

EARLE BIRNEY AND THE COMPOUND GHOST

Paul West

NO POMP OR POET'S POSE: just a tall, self-contained self-analyst dominating the lectern and mixing shrewd points with occasional smiling mutiny, as if to suggest a terrible soul beneath: not professional or vatic, but a gently wild man born in Calgary in 1904. That is how he must have appeared, as lecturer and reciter, during a multitude of performances in North America, Japan, Mexico, India and London. It is typical of him that he should speak of "saying" his poems, display a genial regard for beer-parlours and write, he supposes, to prevent himself from going mad.

The poet in this poet-professor has always delightedly fastened upon the unfamiliar: not to show off with, not because the Pacific Coast bores him or because he finds the ordinary too difficult, but because he has always been something of an animist. For him the temperate Canadian pastoral kept leaping into pageantry, bestiary and something close to the heraldic. We could liken him to his favourite Chaucer: voracious for the detail of contemporary life and yet, while musing on and exposing foible, lunging after ghosts, the miraculous or the shimmering timeless. The Birney of "Anglosaxon Street" is an inspector of human customs:

Then by twobit magic	to muse in movie,
unlock picturehoard,	or lope to alehall,
soaking bleakly	in beer, skittleless.

Home again to hotbox	and humid husbandhood,
in slumbertrough adding	sleepily to Anglekin.

The pastiche disguises nothing: this is the flavour of Chaucer but with more feel

for the motion of life than Chaucer has; the method is compactly allusive, as if he wants to transform everything. And the key to Birney's power, as to the disciplines and rigours he has imposed on himself, is his urge towards myth. This is why his Canadian pastorals never quite succeed. Because he is a lover of myth, he tends naturally to the dislocated reality of mountaineering and the lost reality of the Indians: for instance, the title-poem of his first book of poems, *David and Other Poems* (1942) is peculiarly diffuse yet crammed with exact data. The data is placed exactly nowhere:

One Sunday on Rampart's arete a rainsquall caught us,
And passed, and we clung by our blueing fingers and bootnails
An endless hour in the sun, not daring to move
Till the ice had steamed from the slate. And David taught me.

How time on a knife-edge can pass with the guessing of fragments
Remembered from poets, the naming of strata beside one

One might call it the inevitable Canadian metaphor, this siting of particulars in the vast blank. And whatever one calls it — whatever it tells us specially of Canada — it keeps falling short. Supposed to refer universally because it is of no region, it misses the suggestive power of such lines as these of Eliot:

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in the sunlight, into the Hofgarten. . . .

Eliot's two tent-pegging references — the colonnade and the Hofgarten — complicate reality all over again; they restore whole worlds to us, whereas Birney's descriptive sequence followed by that not very firm allusion to the poets merely insulates us. We have to set to work in order to get beyond the phantoms of atavism, the primitive pattern.

Having objected to the delicious particulars of such poems as "David" I have also to confess that I find the philosophical Birney (strong in *David and Other Poems* and repeated in more senses than one in the second volume, *Now Is Time*, 1945) just as far from enlightening me as I find, say, the Speech of the Salish Chief in *Trial of a City* (1952) a bit fusty, not a little fustian. Much of the early Birney is an express of vivid description with philosophical baggage to follow by the next train. There is no synthesis; but in his deliberate habit of reprinting earlier poems in the context of new ones there is an effort meriting great sympathy. It is Birney trying to put a world together: now blurring with general ideas, now thrusting detail (either urban or pastoral) into the middle of philosophising. He

cannot keep the pastoral intact, he knows, and the presence in *Now Is Time*, which is mostly war poems and excellent ones at that, of philosophical poems from *David* warns us that he is groping after something: a fusion, an amalgam, a compound. Again, in *The Strait of Anian* (1948) he juxtaposed his poetic past and his present, and in *Trial of a City* turned to satirical fantasy and recaptured the mordant note of some poems in *David*.

