

SWARMING OF POETS

An Editorial Reportage

George Woodcock

WHEN *Canadian Literature* began, twelve years ago, I promised that every book of verse by a Canadian poet, as well as every novel published in this country, would be reviewed in its pages. It was an easy promise in a year — 1959 — when twenty-four volumes of poetry were all that the bibliographer who compiled our checklist of publications could discover. All twenty-four, I believe, were duly reviewed. Through the Fifties, Northrop Frye, writing his yearly poetry article in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, had been able to devote a few sentences or even a few paragraphs to every book of verse that appeared; they came, in those days, mainly from the regular publishers, who lost money on good poets to give prestige to their lists. There were few small presses; amateur publishing hardly existed; the mimeograph revolution had not begun.

The change since then was brought home to me with formidable emphasis on a recent morning when nineteen books of verse arrived for review in one mail delivery. The poetry explosion of the past decades was a phenomenon I had already talked of lightly enough; now it was going bang in my face. Last year, according to *Canadian Literature's* annual checklist, more than 120 collections of verse in English alone were published in Canada, and that is a minimal count, for we were well aware that by no means every title had been flushed out of the coverts and copses of amateur publishing. This year, if that one day's mail was a fair augury, the total may well run into 250 or 300 titles in English. With that realization I had to admit to myself that it was time to abandon even the pretence of reviewing every book or pamphlet that a Canadian poet might drift on to the current of public attention.

Now came the nag of editorial conscience. If only thirty or forty books of verse can be noticed at meaningful length, someone has to make the choice, and since editing like writing is a craft that cannot be performed in committee, the choice has to be made by an individual, and inevitably his perceptions and tastes will be dominant. This editor presents as his justification — and his limitation — that he was weaned into writing on Imagism and Original Dada, proved his youth in the shouting Thirties, saddened into manhood in the romantic Forties, and came in the Sixties to a solitary selfhood expressed in verse drama which only the CBC has seen fit to encourage. He claims, at the least, an experience varied enough to spot when poets are merely doing again what was done better when it was first conceived, a caution about condemning anything that seems to have new life, an old dog's nose for the smell of failure, a bone-deep knowledge of the flaw in every success.

But once the score or two of books to be reviewed have been duly selected by such eminently fallible means, what of the books that remain? The least one can do is to list them for reference, and this we have tried to do year after year in the Checklist, but with a growing sense, as more and more collections of verse are *merely listed*, of the need for something more, some kind of occasional survey of the poets and trends that are emerging into significance and the little presses that encourage them.

During the last month, in the attempt to do at least this minimal justice, I have read some eighty books and booklets of verse that have accumulated on my desk. I cannot say that I have reached any portentous theoretical conclusions; there has not been time to be more than impressionistic. But perhaps that is not inappropriate at a time when the current prejudice against structure has helped to prevent even the emergence of a definable trend that might be compared with those of the Thirties or Forties. One has the feeling of a guerilla army percolating in all directions, and not always forward, for often the movements whose outlines one fleetingly recognizes are in fact ghosts, the ghosts of Dada, of Surrealism, even, in the latest wave of younger poets, of the social Thirties.

NOW FOR A HEADER into the bookpile! On top are the anthologies; of the first two I turn up, one is made by a young poet selecting from the stars of Establishment 1970; it is *Fifteen Canadian Poets*, edited by Garry Geddes (Oxford, \$3.95). The second is selected, by one of the Establish-

ment stars, from among the young (an unspecified "upper age limit" has been imposed, but it is hard to determine, since at least eight of the contributors have crossed into the thirties and some born later are already old at heart); it is *Storm Warning*, edited by Al Purdy (McClelland & Stewart, \$2.95). Out of this group, Purdy believes, the next Establishment will emerge, and he may be right, for already the leading poets of the day as Geddes reveals them in *Fifteen Canadian Poets* are different from those an anthologist working ten years ago would have presented. Then Purdy, Cohen, Mandel, would have been regarded as junior members, doubtful borderline cases; now, next to Birney, Souster and Layton, they seem the elders in Geddes' collection, and even George Bowering and Margaret Atwood, of whom very few had heard in 1961, have become accepted literary personalities; the only real newcomers to the group are Victor Coleman and Michael Ondaatje. Even in five years, some of Purdy's unknowns or half-knowns will obviously have moved into that little circle of celebrity whose light we in the world of letters call fame.

