

# A UNIFIED PERSONALITY

## *Birney's Poems*

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WITH THE PUBLICATION this spring of Earle Birney's *Selected Poems*, a generous and representative gathering of a hundred poems, many of them long and ambitious and all of them interesting, we have an opportunity to sum up a long, fruitful, and varied poetic career — a career which this volume indicates has grown steadily in significance. The poems from Birney's two most recent books, *Ice, Cod, Bell or Stone* and *Near False Creek Mouth*, have a power and mastery that was foreshadowed but only occasionally attained in *David* or *Trial of a City*, the works on which Birney's reputation has been founded and established. Though Birney has written two novels, edited an anthology, and published a good many scholarly articles, including an immensely valuable analysis of the poetic reputation of E. J. Pratt, it is as a poet, a teacher of poetry, and a publicist for poetry that he is chiefly and rightly known; and it is his poetry only that I propose to examine here.

I don't remember when I first read a poem by Earle Birney. I know that when Frank Scott and I were preparing the manuscript for *New Provinces* in 1935 we had not heard of him, though we soon began to read the pieces that appeared in *The Canadian Forum*, of which Birney was literary editor from 1936 to 1940. It was not, however, until the publication of *David & Other Poems* in 1942 that it became apparent that a new poet had arrived, a poet who gave promise of being a worthy continuer of the tradition of heroic narrative established by Pratt and perhaps the precursor of a new school of modern poetry in Canada. Now a quarter of a century later and with the present volume before us we can see that these hopeful anticipations have been amply fulfilled. Birney's career — even more certainly than F. R. Scott's, which I hope to examine in these pages in a subsequent essay — has been analagous to the development of modern Canadian poetry as a whole. Both poets have been leaders in some respects and

followers in others. From the beginning both have been adventurous and experimental, and if occasionally they have seemed to be groping or merely wandering, the occasions were remarkably few. Scott, in spite of his liberal and leftist point of view, has been mainly traditional, while his experiments have been in the direction of new and avant-garde techniques. Birney, who is also politically and socially of the left, takes more naturally to the experimental, though in his case, paradoxically enough, his most successful experiment is the experiment of being traditional. Some of the best of his earlier poems — “Slug in Woods”, “Anglo-Saxon Street”, “Mappemounde”, and parts of “Damnation of Vancouver” as well — while not mere pastiche or parody, certainly owe their success to the skill with which the poet has utilized his scholarly knowledge of *Beowulf*, Chaucer, *Piers Plowman*, and Hopkins. To the advantages of a western mountain childhood and hard work as a manual labourer and logger in his youth, Birney added those of a thorough academic training in English literature, culminating in a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto in 1936. With the exception of some years spent in study and travel abroad on various fellowships and grants, all his life since the end of the second world war has been spent as a university teacher of literature and creative writing. The rather touchy remarks about academic critics and anthologists in the “Preface” to *Selected Poems* should not be taken too seriously. They are partly confessional, for Birney has been both. A few of the poems (I shall cite instances later) do suffer because the literary sophistication of the technique calls attention to itself in a way that is distracting rather than expressive. But this does not happen very often, and in any case it is the price that has to be paid for the successes.

THERE ARE SOME THINGS about *Selected Poems* I do not like, and my praise of the poet would be less convincing if I did not say what they were. Let me do so at once. Some of them, of course, are not the poet’s responsibility. The make-up of the book, like so many of McClelland & Stewart’s recent volumes of verse, seems to be pretentious and flamboyant, while the illustrations, though good in themselves, seem to be competing with the poems. Poetry ought to be left to speak for itself.

For me the same criticism applies — and here the poet himself must bear the responsibility — to the typographical gimmicks and punctuational nudity imposed



that what we write is inconvenient to read. This of course is the modern dogma that Wyndham Lewis and Yvor Winters have attacked — that to express confusion we must write confusedly. My objection to this kind of thing is not that it lacks clarity but that it lacks point: the device is so childishly obvious. However, if as Birney says in his “Preface” these devices are spells to appease an intermittent madman within him let us be grateful and turn to the true poet and the true poems.

