the first issue of a soon-to-be-forgotten poetry magazine called *Moment*. Soon

thereafter Acorn took the magazine to Toronto with him, and began editing it with the young Toronto poet, Gwendolyn MacEwen.

In 1962 Purdy published two books of poetry. The first was *Poems for all the Annettes*, published by the Contact Press, the most important publisher of poetry in Canada at that time. The Contact Press, which died a couple years ago, did not print books in great numbers of copies, but it produced the largest early collections of such poets as its founders, Layton, Dudek, and Souster, and others such as D. G. Jones, Milton Acorn, Margaret Atwood, Gwendolyn MacEwen, John Newlove, and Alden Nowlan. The list is too long to do it credit here, but Canadian university libraries that did not sign up for a complete run are now kicking themselves in the PR8000 stacks. Being added to the Contact list did nothing for Purdy's plans to live off his writing, but it did signify that he would be among the poets given serious attention in this country.

The other 1962 book was perhaps not as significant, not as interesting, and certainly not as successful. One suspects that the poems, at least some of them, may be pieces left after paring of the Contact book. *The Blur in Between* was set by hand, illustrated with cuts by R. V. Rosewarne, and published by Jay Macpherson's short-lived Emblem Books of Toronto. Emblem Books printed eight titles, Purdy's being the eighth. The only other spoken of much these days is number seven, Alden Nowlan's *Wind in a Rocky Country.*

But *Poems for all the Annettes* had done its job. If Purdy was not now a household word it is only because poetry is not spoken of enough in most households. His poems were now being heard often on radio shows such as "CBC Wednesday Night." In 1963 he won the President's Medal of the University of Western Ontario for the best poem by a Canadian printed in a Canadian magazine the previous year. That in itself was a kind of breakthrough because it is seldom that the medal goes to any poet outside the academic tradition beloved of the three old Ontario universities. Not that Purdy had ever been an "underground" poet. But he had been unusually, bullheadedly individualistic — he knows just about every poet and every poet's work in the country, but he would hesitate about getting too close to one other writer, for fear of starting a coterie. He was a long way from his days in Vancouver when he went to the CAA to try to find another ear. Now he was, as the wide open verses in his new poetry say, his own man. He began to read poems in front of university audiences, and he still wore his sleeves rolled up above his elbows.

Those years of the early Sixties were fertile ones for Purdy; he was publishing widely and the poems were taking on a quality that is necessary for public suc-

cess — a reader familiar with the Canadian poetry scene could recognize a Purdy poem as surely as he could a Layton poem or a Souster poem. It was almost as if some uncanny principle were in operation, providing a sunburst in the poet's energies to make up for the late and sometimes false start he had made.

In any case, 1965 saw the publication of *The Cariboo Horses* by McClelland & Stewart. This was Purdy's first professionally published book, and a sure sign that he had arrived. At this time M&S was the only big house in Canada distributing books of poems widely. Ryerson Press was between early and later poetry policies, and Oxford and Macmillan didn't have very exciting lists. Alfred Purdy was now pretty sure of a major place in Canadian literature, and would now be one of McClelland & Stewart's big four, Leonard Cohen having been entered into the lists. As a kind of confirmation of this idea, the Governor-General's award went to *The Cariboo Horses.*

In *The Canadian Who's Who* Purdy lists his recreation as "travelling," and while that has always been true, it now became highly operative in the poems. *The Cariboo Horses* contains poems set in such Canadian locales as 100-Mile House, Agassiz, Stanley Park, Roblin Lake, Sioux Lookout, Piapot, and Crow's Nest. When asked in an interview[4] if he traveled for his poems because it is "easier to control the elements of a newer, smaller area," Purdy replied, "unless one is a stone one doesn't sit still. And perhaps new areas of landscape awake old areas of one's self. One has seen the familiar landscape (perhaps) so many times that one ceases to really see it. Maybe it's like the expatriate writers, Joyce and so on, who went to foreign countries in order to see their own."