Fifteen Canadian Poets is a finely chosen anthology, picked mainly — though not entirely — from poems written during the Sixties, avoiding over-familiar works, and convincingly demonstrating the imaginative and textual richness of the best Canadian poetry produced during the decade that has just ended. There are other poets I would have included — P. K. Page and Miriam Waddington certainly and George Jonas perhaps — and at least two of the poets included I would have left out, but it is precisely in such debatable cases that the intangibilities of taste take over from the relative certainties of critical judgment. And despite differing preferences, I doubt if any anthologist could have composed a selection which *as a whole* is more effective than *Fifteen Poets*. I suspect the limitation in the number of poets, like the very lucid notes on them, was primarily intended to make the book useful to students and teachers, but for the general reader as well this kind of selective anthology is the ideal supplement to a classic general collection like A. J. M. Smith's *Modern Canadian Verse*. Smith is extensive; Geddes is intensive. We need both views.

My strongest impression on reading *Storm Warning* was of the obvious pre-eminence of David Helwig among the poets Purdy has collected. He is older, of course, than at least four of the Geddes Fifteen, and he writes with a sureness of rhythm and a clearness of imagery, a positively visual evocativeness, that place him — and have placed him since his first book — firmly within the major tradition as it exists in Canada.

So far as the other poets are concerned, I like to consider *Storm Warning* in

relation to two collections of work by younger poets which The House of Anansi has recently published: *Soundings* (\$2.50 paper, \$6.00 cloth), a selection from "new Canadian poets" made by Andy Wainwright and Jack Ludwig, and *Mindsapes* (\$2.50 paper, \$7.50 cloth) which is devoted to four poets — Dale Zieroth, Paulette Jiles, Susan Musgrave and Tom Wayman.

In general Purdy's collection gives an impression of greater fluency than Ludwig-and-Wainwright's, and this one can relate to the flowing pace of Purdy's own poems which is reflected in his taste for other poets' verse. Though some of the items included are common to both volumes, *Soundings* projects a dryer, more "brainy" flavour, a faint smell of damp coats in creative writing seminar rooms. But the cumulative effect of the two collections, combined with the larger batches of poems in *Mindsapes*, is a modestly exciting one. There are, as in most recent anthologies, poems that are pretentious and dull, poems that are mechanically experimental, poems that have reduced simplicity to poverty — and by that I don't mean the transfiguring poverty of which anarchists speak, but a destitution of the word, a positive desiccation that has made the task of reading through so much recent minor poetry resemble the trials of an explorer condemned to traverse the Gobi desert with no other sustenance than Shredded Wheat. Both anthologies, in other words, have their share of non-poets busily writing themselves into impasses. But when one counts these out, and when one suspends hasty praise of those authentic voices that need more exercise (such as Gail Fox, Terry Crawford and Andrew Susnaski, all of whose work may well reward the following), there are still a number of poets who stand out not merely as individuals but as portents of a deepening of the general poetic stream which recently has been running so widely but shallowly through the rapids of easy publication. (For the poetry explosion, like the population explosion, while it proceeds geometrically, still produces geniuses only in arithmetic proportion.) Let me name some names: Kenneth Belford, Brenda Fleet, Patrick Lane, Dennis Lee, Sid Marty, Tom Wayman. These are poets who not merely promise; they have already, and in notably varied voices, achieved.

They have grown out of the breathing exercises and funny spelling games which made a kind of literary Palm Springs out of a good deal of recent Canadian — particularly west Canadian — poetastery. They have learnt, by various ways of solitude, that the histrionics of the reading circuits may earn easy money and heady applause, but do nothing for a poetry that is meant to be more than a transient succession of happenings. They are allowing their inner voices to speak and deepen, they are acting as if craft — as it does — presages art, they are

clarifying their images; they are acknowledging that a poem is not a mere episode, that it may begin in passion and incite to action, but, if it is to achieve its intent, must be transmuted into an artifact detached from the poet and eventually contemplated by those whose only access to its final depths will be — despite Maitreya McLuhan — that still aperture in the jabbering wall of multiple consciousness which the white window of the page can offer.

I confine myself to brief impressions, since these are poets whose work will certainly be reviewed more intensively in *Canadian Literature*. In general terms, the three tendencies I find attractive in such poets are: (a) a veering of emphasis from the alienation of industrial society towards reintegration by a direct return to the natural world; (b) a beginning — at very long last — of the transmutation of new radical styles into real poetry of social significance, as one used to call it in the Thirties, with — again at very long last — some of the Thirties passion and purposiveness; (c) an inclination to return to a poetry of memory and continuity, in which the past is again recognized and a historical view is recreated.

