

ALAN CRAWLEY AND CONTEMPORARY VERSE

*Prepared by
George Robertson*

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ROBERTSON: A man and a young girl are walking by Second Beach in Vancouver. The time is the beginning of the war, the man is blind, the girl is a poet. The man knows many poets, though he has never written verse himself. His name is Alan Crawley, and he is soon to become the editor of a little magazine called *Contemporary Verse*. The poet is Dorothy Livesay.

LIVESAY: Alan had a little spaniel called Roddie — I think that was his name — and he liked to take him for walks, but of course being blind he couldn't go alone. And I needed walks because I was carrying a baby, so we used to go out arm in arm, he with his walking stick and the dog. We would walk along Second Beach, through the park several times in a week, talking and just enjoying the air and so on. Soon I began to write again, I think under his influence; then I began showing him the poems, getting his criticism of them. He helped me a bit — he tried to make my language more what he called "modern."

ROBERTSON: In those days, there were few places a poet could send his work: *Canadian Forum*, *Saturday Night* (if the poem fitted the required space) and of course *The Canadian Poetry Magazine*, as conservative in its format as in its

contents. Here and there a group of poets would create a magazine to publish their work, but they rarely looked outside their own group. One Easter weekend in 1941, four poets met in Victoria to discuss their plight. They were Floris McLaren, Dorothy Livesay, Anne Marriott and Doris Ferne. That occasion is remembered by Florence McLaren.

McLAREN: Dorothy Livesay said we could start a poetry magazine ourselves. I said, "That's a nice pipe dream." Dorothy said why? Then we began to talk. We knew nothing about the publication of a poetry magazine, we knew nothing about the financial problems involved, but we talked of it. Someone said who would edit, who would be an editor for such a magazine, and the three of us answered together, "Alan Crawley!" Dorothy agreed to talk to him when she went back to Vancouver and tell him of this suggestion, and see if he would consider being the editor if it could be done. We wrote to him of course and explained a bit more, although we had no definite plan then, but I'd like to read the paragraph from the letter he answered because it . . . this was in 1941 of course, at the beginning of the war. He wrote and said: "This is to the conspirators who started all this in spite of the distress of the times and the prospect of unsettled days to come. I feel that the publication of the magazine of Canadian poetry is a worthwhile and a reasonable venture and should do much to help modern Canadian writers, for I know of no other publication that is giving this possible help to writers. I am willing and enthusiastic to do what I can for it." The next step was to investigate the practical problems of financing. We talked to printers here and found that a lithographing process could be used and the cost of the sixteen-page issue would be \$25. We decided that four issues a year would be satisfactory — that would be a quarterly, and if we could sell 25 subscriptions at \$1 a subscription, we could put out the first issue. So we proceeded to sell 25 subscriptions to people who knew nothing about what was going to happen, had our \$25, and published the first issue.

ROBERTSON: Letters were sent to Canadian poets, those with reputations, those without. A young poet in the Maritimes had a few things published: her name was P. K. Page.

PAGE: I was living in New Brunswick at the time, by the sea. It was wartime, and we were in a fisherman's cottage, and I was writing — I think I was probably writing the novel I was talking about a minute ago and had had very little published. And then this letter arrived by pony trap — the sounds of the horses' hoofs coming down the road, and this letter from Caulfield, I suppose it was, where Alan lived at that point. And I opened it and it said he had heard

from Anne Marriott that she had met me, that I wrote poetry and would I be prepared to send in something for Volume One of *Contemporary Verse*. This was a very revolutionary sort of thing to happen because . . . well, to begin with, there weren't poetry magazines much in those days — this was the dim dark ages — and people preferred to *not* write poetry rather than to write poetry, I suppose, if they preferred anything. It wasn't a thing you talked about very much and certainly nobody ever asked you for a poem. So this was quite exciting.

