

## OF ALAN CRAWLEY

*Ethel Wilson*

**I**N 1941, a small quarterly publication of poetry, *Contemporary Verse*, appeared in British Columbia. The editor was Alan Crawley. The magazine spanned and served a difficult decade.

*Contemporary Verse* appeared at a time when many young writers, novices, wrote alone in Canada, whether they were poets or writers of prose, unknown to each other and usually ignorant of any vehicle of publication — should they wish for publication. There was, before and — for a time — after the years 1937 and 1938 a sort of anonymity, a vacuum in the land in the area of new poetry and prose and its publication, as far as the new writer was concerned. The war, intervening dreadfully, became both a nightmare inspiration and a barrier.

It was during these years in Canada that poets, individually, became aware that the needs of the poet (and of his potential reading public) might be met to a surprising degree in the small quarterly publication — *Contemporary Verse* — issuing from the west of Canada, open at first to poets anywhere and then limited to Canadian poets everywhere. The needs of the prose writer in Canada (and his potential reading public) were being met by another small publication — *Northern Review* — published in Montreal and edited by John Sutherland who also welcomed poets. John Sutherland was, to me, a splendid and tragic young figure. There was pathos and defeat and victory in his life, his dedication to Canadian letters, and his early death. During a few arduous and combative years

he offered an opportunity to yet unestablished Canadian writers (I was one of them) wherever they might be. Alan Crawley and John Sutherland, working independently and three thousand miles apart, provided for us, it seemed, a door in the west and a door in the east. These doors were opened to us, poets or writers of prose, by these two men, and if we would, and could, we passed through the doors into the open air of speech and communication. At intervals other little magazines came and went, among them the elegant and too short-lived *Here and Now* — but to my initial ignorance and subsequent knowledge *Contemporary Verse* and *Northern Review* alone seemed to have a sort of temporary permanence, then.

In the third issue of *The Tamarack Review* (Spring 1957) there is an excellent brief history of the origin and life of *Contemporary Verse*, by Floris McLaren. While Alan Crawley in Vancouver edited the contents of his small, courageous publication, Mrs. McLaren in Victoria was the business manager and saw to the simple but financially difficult production. Over an unusually complex period of eleven years, this labour was a continued offering to living verse. The poets were encouraged, advised, criticized, rejected or made known, and not paid. Neither were the editor and his associates. From all over Canada submissions came in, testifying to the need for contact. I must tell you, and beg you to believe and remember, that the editor of *Contemporary Verse* was blind.

Alan Crawley came of an English family which for several hundred years had lived close to the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire; the life lines of that family ran through the Church, the Army, the Navy, and Law. In 1875 Alan's father, then a young man, and three companions sailed for New York and, after adventuring in the west, turned to Manitoba where the hunting was alleged to be good. Young Crawley and two of his friends each took up a homestead in an unsettled area southwest of Winnipeg. Some time later he returned to England. There he married and—no longer the young hunter and homesteader—returned to Manitoba, and, in the little village of Holland, opened a private bank and insurance office. There the small family remained, settled settlers who had made their first journey across the prairie by oxcart, and there Alan spent his boyhood, with his younger brother who lived to die in the war of 1914-1918.

Alan says: "As I recall, the rooms were over-flowing with books and with newspapers and magazines which came continuously from relatives in England. There always seemed to be one of the family reading out of doors in the summer-time, or reading aloud to the rest of the family in the long dark of the prairie winter evenings." He remembers no poetry among the many books — beyond a

collection of Percy's *Reliques* and the poems of Edward Lear, a curious combination that points to the future eclecticism of Alan's mind. The boy became interested in the history of English words and names and was soon a natural student of etymology. This was the product of the abundance of books at home, not of his schooling, for he attended the little village school.

Later, he was sent to St. John's College School in Winnipeg. Many of the boys in this unique institution were the sons of Hudson's Bay factors in the far north who came to Winnipeg in the old Hudson's Bay Company river boats and stayed each school year at St. John's from August of one year until July of the next. Alan's education was entirely Canadian and of the middle west, supplemented by the books and reading habits of his family in the village of Holland.