This progress is worth pursuing in further detail: it crazy-paved the way for what is Birney's finest and most recent achievement, *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*¹, the very title of which suggests a miscellany rammed together; a reconcilable quartet. He has approached it by finding various modes of expression variously unsatisfactory. First, the remote and straitened reality of "David" in which the conversations seemed hardly artificial enough: "but he cried, louder, 'No, Bobbie! Don't ever blame yourself; You can last.' He said only, 'Perhaps . . . For what? A wheelchair, Bob?'" Then the war poems, with an imagery that knocks us over before we have time to assume any attitude at all:

The clusters of children, like flies, at the back of messhuts,
or groping in gravel for knobs of coal,
their legs standing like dead stems out of their clogs.

And then the satirical semi-dramatic, the vocal equivalent of myth: the poet is seeking again the movement of conversation, trying to find an idiom and inflexion to partner the jumble he has now acquired of Seal Brother, Hell, salmon, sea-wolves, the Tide of the Thimbleberries, cetegrande, popcorn, "Narvik's blanching hulks", the "rotograved lie", the slug's "greentipped taut horns of slime", "dying Bering, lost in fog" and lilies growing their pungent bulbs unprompted.

AFTER A SILENCE of ten years he finds his way out in *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*, through a loose combination of voices. There is the deliberate patience of the professional gazer: as in "El Greco: *Espolito*":

The carpenter is intent on the pressure of his hand
on the awl, and the trick of pinpointing his strength
through the awl to the wood, which is tough.

The flat tone and meticulous eye seem to insulate the horror from us without,

¹ McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, \$3.50.

oddly enough, soothing us one bit. The point is well taken because we are allowed no guesswork. Because we are not the intended victims (not on *that* wood anyway) Birney deprives us of vicarious pain. Contrast this cool recital with such ventriloquism as the following:

Ah but I saw her ascend up in the assendupping breeze

There was a cloudfall of Kewpids
their glostening buttooms twankling

That comes from a poem called “Mammorial Stunzas for Aimee Simple McFarcin”; not far from Eliot’s Aristophanic melodrama, but closer than Eliot ever is to illustrious vernacular and rendered with a Dickensian relish for caricature. Just *listen* to this:

Jesus man what did you expect
Queen Liliuokalani spreadeagled on a tapa mat?
Sure they got a farm in Diamond Head crater this
a big place state cap world tour —
but any guy dont like Waikiki say we got
more catamarans surfboats fishspearin palmclimbin
than all them natives saw in a thousand
years waitin around for us okay maybe the hula
aint

The book displays three principal idioms: cool meditation studded with vivid detail, and pastiche of raw vernacular; these tend to slide into each other when the poet is empathising hard or really wanting the contrast of two points of view. The third is represented by a few poems in foundering, chaotic typography the point of which — presumably visual enactment — escapes me almost entirely. All three idioms, however, tell us a great deal about Birney the rebel. He is repudiating the professorial sage, the mug tourist and (I think) the Birney who shrinks from typographical trickery and therefore forces himself to attempt it. There is no need to choose between Birney the eloquent and reflective intelligence and Birney the mimic; in each role he is anxiously trying to relate himself to the world — and with gratifying success, all the more so when he deepens a poem by transcending while evoking the academic mode:

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 quoted in orchids. . . .

The mimicry is the fact, more or less, and the comment is the endlessly interpreting mind. Sometimes they are sandwiched in an impacted conversation:

*But arent there towns in Mexico more av-? Dear madam,
Actopan is a town more average than mean.
You may approach it on a sound macadam. . . .*

Always, however, whether or not the mimicry is full-blooded or tame, the conversations — like the personae, the academic-sounding exercises, the brilliant vignettes of Japan, Mexico, Siam, are metaphors for the essential loneliness of any articulate observer. The mimicry is the lunge out of oneself, the effort to transpose oneself without however losing the advantages of intelligence.