The first tendency appears in some variety in the work of Kenneth Belford, Patrick Lane and Sid Marty, all of them writing from experience of the wilderness or its margins, and together forming the vanguard of what may be a new Canadian mythology, replacing Frye's garrison mentality by a guerilla mentality which, to adapt Mao's image, sees the poet swimming like a fish in the waters of the natural world. As Kenneth Belford puts it in *The Post Electric Cave Man* (Talonbooks, \$3.00):

The literal nature
of this
country. The
geography of
it.
Leading me somewhere.
And I willing.

That is perhaps an unfair example of the verse these poets are producing. Most of it is much less laconic and elemental, but Belford in this case uses his sparseness, I think, to make a necessary point. Among these mountain men poets, it is Sid Marty, so far — I gather — volumeless, whom I find the most varied and rewarding.

During the later Thirties there came a time when social protest turned from an invigorating to a debilitating element in poetry; that was when we began to

see how the Stalinists had betrayed the Left in Spain. Something like this may well happen again, but at present we are still in the invigorating stage so far as the better Canadian poets of rebellion are concerned (though I have also seen some abominable Stalinoid crudities coming from West Coast rhymesters). I find a deep appeal, for instance, in the superimposition of anger on a lyrical gift which Brenda Fleet demonstrates in a poem like "Quebec" (included in *Storm Warning*). But in social poetry it is necessary not only to appeal, but also to shock and to stir sardonic laughter, and here it is Tom Wayman who, in all the three collections of young poets I have mentioned, but particularly in *Mindscaapes*, emerges as one of the true originals in contemporary Canadian poetry. Wayman has convictions, but he does not produce propaganda, and, whatever group may have his affiliations, he is no party slave in his writing. He has moments of controlled, grave lyricism even in his most committed poems, of the kind that makes his "Dream of the Guerillas" not only impressive as a statement of position but also convincing as an artifact, a work that may well survive — if mankind survives at all — to take a future reader for an instant into the heart of such idealism as exists in our age.

And night quiet
 after the dream.
 Street lights burn on.
 The slogans are calm on dim walls. The clock,
 the clock says: now
 the guerillas are coming and you must go with them.

There are Wayman poems of intense bitterness against the ruling system, poems of honesty about the weaknesses of new radicals and new radicalism (such as one had ceased to expect in so self-righteous a Movement), poems of sardonic comedy in which the counter culture for once observes and mocks its own clowning. Thus, as a bonus to their great poetic vigour, Wayman's poems — like all good poems of social interest — have a genuine documentary value.

Dennis Lee's recognition of the past, of the sweep of history necessary for the understanding of a present which, whatever our romantic instants may demand, is never comprehensible merely as the everlasting Now, sharpens his political bitteresses with a there-but-for-the-grace-of-God admission that statesmen are often merely the scapegoats for other men's inertia, complicity and shame:

... Doesn't the
 service of quiet diplomacy require dirty hands?

(Does the sun in summer pour its warm light into the square
for us to ignore? We have our own commitments.)
And then if it doesn't work one is finally
on the winning side, though that is
unkind. Mr. Martin is an honourable man, as we are all
Canadians and honourable men.

But Dennis Lee's talents are already recognized, as a poet and above all as the superbly resourceful publisher of experimental fiction and poetry at the House of Anansi. Dale Zieroth, though he appears in *Storm Warning*, *Soundings* and, at some length, in *Mindscapes*, has not yet published a volume, and his quite exceptional poetry has, to my knowledge, been little praised. Yet Zieroth may well be that genuine recollective poet of the prairies for whom we have been waiting. What Bowering, Mandel and Newlove do occasionally in their poems remembering prairie childhoods and journeys, Zieroth does in depth with the reconstruction, in images of dark and almost Proustian luminosity, of life in a minority community of a small and remote prairie town. He writes, as Purdy and Tom Wayman do, in fluent long-line verse, logical and sequential, based on sentences and their appropriate rhythms rather than on a mosaic of phrases, and mostly avoids the voice-constricting narrow column which nowadays has become as monotonously usual as the iambic pentameter once was. It makes Zieroth's poetry all the more effective that, again like Proust, he does not merely involve himself in recollections of a childhood environment. He has moved as a countryman to the city, and that experience is intertwined with the rural past, and the two are cemented by descriptions of revisitings, so that past and present establish a continuum, and the life of the prairies is seen in the context of a way of existence familiar to most contemporary Canadians. "Prairie Grade School", "The People of Lansdowne", "Father", "Journey into Winter", are perhaps the key poems in the structure of this recollective vision, though the individual poem that impressed me most of all, and that incidentally brings Zieroth near to the mountain men (and especially to Patrick Lane's "Wild Horses" with its similar casting of man rather than the natural world as the aggressor) was "The Hunters of the Deer". The hunters go out and kill and return to the farmhouse, and after feeding, all but the farmer depart.

