

NED PRATT

Two Recollections

What he did was to put his finger on one poem and say, “Now this one — it has some feeling, some sensitivity, some sense of structure. But — well, damn it all, it isn’t worth *money*.” I have never had a profounder insight into literary values, and I was lucky to have it so early. As a graduate student I was his assistant when he became the first editor of the *Canadian Poetry Magazine*. I am not saying that what was printed in those opening issues was imperishable, but it was certainly the best of what we got. What impressed me was the number of people (it was the depression, and the magazine paid a dollar or two) who tried to get themselves or their friends in by assuming that Ned was a soft touch. In some ways he was, but he was not compromising the standards of poetry to be so: poetry was something he took too seriously. And, as I realized more clearly later, friendship was also something he took too seriously to compromise. People who thought him a soft touch were never his friends. He could be impulsively, even quixotically, generous to bums and down-and-outs, and I think I understand why. His good will was not benevolence, not a matter of being a sixty-year-old smiling public man. It was rather an enthusiasm that one was alive, rooted in a sense of childlike wonder at human existence and the variety of personality. This feeling was so genuine and so deep in him that I think he felt rather guilty when approached by someone towards whom he was actually indifferent.

His hospitality and his love of parties was the central part of the Pratt personal

legend. The chair at the end of the Senior Common Room table in Victoria College was always left vacant for him, for Ned Pratt could not sit anywhere but at the head of the table. (It remained vacant for several months after it was clear that he would never return to that table.) Yet those who attended his parties realized how passionate his concern was for the genuine symposium, the exchange of ideas. He wanted good stories and picturesque language, most of which he contributed himself. Not many of his guests are apt to forget such things as the huge salmon hooked by the Governor of Newfoundland, who poured an entire bottle of Newfoundland screech down its throat and then released it, only to have it circle the boat on its tail singing Rule Britannia. But he was quickly bored if the conversation ran down in gossip or trivialities. The personnel at his parties naturally changed over the course of years, but from Bertram Brooker and Wilson Knight in the thirties to Marshall McLuhan and Douglas Grant in the sixties, he never wavered in his affection for friends who could talk, and talk with spirit, content, and something to say.

His entire poetic career was spent as a full-time member of the teaching staff of Victoria College. He never made a song and dance about being "creative," and he never felt the need of compensating for the way he earned his living by issuing anti-academic pronouncements. The College took unobtrusive measures to make it easier for him to get on with his work, but it could not have helped beyond a certain point. His reputation as absent-minded and as a complete duffer in practical affairs was carefully staged by himself, in order to stay clear of the enormous complication of committees and similar substitutes for thought and action that are such a bane of university life. He taught students, and worked harder to get to know them than anyone else on the staff. (Even after his retirement he gave luncheon parties for the students in the classes he had previously taught.) He worked with colleagues, to such effect that one came to recognize a special kind of affectionate smile that preceded any reference to Ned. But he stuck to the essentials of university work, to teaching and his own writing, and as a result it was hardly noticed that he was an academic poet.

He was also a Canadian writer, without either trying to be one or trying not to be one. Not many Canadian writers would really be content to be popular inside the country and largely unknown outside it. I am not saying that he was wholly content with this either — nor am I. But he did realize that he was addressing a specific community, and he showed extraordinary integrity in addressing also the general reader in that community, instead of writing for other poets. He was never in fashion, and he never tried to be out of fashion, and as a

result he has introduced hundreds of Canadians to poetic experience who would not otherwise have got it, or who would have tried to get it from some phony anti-intellectual doggerelist. There are many popular features in his work, some of them obvious, such as the preoccupation with physical courage and heroic action, and some of them less obvious, such as the absence of bad language, even when dealing with the grousing of sailors in *Behind the Log*. Yet there is a tough conceptual skeleton behind all his writing: his supposed incompetence in the two disciplines he tried before he tried English, theology and psychology, was part of his own campaign to persuade others that he was too simple-minded to have his time wasted in their interests.

So although he was never anti-intellectual, and never undervalued or deprecated what the university stood for, he still avoided the pitfalls that beset intellectuals in modern society. Of these, one of the most striking is the fascination with the logical extreme, as opposed to the illogical golden mean. To write and to teach in Ned's generation meant defending the values of the imagination through a depression and a war, and this took courage of a kind that he not only celebrated but, very unostentatiously, possessed. Some of us grew up in that generation and tried to hold on to the kind of liberal values that are not simply the values of the left as against the right, but are the values of human dignity as opposed to stupidity and hysteria. We remember many lost leaders in that period, some temporarily and some permanently lost, who deserted wisdom for paradox. The sense of outrage and betrayal that I felt when I first opened *After Strange Gods* is something I hope never to feel again. But during the war, at an evening in Earle Birney's apartment in Toronto, I heard Ned read *The Truant*, and felt, not simply that I had heard the greatest of all Canadian poems, but that the voice of humanity had spoken once more, with the kind of authority it reserves for such moments as the bombing of London, when the powers of darkness test the soul and find once more that "The stuff is not amenable to fire".



2. *The Special Quality*

Roy Daniells

THERE ARE a few poets in the Canadian tradition who will be remembered for what they were in themselves, almost independently of what they wrote. Lampman and Isabella Crawford are among them. Now our good Ned Pratt has joined this small company whose personal memory we shall not willingly let die. Yet the personal image is no more simple than the image of Pratt the poet whose complexity has been the theme of H. W. Wells, John Sutherland and Desmond Pacey. Ned's hospitality was famous, his bonhomie a legend in his lifetime, his kindness a constant factor in many lives. Yet other good hosts, other occasions filled with wit and paternal benevolence, have not left the same indelible mark on the mind. What was Ned's special and unique quality?