ROBERTSON: Alan Crawley is now 81, his voice is still youthful, his step firm. His blindness dates from 1933 — the result of an illness. Before that time he was a successful corporation lawyer. After the illness, he learned Braille and came west and began to feel, hear and say poetry, because poetry was life to him. He sits now in his home in Victoria, his head lowered, his eyes watchful as he listens to a question and then talks about his days as editor of *Contemporary Verse*.

CRAWLEY: You know, we were all perfectly unskilled in the art of bringing out a magazine. I had a few people who knew we were doing this and they sent some letters to writers in different parts of Canada, and I had a stack of MSS from Mrs. McLaren, Dorothy Livesay, Mrs. Ferne and Anne Marriott to start with. I wrote a few letters and was very frightened that we were not going to get enough subscribers to sell a decent first issue, or even to have the material to make up this issue. But I remember one morning in my mail I got manuscripts from P. K. Page, Earle Birney and A. J. M. Smith, which added to the others, and I thought now we can start. But I wasn't at all sure how much we could afford, nor how much there should be in the first issue; so I cut a pack of cards to see what number came out, hoping that it wouldn't be a king because that would be 13, and I turned this pack up and drew out a seven (which had been through my life a rather lucky number). So I got seven poems together, seven writers' poems together, and put them in the order in which I thought they should go into the first issue, and sent it off to Mrs. McLaren to deal with.

McLAREN: We simply did it in the hope that the contributions would come to Caulfield to Alan Crawley, and his wife Jean (who was never listed as a member of the committee, but certainly was one of the hardest working members the committee had) read the selections, read the poems to him; those which he wished to go over more carefully he put into Braille so that he could go over them later. And then when he had made his selection for each issue, he sent that by mail to me in Victoria, and I typed the dummy for the printer.

ROBERTSON: The first issue was mailed to 75 subscribers. In his Foreword, Alan Crawley said that "truth and beauty are not all told, that there are many writers of our own time who can speak to us in words and images and forms that interest and appeal; and that for most of us their writings are hard to come by." Those were days, unlike the present, when what was new was not automatically considered good or important. The contents of the first issue were described by the *Globe and Mail* as "experimental." The *Vancouver Daily Province* more generously said: "The younger poets of Canada, chiefly those who wish to break away from the binding tradition of their elders, have made for themselves a new outlet for their thoughts." And, best of all, Northrop Frye in *Canadian Forum* said: "If you buy this little pamphlet you will get wit, satire, music, imagination, and where else can you get all that for two bits?"

LIVESAY: Because Alan's sole interest was poetry and modern poetry, and because he knew a lot of it, we felt that he knew what he was talking about. He never told us, you know, change this, but he would just say: perhaps that's a little redundant, you know, just casual things. But actually the strange thing about Alan, and no one's really talked about it . . . I suppose it is just by chance, but there must be at least seven Canadian women poets who went to him for help, sent their material to him and got a great deal of encouragement. I think of Anne Wilkinson, who is dead now, or Jay Macpherson, a very young girl, as well as, out here, Anne Marriott, Floris McLaren, and myself; and it was when she was in the east that Pat Page first sent poems to *Contemporary Verse* and got to know Alan through that, and he again would give little comments. He always wrote letters to people who sent poems, you know, either rejecting or accepting, but he just didn't write a prim note of rejection; he liked to say something about the poem. And Miriam Waddington was another — I mean, it's just amazing how particularly the *young* women seemed to get a stimulus from him. I do think that Alan is the type of man whom women find rare because he has all the sensitivity of a woman, and yet a very objective kind of masculine mind, and this sympathy he has I think is rare. Women don't find it very often in men.