Ice Cod Bell or Stone is a conspectus of the poet's honesty while he strives to be more than a tourist in a world of gaudy surfaces and fraying skins. No-one anywhere is treated more impersonally than the tourist, and this book is a record of being a geographical and spiritual tourist. Observe the names, weird and unfriendly, which populate the Mexican reservation in this volume: Najarít, Ajjíc, Irapuato, Pachucan, Tepoztlán, Tehautepec. This poet responds acutely to the out-of-the-way; apart from the twelve poems about Mexico, which must almost all of them rank among his best, there are many novel themes or points of departure: a bear on the Delhi road, Captain Cook, El Greco, a tavern by the Helle-spont, Ellesmereland, Kyoto, a Bangkok boy, two poems by Mao Tse-Tung, Wake Island, Honolulu, Yellowstone, and (that telling mutilation) Aimee Simple McFarcin. By contrast the few Canadian poems seem less mature: quiet demonstrations of fidelity tucked in between bouts with seductive haunts where life is more intense.

Yet I do not think Birney yields to the meretricious or pursues novelty for novelty's sake (except typographically). In one poem called "Can. Lit." he explains that

We French, we English, never lost our civil war,
endure it still, a bloodless civil bore;
no wounded lying about, no Whitman wanted.
It's only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted.

It is precisely that lack of ghosts which emerges in the Canadian poems in this collection and which handicapped the early Birney until he went to war. Even this haunting poem about a tree seems no more, finally, than a punctuation mark added to a vast meaningless process:

Then the white frosts crept back. I took
to slipping out when no one looked
and poured the steaming crescent of my pee
over the shivering body of my tree.
That brown offering seemed to satisfy;
a warm tan mounted to her head.

The tan is a substitute for those ghosts. Significant too is the poem which gives the title:

Explorers say that harebells rise
from the cracks of Ellesmereland
and cod swim fat beneath the ice
that grinds its meagre sands
No man is settled on that coast
The harebells are alone
Nor is there talk of making man
from ice cod bell or stone.

It is all “say” and “alone”; he evokes a land of little purchase. He is supposed to deal with a country upon which the history of man’s failures and triumphs is hardly even recorded. Phantom hypotheses make a poor show alongside those who

. . . came chattering and dust-red from Asia
to these wharfstones, a tipsy Xenophon in tow. . . .

or that small Japanese boy with his kite:

tall in the bare sky and huge as Gulliver
a carp is rising golden and fighting
thrusting its paper body up from the fist
of a small boy on an empty roof higher
and higher into the winds of the world.

“It is not easy to free”, one poem says, “myth from reality”; we might have expected that from Birney. It is no surprise either that he appears with just a few poems on a country whose main reality is the Great Outdoors, and then seeks ballast in more storied countries. And yet, even allowing that he has a distinct point to make about being at home abroad and yet never belonging there, I feel somewhat uneasy about *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*. I feel prompted to ask: Has he done as ingeniously, as vividly, as boldly, by Canada as he might have done? All great northern boredoms and ice vacancies apart, surely this raw material from

daily reality whereas Birney the Canadian realist inherits only a few vague side-shows:

O mammoma we never forgess you
and your bag blue sheikel-getting ayes
loused, lost from all hallow Hollowood O

Aimee Aimee Tekel Upharsin

Birney's Mexico is dry, foetid, fly-blown, cruel, pauper-thick, tequila-eased, lottery-optimistic, tourist-pestered and legend-heavy:

Wholehearted Aztecs used this isle
for carving out the cores of virgins.
Cortés, more histrionic, purified it
with a fort and modernized the Indians
in dungeons contrived to flood each time
the tide was high.

History has bled to death there, but so it has in Rome, and there is much in Rome that is not imperial. It may be an advantage to a poet to have a theme with the grandeur or pain of history about it, but it should not be an essential. Otherwise the poet will become a mere historiographer. In one of his best poems the Italian poet Eugenio Montale makes highly effective use of a popular song, "Adios Muchachos"; Eliot's throbbing taxi is sinisterly eloquent and so are Pound's excerpts from headlines. If modern Canada has no legend, then the opportunities for imagism are considerable. Present the thing, for once, in terms of itself.