There was not, at that time, a law school in the University of Manitoba so, after matriculation, Alan was articled for the study of law to a member of a prominent firm in Winnipeg. In 1912 he was admitted as a barrister and solicitor to the Bar of Manitoba.

At about that time the Russian actress Nazimova came to Winnipeg and appeared in Ibsen's plays. Alan had been reading Ibsen with fascination, and met the great Nazimova. In a talk with her, she awoke his lively interest in the theatre and also in the Russian writers. He at once began to read Tolstoy, Chekhov and Dostoievsky.

In 1913 he married Jean Horn of Winnipeg. Shortly afterwards he, his wife and a friend H. A. V. Green organized a group of amateur players under the name of The Community Players of Winnipeg. For more than ten years the players produced and acted, first of all in a rented theatre and then for several years in a theatre of their own with a permanent and paid director. Alan's first productive period in the arts had begun.

It seemed peculiarly true that the arts lay latent in him and only an incident was required to awaken them into activity. The next incident occurred in England. On a hot Saturday afternoon in London when the streets seemed strangely deserted, Alan stopped in front of a small shop window in which were books of poetry, books about poetry, and some unusual Poetry Sheets. He went in. It was the Poetry Book Shop, famous in England before and in the twenties, but unknown to Alan Crawley. There, and on subsequent visits, he met Harold Monro the owner and himself a poet, Walter de la Mare, Ralph Hodgson, Davies and others. For the first time Alan heard of the Georgian poets and the young war poets. From this chance visit the interest and passion grew that led to the influence of Alan Crawley among the young poets of Canada. He returned home

with volumes of poetry and to a new found land.

He became a collector and student of contemporary verse and formed the habit of reading a poem each day, regarding it critically, and memorizing most of them. He read all available criticism of poetry, particularly modern poetry. His interest at that time lay in the work of the young English poets. This was his first introduction to new and living verse and — like many other Canadians — he did not know, then, whether Canadian poets or Canadian poetry existed. That came later. Before long he began to speak over the air on the subject of contemporary poetry.

In 1934 Alan suffered a serious illness which was followed by the sudden and complete loss of his sight. He retired from the practice of law and with his wife and their two young sons moved from Winnipeg to Victoria in British Columbia. In every changing scene of Alan's life, his wife has accompanied him and — speaking diffidently about a subject of great delicacy — I am sure that she with her taste, her sound sense, her wit, her instant apprehension of things physical and of the mind, her gift of communication, has carried a mutual light, always. Jean has a gay casual-seeming way, but she has a clairvoyance of life that has enabled her to do that which, daily, she does, beyond our understanding. So when the shock and disaster of total blindness came upon Alan, his wife advanced with him, both of them in good heart, to meet every new adjustment. The accommodation of life to circumstance now included, of course, the learning of braille.

I ventured to ask Alan once, whether the mastery of braille drew, almost beyond coping, upon his powers of concentration and determination. He told me that he was helped by a phenomenal memory — and so his teacher had said — and probably an unusual visual memory. He would need that, I thought, as I passed my finger over his copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*. I looked at those multiple faceless dots and tried to visualize the substitution of an unfamiliar new delicate faculty of touch for the lost familiar faculty of sight.

**I**N 1934 AND 1935 the Crawleys lived in Victoria. As soon as he arrived Alan became aware of a living growing interest in Canadian poetry. He formed new and lasting friendships, bound by this strong common interest. In 1938 he met Dorothy Livesay Macnair and her husband Duncan Macnair who furthered his knowledge of Canadian poetry and made him familiar with the work of Canadian poets throughout the country.

The Crawleys had now moved to Caulfeild in West Vancouver, accompanied by their younger son, Michael, and there Alan's association with Canadian poetry and makers of poetry increased. He resumed speaking over the air. He spoke of contemporary poetry to various groups — in University extension courses, to C.C.F. gatherings, to Normal School students, in meetings arranged by the Vancouver Library. During those years Alan became immersed in the enlarging world which he had entered. His trained legal and critical mind helped him to be a severe yet inspiring critic of contemporary writing and his judgment was often described as impeccable, both in eastern and western Canada.