PAGE: I remember that he would write back and tell you that he just didn't think the poem was good enough. I have no idea how he went about doing what he did. He certainly communicated with you. I think probably the thing that one needed more than criticism was encouragement, because, in my own case any way, I wrote rather for myself, and when I suddenly found that you could write for somebody else too, you could write for a response — it was a

very curious experience. This may sound ridiculous, but it's true nevertheless. Alan as far as I was concerned had a facility to turn on the tap, but how he worked critically, I've no idea. If he didn't like what came out of the tap, he'd send it back quite ruthlessly, at least ruthlessly isn't the word, but quite directly. He was always very direct in all his dealings with you. If he liked the poem he told you; if he didn't he told you. But the main thing was some kind of a contact, some kind of a tension between two people, some kind of a polarity.

LIVESAY: There were I think three poems in the volume *Day and Night* which came out in '44, which Alan had sort of worked over with me, or at least I had read them aloud to him. He wasn't particularly interested in social poetry like my poem *Day and Night*. I think he admired its techniques but he wasn't very . . . he liked a poem that revealed the inner emotion. So that he liked *Lorca*, when I read the poem in sections and he said, "why don't you link them up more — couldn't you put in some kind of phrase which would link each section?" So I went home and that night I think I did write just a few little lines where there was a common theme or a common music:

"While you, you hold the light unbroken," and then

"You make the flight unshaken," and

"You hold the word unspoken,"

and then at the end, "light, flight and word be unassailed, the token."

Well, I wouldn't have done that if it hadn't been for Alan.

ROBERTSON: Alan Crawley heard poetry spoken by his wife, felt it through his fingers in Braille, and said it aloud over and over. But even if he had not been blind, Crawley would always have insisted that poetry is not melody for its own sake, but the combination of sound and sense.

CRAWLEY: I have always felt that a poem read aloud by a person who had previously been affected by it, and could say it without having just read it, made a very much better impression; . . . the listener had a better communication from the poem than by reading it from the print itself. And I have had this more or less confirmed by people who have listened to poets reading their own poetry, which of course now is being much more done than it was 30 years ago or 25 years ago even in Canada.

McLAREN: He reads poetry beautifully. I remember one writer listening to his reading of her works said at the end of it: "You make a person a poet when you read their writing." He would say that he didn't make anyone, that he read what is there. He was very aware of course of the meaning of the verse and gave full balance to that, but also very aware of the pattern of sound in

the verse; . . . because he looked for it himself, he made other people hear that. ROBERTSON: The magazine prospered after a fashion; it was never able to pay poets, and truthfully poets never expected to be paid. Costs were rising, but *Contemporary Verse* was reaching a wider audience with every issue, and it was undoubtedly publishing the best verse being produced in Canada, poems by A. M. Klein, Louis MacKay, Earle Birney, F. R. Scott, Roy Daniells, Ralph Gustafson, Anne Wilkinson, Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster, James Reaney, P. K. Page, Dorothy Livesay, Margaret Avison, Robert Finch, Miriam Waddington — the list could go on. Most of these were established poets, and then later there were the discoveries, the younger ones. Alan Crawley cast his net wide, and he made his selection, this amateur-become-editor in his mid-fifties, on the basis of one thing only, on the basis of his own taste.

LIVESAY: In Canada we've been rifled by cliques, and we still are you know. Every city has its circle and its fans and its . . . self-adulation going on, but Alan was completely free of this. And he did get people from all parts of the country writing . . . I mean the Montreal group around *First Statement* was a fascinating group, but it was a clique. For instance, I never got into any Montreal magazine, but anyone from there could and did write for *Contemporary Verse* and get published; so I would say it was due to his impartiality and universality.

CRAWLEY: I believe of course that C.V. did a great deal to help the writers of poetry at that time. It had quite a wide circulation in the last few years and was quite widely read and gave poets a good deal of encouragement, not only from me but from the other members of the group whom they got to know. I am not at all doubtful of the effect and the good and encouragement that was given to young writers by C.V. in those ten years.