**S**ELECTED POEMS is divided into six sections. The first, made up mainly of later poems, is entitled after one of the best pieces in it, “The Bear on the Delhi Road”, and is a record of Birney’s travels westward from British Columbia to the South Seas, Japan, India, Thailand and back through Greece, Spain, England, and the Arctic home again. These poems, with one or two not very important exceptions, date from the late fifties and the early sixties, and include half a dozen pieces that are among the best things Birney ever wrote — “A Walk in Kyoto”, “Bangkok Boy”, “The Bear on the Delhi Road”, and best of all, the magnificent “El Greco: *Espolio*.” Here too is one of the not-so-many light, satirical, gently comic poems that is completely successful — successful I think because the satire here directed against the world of tourism and public relations is directed, even if ever so gently, against the poet himself too. This is the delightful “Twenty-Third Flight” that begins —

Lo as I pause in the alien vale of the airport  
 fearing ahead the official ambush  
 a voice languorous and strange as these winds  
     of Oahu  
 calleth my name and I turn to be quited in  
     orchids  
 and amazed with a kiss perfumed and soft as  
     the *lei*.  
 Straight from a travel poster thou steppest  
 thy arms like mangoes for smoothness  
 O implausible shepherdess for this one aging sheep —

and continues to the tragi-comic conclusion of the poet so welcomed being nevertheless soon ruthlessly abandoned: “Nay, but thou stayest not?” —

O nubile goddess of the Kaiser Training  
Programme  
is it possible that tonight my cup runneth  
not over  
and that I shall sit in the still pastures of  
the lobby  
while thou ledest another old ram in garlands  
past me . . .  
And that I shall lie by the waters of Waikiki  
and want?

This is my favourite among the comic poems, but there are many others almost equally seductive, some satirical, some whimsical, and some with a wry seriousness, as in the brilliant series of Mexican poems. I don't know where you'll find anything better in modern North American poetry than the combination of wit and sentiment, pertinent observation and auricular, almost ventriloquistic precision than "Sinaloa", "Ajjic", or "Six-Sided Square: Actopan".

These last poems are in the second section of the book, which is headed "Trans-Americana." The section begins with a series of satirical pieces on certain unlovely aspects of "civilization" north of the Rio Grande. Most of these, when compared with the charm and sureness of "Twenty-Third Flight," seem weak or forced — a defect which may be partly due to the arbitrary typographical eccentricity that has been imposed upon them since they first appeared in earlier volumes.

When we come, however, to the poems on Mexico, Peru, and the Caribbean islands all such cavilling falls away. These are not only among the finest of Birney's poems; they are just simply and plainly, *man, the finest*. The new style that some of our West Coast poets learned from Olson, Creeley, and the Black Mountain writers (and from Birney himself, I suspect) has here been put to uses that transcend the personal and the purely emotional. Poems like "Cartagena de Indias", "Machu Picchu", "Letter to a Cuzco Priest", "Barranquilla Bridge", and others sum up a whole ancient and alien civilization and bring it — and our own — under the scrutiny of a sharp, sensitive, and discursive mind.

When these poems are compared with even the best of the poems of the early forties that make up the next part of the book ("War Winters") we see how great and how sure has been Birney's development as a craftsman in poetry, a development which depends upon and expresses a development in intellectual and emotional maturity. Perhaps this growth in maturity is the achievement of

originality, the setting free of a unique poetic personality that after years of work has at last found itself and its true voice. This is not to be taken to mean that such well-known early poems as “Hands”, “Vancouver Lights”, and “Dusk on the Bay” are not sincere and accurate expressions of what a Canadian felt in the dark days of 1939 and 1940. But it is easier to see now than it was then that they speak with the voices of Auden, Rex Warner, or Stephen Spender, as we feel they might have recalled Rupert Brooke had they been written in 1915. They are true to their time rather than to a unique person, and they are not, therefore, without their own kind of historical significance. They do certainly present an attractive contrast to the war poems of some of the aged survivors of an older generation. Even today only a few poems written later in the war — Douglas LePan’s poems of the Italian campaign and Pratt’s *Behind the Log* — stand higher than these as interpretations of Canada’s war.