That is surely what happened in Purdy's poems in the summer of 1965. He received his second Canada Council fellowship, and once again characteristically turned away from the traditional European holiday to spend his time among the Eskimos of Baffin Island, collecting the lyrics that make up his most successful book, *North of Summer.* Purdy had always been interested in the Canadian Arctic as something like an emblem of the whole particular Canadian ethos, or of his ideal for the particulars of the Canadian experience, much in the way that the painters of the Group of Seven went north to find visual experiences that would make images for a Canadian art and Canadian character different from the European springs. In fact, *North of Summer* also contains colour reproductions of eight A. Y. Jackson oil sketches of the eastern Arctic made in that summer of 1965.

So Purdy rummaged through his library of Canadiana, one of the most interesting collections of books in the shelves of any Canadian writer, reading all

about his territory before jumping into bush plane and fishing boat with portable typewriter, to make poems filled with the details of a Canadian life usually lost in the vague notions of long afternoons over barren and unmarked land beyond the imaginations of readers in a Toronto dining room. Purdy says in his postscript to the book: "Queerly enough I didn't have the sense of vast and lonely barren distance in the Arctic, even tho it certainly is vast and lonely. Why didn't I? I'm not sure. Perhaps because I looked at things close up, flowers, rivers and people: above all, people. Besides, you'd have a helluva time shoving vast lonely distance into poems."

That is one of the sources of strength for the book, the close-up detail that offers some confluence of imagination between the poet and the reader who hasn't been there. The other source is the book's structure. It is made up only of the Arctic poems, and not all the poems Purdy wrote about the Arctic, either. It is in all ways a book, not just a collection of recent poems.

But the poet does write recent poems, occasional lyrics, and if they are any good they should be collected into a volume. So in 1968 Purdy's third McClelland & Stewart book in four years, *Wild Grape Wine*. Once again the image of the poet on the move is important to the collection. In this case there are signs that *North of Summer* offered to the poet the best kind of design for marshalling the power of his imagination. In the new book we find smaller "books" of poems wherein the poet may be seen alighting in some corner of the land or elsewhere, and joining detailed observations to lyrical reflections in order to provide longer looks at the places and people that make up our land and imaginations. So there are series about Purdy's visits to Cuba, Newfoundland, and the Ottawa parliament, as well as the inevitable lyrics about history and present family drama in his home territory by Roblin Lake.

The domestic scene, if it may be called that in this instance, has always been a counterpoint to the traveling in Purdy's poems. Prince Edward County must be one of the least "progressive" counties in Ontario, or in the whole country. It reminds me of certain half-abandoned farm valleys of eastern British Columbia. I like those places with their crumpled old gray barns, and I think I see why Purdy likes the country around Ameliasburgh. You get there by going through Belleville, the closest city, an ugly little place whose only grace seems to be that it contains liquor and beer stores. You drive over narrow roads of crumbled pavement or rutted dirt, flanked by ancient split-rail fences bordering fields of no great agricultural promise, and none of this time are you aware that you're

on what the map shows to be a sloppy kind of peninsula poking out at the edge of Lake Ontario.

> Old fences drift vaguely among the trees
> a pile of moss-covered stones
> gathered for some ghost purpose
> has lost meaning under the meaningless sky
> — they are like cities under water and
> the undulating green waves of time are
> laid on them —
> (*The Cariboo Horses*)

If you are not delayed by wandering cows, you get to Ameliasburgh in about fifteen minutes, but the burgh is not a grand monument to Amelia, whoever she was. It is perhaps a block and a half long, but most of the buildings appear to be unused, save to support the tin signs that advertise the products of an earlier age. There is a wooden general store that seems to be a post office as well, and that's where you buy a licorice pipe and ask where the Purdys live. You are told about a road up the way that is entirely unmarked because everyone here who can read is already relevant. The last dirt road rides up on a hill overlooking an outsize pond that you suspect is Roblin Lake, and below you is a pair of mud-formed ruts descending to what could be a home-made A-frame. Checking around, you decide this is it when the materials of the Roblin Lake poems settle into their proper places:

> Across Roblin Lake, two shores away,
> they are sheathing the church spire
> with new metal. Someone hangs in the sky
> over there from a piece of rope,
> hammering and fitting God's belly-scratcher.
> (*Wild Grape Wine*)

Yes, there's the spire, reflecting the dull Ontario sun, and if you have the nerve you nose your car down the hill and park it next to the amateurish wooden privy half-obscured by a bush.