PAGE: He was a very emotional man, Alan, an undemonstrative emotional man. You saw very little of the emotion, but you felt a great deal of it, and you felt that he was very much in touch with you in some way. That he had a strong empathetic quality, is the feeling I had about him. As a result of this, one had no shyness with Alan and this was his great strength for me — I was a rather reticent person and to suddenly find somebody with whom one was not shy, someone in an editorial capacity, that is — because after all one did find one's own individuals with whom one wasn't shy of course — but to find somebody in an editorial capacity to whom you could show a poem that you thought maybe was simply awful, "but it doesn't matter, if it's really awful, Alan will tell me it is; and if it isn't awful, well, we can talk about it."

ROBERTSON: Outside the window of his home in Victoria, there is a garden

and flowers. I looked out at the flowers he couldn't see but nonetheless knew better than I, and tried to imagine what he would sound like speaking verse. I asked him if he would read something for me, but he gently and firmly refused, claiming that his memory is no longer as good as it was. So we must imagine that voice, precise yet musical, unfolding the words, making sense of sound as he used to do in earlier days.

LIVESAY: There were two kinds of evenings. There were those with the Crawleys, Mr. and Mrs. Crawley and perhaps their son, Michael; he drove them about and helped them in every way. Then we would invite other friends in and have an evening, you know, a social evening with plenty of drink and talk, and this was always a most lively occasion, full of wit and humour and jokes. You saw Alan there in a very social light, and you saw him as a man who simply adored the pleasure of human contact and conversation and exchanging wit, not gossiping in any malicious way, but just amusing things about people, because there's nothing . . . there's never been anything in his attitude to writers that is partisan or suspicious or critical of them as people. He enjoys them and doesn't gossip at all. But then there would be a different kind of session when Michael or perhaps his wife Jean would drive down to my place for an afternoon of poetry, when he might come for lunch and then we'd sit out under the cherry tree or whatever tree happened to be around (and this was particularly in North Vancouver). I would read to him any new and interesting poems that I had come across or letters from poets — this sort of thing; or he would bring correspondence for me to read and discuss. Always he would have some kind of comment and some insight into what was being said or written. He was very interested, so the time flew by until someone came and picked him up. Sometimes I would go to Caulfield and do the same thing, stay there while the family would go out on their errands. We would sit and converse, for a couple of hours reading. He loved talk — we'd talk for about a half an hour and then he would say, "Well, let's get down to some reading." We would read and comment and he'd say: "Now what have *you* got, any new poems?" He'd ask me to read something of mine, and always he was very thoughtful about them. "Yes, I like that, I like that" . . . "No, I don't care for that."

PAGE: I remember this marvellously Spanish looking man. He looked as if he might have come out of . . . or he might almost have been an El Greco painting with this extraordinary alive quality about him, and a tremendous capacity to know where everybody was in the room and to be following and with you in your conversation. Periodically I used to stay with Alan and Jean in Caulfield

where they were very generous to poets, I must say . . . long suffering and generous and we'd get mildly drunk in the evening and quite bawdy, and laugh a tremendous amount. I think it was the laughter I remember as much as anything. I don't know whether he was dominating the room he was in but he was on top of the room he was in; he was everywhere in the room he was in; he missed nothing in the room he was in; and seemed a good deal sharper than most of the rest of us, which indeed he was, I think.

ROBERTSON: John Sutherland, editor of the Montreal little magazine, *Northern Review*, once wrote to Crawley: "I envy your knack of catching all the promising young poets."

CRAWLEY: In 1946 I think it would be, I was in Toronto and Ottawa and I met Jay Macpherson. She came to a talk I was giving, and we had a little talk and she said she would send me some manuscripts which she did and I published a lot of her poems and came to know her very well. Her writing is very different from what is being done now — it is very good poetry and I think she got a lot of encouragement from being in *Contemporary Verse*. Another occasion later on in the years of *Contemporary Verse*, I had a telephone call asking if a man could come and see me when we were living in Caulfield, and I said "Yes, indeed, if you want to come and talk about poetry," and when he came he turned out to be Daryl Hine from New Westminster. He was just about 15 and he had a sheaf of manuscript in his hand; we went down to my room and he read to me for about two hours, most remarkable writing for a boy of that age, and he has written some very fine poetry and is still doing so, has published a couple more books — he is now teaching, I think, at the University of Chicago, but he's a Canadian who started first in *Contemporary Verse*.