There was now a stirring among the few western poets and a feeling of urgency that some opportunity should be made for voices to be heard. Following many conversations with Mrs. McLaren, Doris Ferne, Anne Marriott, Dorothy Livesay Macnair and her husband, Alan considered assuming the responsibility of editing the new poetry magazine, should such a magazine be published. Before making his final decision he consulted A. J. M. Smith and P. K. Page in Montreal, Earle Birney in Toronto, Kay Smith and Leo Kennedy, who responded with their advice and opinions and sent manuscripts.

Alan decided, and wrote in 1941: "In spite of the distress of the times and the prospect of disquiet and unsettled days to come, I feel that the publication of Canadian verse is a worth while and reasonable venture that could do much to help modern Canadian writers, for I know of no magazine now that is giving this help. I am willing and enthusiastic to do what I can for it." In 1941 the first issue of *Contemporary Verse* appeared.

During eleven anxious years of war and peace through which *CV* continued to be produced, Alan's phenomenal memory served him well, as it does today. As each submission arrived from a young or mature poet, his wife read the poem slowly to him, in its form, and he typed it in braille, in its form. He then "saw", contemplated, memorized the poem, and arrived at his conclusions. He wrote to the poet in full and his comments are still memorable to those who received them. He never returned a poem with a polite rejection only. His memory held the words for the time required and, when no longer needed, the words melted away. Jean then turned to the next communication. This faculty of his, or combination of faculties, together with the unfailing presence of his wife, and the constant but distant assistance of Floris McLaren in Victoria, helped to achieve the quarterly miracle of *CV*. Mrs. McLaren has kindly permitted me to refer to her article in *The Tamarack Review*. These references illuminate the times, and I am very grateful to her.

Among Canadian writers who have become well known and whose early poems were published in *CV* are Louis Dudek, Daryl Hine, Jay Macpherson, P. K. Page, James Reaney, Raymond Souster, Wilfred Watson, James Wreford, Miriam Waddington. All of these writers appeared many times in *CV* and their names are an indication of the intuition and critical perception of the editor. Among contributing poets whose verse was already published and well known were Earle Birney, Roy Daniells, Robert Finch, Ralph Gustafson, Ronald Hambleton, A. M. Klein, Dorothy Livesay, L. A. MacKay, F. R. Scott, and A. J. M. Smith, whose support has always been most generous, constant, and very much valued by Alan. Poems of Margaret Avison, Irving Layton, Norman Levine, Malcolm Lowry, Anne Marriott, Phyllis Webb, Anne Wilkinson and many others appeared — a whole new galaxy in the northern sky. In the first issue of *CV* Alan wrote, "Truth and beauty is not all told . . ." and he continued in the telling. John Sutherland wrote to him, "I envy you your knack of catching all the promising young poets." E. J. Pratt showed constant interest in the work and sent a poem for an anniversary number of *CV*. Two of Alan's young poets, men of great promise, were lost in the war. Bertram Warre (1917-1943), R.A.F., was killed in action over the western front, and J. K. Keith was killed fighting in Korea.

During these years about twenty of Anne Wilkinson's strange, sensitive poems appeared. In the summer issue of *CV*, 1947, was the first printing of "Five Poems" by Malcolm Lowry, the first of which was "Salmon Drowns Eagle". One issue consisted entirely of Dorothy Livesay's long poem "Call My People Home". Another was made up of the work of three poets — Louis Dudek, James Reaney and Raymond Souster. Alan's arrangements were original and unpredictable and *CV* was prophetic in records of fulfilment and further promise.

In September 1949 a brief was submitted to the Massey Commission by *Contemporary Verse* on behalf of poetry and the writers of poetry in Canada. In the introduction to this brief, Mr. Crawley said: "The boundaries of appeal have been widened and . . . there is a growing realization that the pressures, tensions and relationships of our complex industrial society can often be best comprehended through the poet's uncanny eye . . . Poetry is sterile without communication. It is in distribution and publication by the spoken and written word that communication is given to poetry and an intimacy is established."