There is an expanse of uncut grass and very tall dandelions leading down to the shallow water, and there seem to be objects such as picnic tables or pieces of wharf. It's an emblem of Purdy's disdain for the *House & Garden* Canadian way of life, you might be tempted to say. You remember the rolled-up sleeves and the five-cent cigar, and you just can't help getting comfortable, at least not

if you're a Canadian of enough age to have been brought up rural before getting into the city poetry embroglio.

So you know that inside the slapping screen door the house will be like that, comfortable, and made with straightened nails, a stove that takes up its share of visible space and consumes a woodpile topped with snow during the winter. Purdy taught himself to build as he taught himself to make poems, and the effects are similar — lots of inexpert finishings made up for by the sense of talent and energy, and honest usefulness. The shack, as he calls it, gets more storied visits from other poets than most poets' homes. Inside it, Purdy looks exactly like the pictures in his poems or the pictures in *Time* magazine, or the picture on the dust jacket of *North of Summer* — he is typing with forefingers at a small home-made table of visible nails, hair sticking outward in every direction, wearing nothing but bush-pants with the cuffs turned down, and unlaced canvas shoes, surrounded by a disorder of little objects including snap-on sunglasses, cigarette papers, empty glass lying on the floor, and a Toronto telephone book.

In 1968, Purdy became a very busy man of letters around the country. While *Wild Grape Wine* was published by M&S, across town the House of Anansi printed a new version of *Poems for all the Annettes*, but for this edition the poet revised most of the poems, added some, dropped some, and applied his later rules of punctuation. He also had a number of broadsheets produced, and engaged in a large number of typically robust and anecdotal book reviews. Further, he entered into a busy career as editor. Starting with a selection of West Coast poetry for *Tamarack Review*, he went on to supplying advice and introductions to poets such as young Doug Fetherling, and edited (with introduction) the selected poems of Milton Acorn for the Ryerson Press. He edited one of the most newsworthy books of the year, *The New Romans*, a collection of writings by forty-nine Canadians expressing their views on the United States. In connection with that anthology he made personal appearances all over the country and in the U.S., traveling in better style than he had in the Thirties. At the same time he was editing another anthology of poems, this time for high schools, called *Fifteen Winds*. He is also still providing scripts, dramatic and otherwise, for the CBC.

At the end of the year he and Eurithe locked up the shack and went off to Europe, Purdy's first trip over there since 1955. While there he was of course filling his small looseleaf notebook with poems to fill the travel sections of future volumes. He was also beginning to write a book about Earle Birney, and as soon as he arrived home in Eastern Ontario the news came that he was collecting

poems for a special Dominion Day radio programme. Any book on Purdy is going to be in some way obsolete because he is not a man to wait while you catch up.

> And I walk home thru the night
> invisible to them now
> following damp furrows
> across someone's cornfield
> holding in my head
> a small bright area
> that speaks man
> along with a voice that says
> "so what?"
> while the dead underfoot whisper
> and the land stirs to life
> and nothing is impossible
>
> (*Wild Grape Wine*)

NOTES

[1] Milton Acorn, *I've Tasted my Blood* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1969), *xi.*

[2] Doug Fetherling, "Al Purdy's Recent Poetry," *Quarry, XVIII*, 2 (Winter 1969), 42-43.

[3] "Purdy at 25," *Intercourse*, 9 (October 1968), 9-11. Interview with Raymond Fraser.

[4] Gary Geddes, "An Interview with Alfred Purdy," in *Twentieth Century Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Gary Geddes (Toronto: Oxford, 1969).