ROBERTSON: If you were still editing *Contemporary Verse* now, who are the Canadian poets you would like to publish?

CRAWLEY: I would very much like to have been able to publish some poems by Leonard Cohen, whose earlier writing, not just the last writing particularly, but his earlier writing I liked very much, and some of his later poems now that he reads and accompanies on his guitar I like, but I think a good deal of that comes from the guitar accompaniment; and I also like some poems by Purdy and Newlove. I do not read a great deal of contemporary poetry — I find that I've . . . I don't get as much satisfaction or pleasure out of it as I do out of reading the poems that I knew or by writers that I have known some years ago.

ROBERTSON: There came a time when Alan Crawley no longer felt able to carry the burden of *Contemporary Verse*. In 1951 in the 10th anniversary issue, he announced that he was considering bringing it to a close. He had hoped to find money to extend its circulation; he had hoped to pay contributors; he was unsuccessful, and, more important, he began to feel that the magazine was losing its vitality. In spite of pleas from readers and poets, he wound up *Contemporary Verse* with the issue of Autumn of 1952. In it he said, "We have a strong belief that the work of a little magazine under the same editor's direction declines in time from its peak of usefulness. With this conviction we close our files and write the abrupt and final statement: this is the last issue of CV." And thus the magazine ended, without fanfare or grace notes. It had been born in a near-vacuum. When it died new magazines were already springing up. In the decade of its life, the climate of Canadian letters had improved remarkably, not least because of the influence of magazines like *Contemporary Verse* and *Northern Review*. Others were to take their place, and the man who had worked alone retired from publishing but not from thinking and talking about poetry.

CRAWLEY: I was talking to a young man a couple of years ago, he was in his early twenties, and in the course of conversation about literature he said to me: "Well, I've written some poems;" and I said, "Would you let me see them?" And he said: "Oh, no, I don't think so." I said, "Don't you want to know, have any idea what other people would get from them?" And he said "No, I tore them up. I know they're good poems — I don't want anybody else to have anything to do with them." Well that to me was something quite new because most of the poets that I've known have wanted to make some communication to some person and not to keep their writing to themselves, but that probably is part of what's going on now in many ways. I think that some of the young writers are like a number of the young people who are not actually writing but who have the feeling that if it doesn't communicate to you then it's your fault, not their fault, and until they learn that they have to say things so that they are intelligible or can be felt by the person they're speaking to through verse or otherwise, why they're never going to turn out to be able to create anything worthy.

ROBERTSON: Alan Crawley would call the eleven years of *Contemporary Verse* a modest achievement; he would count as its greatest benefit that it had made him many friends. But it is much more than a modest achievement, and his friends the poets have not forgotten.

LIVESAY: There is a poem I wrote for him when he was living in the Okanagan, after he had moved from Caulfield in the Fifties. I don't know whether Alan knows it was written for him, but it does mention the blindness.

NOCTURNE

Dorothy Livesay

Countries are of the mind
and when you moved upon my land
your darkness ringed my light:
O landscape lovely, looped
with loping hills, wind-woven
landfall of love.

All my frozen years
snow drifting through bare birches,
white-cowled cedar
and the black stream threading through ice —

All sultry summers run
barefooted through the crackling wood
flung upon rocks made skeleton
x-rayed by the raging sun —

All springs, wild crying with the wood's mauve bells
anemone, hepatica
trembling to feel the fanning leaf:
breast against bark, the sap's ascent
burning the blood with bold green fire —

All autumns, solitary season
treading the leaves, treading the time:
those autumns stripped deception to the bone
and left me animal, alone —

All seasons were of light
stricken and blazing —
only now the shout
of knowledge hurls, amazing:
O bind me with ropes of darkness,
blind me with your long night.