Later in the brief Earle Birney wrote: ". . . It (*CV*) is the only Canadian verse magazine which has constantly maintained high editorial standards. It has introduced a number of important young Canadian writers to the public and

encouraged them to continue writing. What space it has been able to give to criticism has been intelligently used . . .”

The early days of Alan Crawley and the occasions both slight and catastrophic which preceded his knowledge and advocacy of work by contemporary Canadian poets and their fulfilment, testify to the innate gifts and selflessness of the man who — under manifest and unseen difficulties — became the editor of the most influential small poetry magazine of a chancy and critical time for literature in our country.

My best means of presenting the results of his work in Canada is to quote from some of the letters of the poets themselves, both then and now, and I am grateful for permissions. One friend speaks today of the remarkable ambience created by both Alan and Jean, and its effect upon the poet. Another says: “Among those who have helped in the revival of writing of poetry in Canada, Alan Crawley’s name will always stand out . . . it is as though his no-sight increased his insight . . .”

Jay Macpherson in a letter received today says: “What meant most to me ten or fifteen years ago was Alan’s affection and forbearance and generous understanding of one’s work. I’m much more aware now how practical all his kindness has been . . . Alan talked me into a more professional attitude and that was a turning point for me. I’ve passed his remarks on since then to numbers of student writers . . . he got one out of the trap of one’s own egotism . . . how rare was his kind of loyalty.”

And from another young — now well-known — poet to his editor: “I want to thank you for all the encouragement and assistance I got from you and *CV* . . . the best verse quarterly in Canada. It is particularly valuable in that it is not afraid to take chances with young unknown poets to whom publication can mean so much. This policy is of course the result of the editor’s deep understanding . . . Take *CV* out of the Canadian literary scene and you have nothing left east of longitude 85°”

Further letters during the years ’41 to ’53, include these. From Frank Scott:

Dear Alan:

At a time when many Canadians are considering the place of art and literature in their national life, I thought I would send you a few words of appreciation for the fine contribution you have made to Canadian poetry through your editorship of *Contemporary Verse*.

The “Little Magazine” has an important function to fulfil. It must act as a focal point for younger writers, giving them not only an early recognition of their merit

but also a sense of being welcomed and received by a larger circle. It is to the author what exhibition in a gallery is to a painter . . . an essential part of his self-expression. To more established writers it offers not only an additional opportunity for publication, but also that stimulating challenge to traditional styles and tastes which creative work always presents. This function *Contemporary Verse* has admirably performed under your guidance during the nine years of its life . . . Your contributors have included, I believe, all the poets who have made Canadian poetry the living part of our culture which it is now recognized as being . . .

Montreal, 1953

. . . I hear that you are giving up *C V* at last . . . nothing can quite take its place . . . Through it you have become part of the literary history of Canada, and you have the gratitude of a whole generation of poets.

I have only recently returned from my year with the *U N* in Burma. I have some unpublished poems to send somewhere; now where can I send them?

Frank Scott

From P. K. Page, 1949:

Dear Alan:

I have been thinking about writing in Canada a great deal lately . . . largely, I suppose, in connection with the Massey Commission, and naturally I have been thinking about you and *C V* . . .

Little magazines are essential in Canada if the movement — dare one call it that? — which has begun is to continue. But they are not the entire answer. Your policy has always been one in which you were as much concerned with the development of your contributors as you were with the standards of your magazine. Other magazines may be just as concerned but they do less about it . . .

Your criticism, encouragement, and even chastisement, have been enormously helpful to me, as they have, I know, to other writers . . . and (so has) the part played by you in being so much more than an editor.

From Louis Dudek on hearing of the possible ending of the life of *C V*, a long and interesting letter, hot off the fire. Fascinating, but too long to quote freely:

. . . that telegram (from ten poets) from F. R. Scott's house came with or went with a true concern for *C V* . . . A few hundred readers? Say it were ten. Ten may be a node of life in the midst of an organism.