Let us go back to 1919, the year that Pelham Edgar rescued Pratt from the psychology department on St. George Street and installed him in Victoria College as an associate professor of English. Ned's descriptions of his ill luck as a demonstrator — prisms flying from the turntable to shatter against the wall — may have obscured the full situation. So may recollections of Edgar's prescience and his tactful kindness to new members of staff (which the present writer must recall with gratitude). The fact is that Edgar gave Pratt all that anyone could have given at that time — a favourable stance from which to survey a situation most unfavourable to poetry. By 1919 little remained of the post-Confederation impulse which has produced Roberts, Lampman, Crawford, Carman and D. C. Scott. Scott alone was both alive and kicking, yet his statement to the Royal Society in 1922, "Revolt is essential to progress", was not matched by anything corresponding in his own work. "We require" he said, "more rage in our poets" but nothing of the kind was forthcoming. It was not until 1925 that the *McGill Fortnightly Review* came into being, borne on the same tide of post-war change that had brought in the first number of the *Forum* in October 1920. When the *Review* began its brief career, Arthur Smith, Frank Scott, Leo Kennedy and Leon Edel were all in their teens or twenties. Pratt was by this time in his early forties and writing the kind of poetry which appeared in his 1926 volume *Titans*

(comprising "The Witches' Brew", "The Cachalot" and "The Great Feud"). He was committed by geography, by his non-urban tradition and by the impetus of his career to something quite unlike the social strategy and poetic tactics of the Montreal group.

In 1919 the Canadian landscape had indeed been bleak and if we imagine Pratt searching among the abraded Edwardians, the English war poets, or the pages of Eliot just reaching Canada, it is hard to see what stimulus to sensibility or what techniques he could have recovered from outside to help him deal with actualities in the local landscape, literal or intellectual. He was in fact thrown heavily back on his own resources (whereas Lampman, in a previous generation, had with all modesty rightly felt himself a kind of reincarnation of Keats). That the whole web of Pratt's poetry had in the best sense of the word a pervasively homespun quality is attributable to his having had always to work alone. The "plain heroic magnitude of mind" with which he got down to his task has never, I think, been sufficiently recognized. We may recall the days when he was struggling to write *The Titanic*, when he would expound his intention, when floorboards became deck-planks under one's feet as the long narrow office shuddered under the impact of ice and slowly sank, leaving one struggling — with Ned's problems, his efforts to shape the narrative, to find diction, to achieve catharsis. (I doubt if he really got help from anyone.) This magnitude, this ability not to be overcome, was, I think, his most distinguishing and most admirable quality. Certainly, if any newcomer to Elysian fields were trying to identify Canadian poets, Ned Pratt would stand out in a simple way, as *larger* than all the rest.

This largeness of mind, which sometimes led to an indifference to what others felt were immediate burning issues, saved Ned Pratt the poet and Professor Pratt the academic from pride, pedantry, paranoia, the Messiah-complex, the thirst for recognition, the affectation of "grand old man", one upmanship of every description and all the other customary side effects of a talent for writing or occupational diseases of academic life. He was never more — and never less — than Ned Pratt getting on with some job to which he was uniquely fitted, with all his powers.

Beside his psychic dimension, he possessed the complementary virtue of being responsive to people, of being intuitive, spontaneous, *uncalculating*. No one of his innumerable beneficiaries ever felt he had to do something in return. "Pro pelle cutem" was not in Ned's vocabulary. Lack of guile and even of foresight had its comic consequences. The college would be ransacked for Ned's little black bag containing important papers, day after day until he reported opening

a cupboard at home and "there it was!" But fundamentally his lack of calculation reminded one of stories in the Gospels or in the Acts: great ends are in view yet from day to day whatever happens will turn out to be divinely directed. Life is too important to be organized. It follows that to meet Ned casually was to feel him give his whole sympathy to one, immediately. After a time one counted on this. Acquaintances felt they were his friends. His friends each felt sure of a special place in Ned's regard — and rightly so: he had room for a great deal of special concern for others. He relived the old virtues of the Canadian literary tradition, Roberts' ability to become exemplary by becoming through unaided effort a man of letters, Lampman's life of spontaneous feeling and creative "dream". This wise passiveness, this ability to give his all where intuition prompted and never by calculation kept clear and bright to the end a sensitivity which set him apart from others.

Whether his massive simplicity of purpose and the unforced immediacy of his daily response to life were related to the epic strain in his poetry and the unclassifiable moral impulse which so powerfully animates it — an impulse no theory seems to exhaust — these are problems for the literary critic. What seems at the moment more important is that as many as possible of those who knew and loved him should leave some record of "the emperor in his habit as he lived", going beyond anecdote and sentiment yet not forgetting the man in pursuit of his work.

We shall not look upon his like again. The Newfoundland community, now part of Canada, cannot hope to retain its old Elizabethan quality. The kind of sensibility that contrives to live in a city without succumbing to urbanization threatens to become rare to extinction. Our culture, saturated with mass-media, will no longer provide the partial vacuum in which by breathing hard a strong sensibility may contrive to have its being. It is unlikely that uncalculating goodness of heart can persist into a world of computers. All the more reason why memory should keep green the greatness and uncontriving simplicity of this good man.