In the next section, “Canada: Case History”, Birney has grouped those poems, some of them satirical but most of them serious and, indeed, “devout”, in which he has come to grips with the problem of what it means to be Canadian and what it is to be a Canadian poet. Viewed as a problem this theme has become something of a nervous obsession, and Birney, like Scott and some others, is at his best when he approaches it obliquely and allows his hawk’s eye and his adder’s tongue to do the work for him. Everything that is really important is conveyed in the imagery and the diction. Cadences like

the moon carved unknown totems  
 out of the lakeshore  
 owls in the beardusky woods derided him  
 moosehorned cedars circled his swamps  
 and tossed  
 their antlers up to the stars . . .

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a marten moving like quicksilver  
 scouted us . . .

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the veins of bald glaciers blackened  
 white pulses of waterfalls  
 beat in the bare rockflesh

— to give but three brief samples, are simple, sensuous, and passionate. Such indigenous music and imagery give to poems like “David”, “Bushed”, and the poems of transcontinental air travel, “North Star West”, and “Way to the West”,

a richness that Birney and a few other poets rooted in the native tradition seem to have derived from the earth and air of Canada itself. This is a northern style, and an excellent one. Our sense of its validity is increased when we realize that it is not peculiar to Birney but is a common heritage. Here are some examples chosen almost at random from *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*:

No more the slow stream spreading clear in  
    sunlight  
Lacing the swamp with intricate shining  
    channels . . .  
    the mica glint in the sliding water  
The bright winged flies and the muskrat gone  
    like a shadow . . .

(Floris McLaren)

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The sachem voices cloven out of the hills  
spat teeth in the sea like nails . . .

(Alfred Bailey)

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On the North Shore a reptile lay asleep . . .

(E. J. Pratt)

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Sinuous, red as copper snakes,  
Sharp-headed serpents, made of light,  
Glided, and hid themselves in night. . . .

(Isabella Crawford)

This last passage, and the poem from which I have taken it, shows better than all the explanations in the "Preface" why Birney is impatient with commas and rhyme.

Of course not every one of the northern poems has the linguistic rightness of "Bushed" or "David". Sometimes his Eng. Lit. sophistication betrays Birney into an overstrained conceit, as for example in these lines from "Page of Gaspé" —

Between over-generous margins  
between the unprinted river and the  
    rubbed-out peaks  
run the human typelines . . .  
farms split to sentences by editor death  
fattening subtitles of rockfence . . .

In this repetitive prose a sawmill  
sets quotemarks after the stone windmill's  
period . . .

or leads him to indulge in a sort of metrical plagiarism. "North of Superior" is filled with more or less erudite allusions to Scyldings, Excalibur, the Green Knight, the Den of Error, Azazel, and Roland, and the metre which recalls Pound's "Seafarer" in the first stanza reminds us of "Evangeline" in the second.

But these are occasional failures. To risk making them is the price every alive and eager artist must pay for his successes. One such success is surely the fine reflective poem "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth", the major work in Birney's last collection of new poems. It is dated "Vancouver 1961 — Ametlla, Spain 1963". "November Walk" is a rich meditative ode-like poem that gathers up the themes of the long series of descriptive, narrative, and reflective poems set in or near Vancouver from "Dusk on the Bay" and "Hands" to the present, and finally and on a much larger scale achieves what the poet had been groping for from the start of his career — an orientation of himself and his place and his time in terms that are both emotionally and rationally satisfying. This poem stands with the poems on Mexico and Peru as the high water mark of Birney's achievement up to now. Most encouraging of all, it gives promise of fine things still to come, for it shows the poet has found a style commensurate with the theme he has approached in many different ways in many different poems — man's effort as microcosm to come to terms with society, nature, and the macrocosm in the brief moment of allotted time. It is a promise that makes Birney's remark in the "Preface" — "In my next work I am thinking of pasting my poems on mobiles" — seem like the frivolous joke it's intended as.