I FEEL SUPPORTED in these thoughts by Birney's own practice as a novelist. I am thinking not so much of *Turvey* (1949), his military comedy, but of the less applauded *Down the Long Table* (1955), which is primarily concerned with Leftist activities in Toronto and Vancouver. It opens with a public hearing where Professor Saunders, tired Canadian radical and specialist in mediæval English at a Mormon college in Utah, is denying un-American activities. But once a rebel. . . . The novel plods back over his picaresque career: as a young lecturer, quitting both Mormon college and pregnant mistress; pursuing a Ph.D. in Toronto; muddled politics, muddled love, bumming across Canada on freight trains in order to start a Third International in Vancouver; donnishly quizzing the layabouts of the South Vancouver Workers' Educational Army; eventually

returning to Utah, respectability and a safe chair (now having his doctorate). With less documentary purpose and more panache this might have been a disturbing and savage book. Birney separates his chapters with excerpts from newspapers, and this Dos Passos technique surely belongs in his poetry too. It proves he has some feeling for life's miscellaneous and kaleidoscopic quality and therefore too for such techniques as we find in poets as different as Eliot, William Carlos Williams and Pound. (Obviously Birney has enjoyed and learned from his Joyce; Aimee Simple McFarcin comes to us by that route.) *Down the Long Table* also reveals a flair, as I suggested earlier apropos of "Anglosaxon Street", for the motion and feel of life: a wilder Chaucer. And this flair, combined with the by no means idealizing or evasive eye intently turned on Mexico in *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*, is just what most Canadian poets lack. Irving Layton is too self-consciously tough; Jay Macpherson and James Reaney are too academic in flavour; Louis Dudek, if anyone other than Birney, has been close to what I am specifying, and his magazine *Delta* regularly offers samples of the right thing, although these are sometimes carelessly put together.

Birney alone, I feel, at present, has the necessary equipment. His sense of pageantry curbed by a gritty realism, he apprehends the squalid or the dull with visionary zest. Take this, for instance, from *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*:

those ladies work at selling hexametric chili,
and all their husbands, where the zocalo is shady,
routinely spin in silent willynilly
lariats from cactus muscles; as they braid they
hear their normal sons in crimson shorts go shrilly

bouncing an oval basketball about the square —

The power of that is not in the exotica but in one phrase, "all their husbands", which suggests in the echo of that popular-song fragment — "where the zocalo is shady" an absolute, almost preposterous vision of labour. All the husbands (as in the poem quoted earlier) are collected up and frozen into a helix of work, rather like those streams of soaring and diving souls in William Blake's drawings. It is a microcosm: mysterious women obedient to occult routine; their husbands, *all* of them, animated by something heavy — all the suet in suetude; and the "normal" sons not yet conscripted but devising their timekiller just the same. It is a most original and graphic piece of summary poetry: tough enough to stand a little experiment I tried by altering a few words:

Those ladies work at selling Pentagonal jelly,
and all their husbands, where the conifer is shady,
routinely spin in silent willynilly
lariats of smoke from new Havanas; as they fume they
hear their normal sons in boxer shorts go shrilly

bouncing an oval basketball across the border —

A small homage to Birney the satirist. But a presumption and defensible only because I think poetry ought almost always to be contaminated by the great deal of our living that is ugly, awkward or vapid. Ice, cod, bell and stone belie the book, are more pastoral than the symbols Birney manages best, and more Canadian-sounding than the book's contents. They remind us that the most characteristically Canadian thing is the Canadian landscape; cities, on the other hand, merge together. One would like to see Birney at the automat or the supermarket; if he can tackle a diaper, as he does in the present collection, then the rest is easy. Our civilization is unlikely to restore itself to a life based exclusively on ground-roots and the pasturing of animals.

Let us hope that Birney's proposed trips to the Caribbean and Latin America are intended to give him an objective view of the home image, for a graphic synopsis to come, with the whole of the world jumbled together on the poet's own planet. *Ice Cold Bell or Stone* marks a tremendous access of vision and technique, and proves that the lack of ghosts is, properly speaking, immaterial to a poet as good as this.