From Anne Wilkinson, Toronto, 1947:

. . . how much I enjoyed your broadcasts. Enjoy is too tame a word . . . Canada is very lucky to have you. Poetry is alive when even one person feels as you do about it.

From J. G. McClelland, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1953:

. . . it was a shock and a disappointment to hear (on my return) that *Contemporary Verse* is no longer to be published. I can think of no one who has made a greater contribution to Canadian letters than you have through the publication of this magazine.

I marvel at the amount of correspondence which Alan carried on by means of his braille typewriter for the personal benefit of the young poets — regardless of difficulty, all for choice and all for love of poetry and of the poetry makers, wherever he detected a true light.

By 1951 a kind of lassitude had settled upon Canadian poetry, noted by F. R. Scott as “this apathy, everywhere, thick and heavy like a fog.” The vigour and stress and shock of war were now in the past and it may be that the muscles of the people relaxed in fatigue. Alan indicated an inclination to close the book. As Robert Weaver said: “When Mr. Crawley feels uncertain of himself and of his magazine at the present time, it seems to me that he is simply reflecting the uncertainties of Canadian poetry in a period of change.” In the Autumn issue, 1952, Alan wrote: “We have a strong belief that the work of a little magazine under the same editor’s direction declines in time from the peak of its usefulness. In this conviction we close our files . . .”

**A**FTER A FEW YEARS spent in the Okanagan Valley where Michael was fruit ranching, Alan and Jean and Michael returned to Victoria where they still live. Through his various media Alan continues to read widely. Yesterday came this letter from him which indicates something of the scope of his continued reading:

This day, Thursday, with a sweet breeze coming through the open window bringing just the wished-for heat and an unusual quietness in the street below, is the choicest time for me to write to *mes amis* and send some of the words I, We, have held for you until this letter . . .

I have tried several times to get the Sybille Bedford book (*The Faces of Justice*) from the lending library and failed, so I am very happy to have it from you, and hope there is no deadline for return, as at the moment we are partly through *A Passage to India* again — I was lucky to get it on Talking Books (but more of that later on), a *Tamarack Review* yet unopened, *The Paris Review* only nibbled at, the lately published reminiscences of Lampedusa, The Leopard, of whom we are very fond and admiring just arrived from London, a gift of a discerning and dear friend and, of course, *The New Statesman* and *The New Yorker* taking their expected precedence, so . . . there's glory for you and some smack of spoiling . . .”

Alan has a quick sense of humour; his face breaks into laughter; he plays a formidable game of bridge; he marks the blessed funninesses of the day; his humour defeats entirely what might have been his melancholy.

Every springtime my husband and I meet Jean and Alan for a few days in the sun and the shade in a quiet and beautiful spot by the sea, on Vancouver Island. A great deal is said, a great deal is laughed at, much is asked, some things are answered. When, last time we were there, Alan said, “This morning when I was reading . . .”, he meant on that sunny dream-like day that he has been reading, very early, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Lord's Song, translated by Annie Besant. In the dark, in the light, he reads. In cold weather he reads at night with his hands warm under the bedclothes and Jean — before she sleeps — hears the rustle of the turning of pages, like a mouse in the dark.

I asked Alan once, when we were alone, about his Theosophical and Christian faiths, and because I am not a student and have very little knowledge beyond the knowledge of faith, I cannot immediately understand. But Alan has studied very much and I think he goes unafraid into all faith and faiths and speculation. He explores in the continuous dark with his delicate finger-tips and his adventurous and honest mind the invisible yet illuminated areas of faith. I have not liked to question him deeply, but I think that his faith is in Theosophy, and in the living Christ in man, and in human friendship.

Alan's friends are very many, from east to west of the country, both literary and un-literary, both men and women. From them he takes their essence as they take his, and they are richer, through this remarkable and courageous man who has contributed to the literacy of his country and to the opportunity of his fellow countrymen.