The fifth section of *Selected Poems*, headed rather journalistically "Letter to a Conceivable Great-grandson", is the least successful part of the book. It is a somewhat haphazard collection of pieces on the threat of atomic extinction and the ironies and confusions inherent in the world of cold-war distrust and science-fiction posturing. The point of view is liberal and humane, and the sentiments are those which all decent men must share. The trouble with this sort of poetry is not something that can be laid at the door of an individual poet. The responsibility is elsewhere. These excellent sentiments are shared (and expressed) by politicians, statesmen, editorial writers, publicists and generals who find them no bar whatsoever to actions and votes that lead in the practical world to the aggravation and perpetuation of the crisis that they (hypocritically) and the liberal

poet (ineffectively) lament. The result is a widening of the gap between the poem's practical intention and the possible achievement of that end. Perhaps its most successful accomplishment is to demonstrate the futility of poetry as propaganda and drive home the corollary that action alone is adequate. This built-in demonstration of its own uselessness is what vitiates nearly all poetry that takes a bold stand against sin, and make the social poetry of Birney, and of Frank Scott too, the weakest part of their work. Two of the finest poems, however, in this part of the book are translations from Mao-Tse-Tung made with the assistance of Professor Ping-ti Ho, of The University of British Columbia and Peking University. Here the cleverness and strain of some of the poems and the echoes of Spender and Rex Warner in others give way to a simple direct style that is very moving indeed.

There is not much that needs to be said here about "Damnation of Vancouver," which forms the final section of this book. Originally published as *Trial of a City* in 1952, it was recognized as one of the most original and technically accomplished of Birney's poems, a *tour de force* of linguistic virtuosity and a satire as biting as anything in Canadian literature. It marked a distinct advance on the simple and unified narrative "David", mingling as it did the colloquial and the grand styles and the satirical and the affirmative modes. It thus anticipates the South and Central American poems of the sixties and fuses perfectly for the first time in Birney's work the two themes that Northrop Frye has named as central to Canadian poetry, "one a primarily comic theme of satire and exuberance, the other a primarily tragic theme of loneliness and terror."

For the new book Birney has revised what was originally a poem or masque and turned it into a play, complete with elaborate stage directions, descriptions of actions (business), and statements about the emotional implications and tones of voice to be got into some of the speeches. This is fine for the amateur actor and the inexperienced director, but the reader of poetry, I should think, would prefer to take his poetry neat. The development of the theme — which is the rape of the land of the Indians by the forces of commercial exploitation and "progress" — comes through more vividly in the original version.

WHAT REMAINS TO BE SAID in conclusion? Not very much surely. It is quite clear that Earle Birney is one of our major poets, perhaps since the death of E. J. Pratt our leading poet. Certainly he is the only rival of Pratt

as the creator of heroic narrative on a bold scale and, unlike Pratt, he has been consistently experimental. He has not always been successful, and he has sometimes aped styles and fashions that are unworthy of his real talents; but without a somewhat boyish spirit of adventure his successes would have been impossible too. The real triumph of *Selected Poems* is that it demonstrates so clearly and forcibly — as does indeed the whole of Birney's career — a unified personality of great charm, wit, strength, and generosity. I recall Louis MacNeice's description of the modern poet. I have quoted it before, but it fits the poet I have been discussing so well that I can think of no better words to end with. "I would have a poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions . . ." This is the man I know, and the poet who rises out of this book.