And when they leave, the man sleeps
and his children sleep while the woman
waits and listens for the howling of the
wolves. To the north, the grey

she-wolf smells the red snow and howls.
 Tonight, while other hunters sleep, she
 drinks at the throat.

For my taste, Sid Marty, Tom Wayman and Dale Zieroth are the best of the younger poets who have recently emerged in Canadian magazines and anthologies. But they are by no means all who are worth watching, as my month's impressionistic survey of the products of the little presses convinced me.

IF I HAD TO NAME the half-dozen men who have done most to stimulate interest in Canadian poets during the last decade, I would pick Robert Weaver for instigating CBC patronage to scores of poets, A. J. M. Smith as the master anthologist, Jack McClelland and Dennis Lee as general publishers, and Louis Dudek and Fred Cogswell for their small press activities. Picking my way among the presses from east to west, I begin in Fredericton with Cogswell. He has now withdrawn from editing the magazine *Fiddlehead*, but he continues under its imprint to publish a great variety of pamphlets and small books of verse. I have never been able to find any principle on which Fred Cogswell makes his selections, unless it is that any dedicated poet of even the most modest ability deserves an edition of 500 copies to try his work out on something wider than his immediate circle of friends. I have twenty-two of these little books in the pile before me, and that is not a year's whole *Fiddlehead* list. Indeed, year by year, such brochures appear in greater numbers. Only a few are the work of poets who have really found their way; the rest are at best notes for poetry. Cogswell himself seems to recognize a hierarchy by printing a few and mimeographing the rest, and it is the printed booklets that include all but one of the *Fiddlehead* poets worth watching in this batch. I mention especially, among the younger poets, Gail Fox's *The Royal Collector of Dreams*, Marc Plourde's *Touchings*, Derk Wynand's *Locus*, and Marg Yeo's *Game for Shut-ins*.

Not all the poets Fred Cogswell prints are young writers. Some have names that echo, even if faintly, down the decades. Neil Tracy's *Voice Line* is perhaps representative of them. Tracy can best be described as a competent archaist. His disgust for the present is so great that he not merely uses outdated language but also sets most of his poems in a pioneer past. There is an outworn poeticism about much of Goodridge Macdonald's work as well, yet there are verses worth any critic's respect in his *Selected Poems*, and especially that chilling piece, "The Harried Hare", where man's life finds its analogy in that of the beast he hunts.

And if at last
 Fence-leaping, circling over snow and moss,
 Over the rocks of broken pasture land
 And frozen furrows of the farm's fall ploughing,
 Backtracking among trees, at night he comes
 Alive, to a burrow under log or stone,
 Eluding the last hunter, knowing
 That the last hound has now been whistled home,
 And snuggles into sleep: — Then comes the stoat
 Whose teeth slit to the jugular while he sleeps,
 And all his little life is sucked away.

As the snow falls again upon the fields
 And the wind cries across the frosted fields.

That, it seems to me, is a good farewell from the last of the old Fredericton clan of poets.

One encounters much more rarely than even ten years ago the kind of Tennysonian-Georgian pastiche that was produced in such quantity by the good old ladies of the Canadian Authors' Association. Most of its practitioners, I imagine, have departed. Yet traditional verse is still being written; it is only that the tradition has shifted forward to Lawrence and Eliot and even Wallace Stevens, and conservatism tends to be in form and image rather than in sentiment and vocabulary. The poets who work in such an idiom often find themselves in the same position nowadays as painters who do not happen to fit in with the ascendant and sometimes spurious modernism that has taken the place and authority of the old academy; the neophiliacs are in, which means that the traditionalists are out, and that is no more just than the old situation. In their own manner traditionalist poets nowadays are inclined to be more competent and flexible in their techniques and to have more to say than the CAA versifiers who preceded them, and one welcomes a venture like the Ladysmith Press in Quebec, whose recently established series of traditionalist poets includes Alan Shucard's *The Gorgon Bag*, Sean Haldane's *The Ocean Everywhere* and Marnie Pomeroy's *For Us Living* (all paperbound, \$1.75).

Moving westward, Montreal has several small presses that publish mainly poetry. The most justly prestigious is, of course, Delta Canada, which Louis Dudek founded. Glen Siebrasse is now Managing Editor. Delta has taken the first risk on an astonishing number of young Canadian poets who have now become Establishment figures, and has kept in print a number of older poets who have somehow missed a wider recognition. Far from resting on the laurels the

The Sono Nis Press was born under a bush called Creative Writing, and its productions have largely tended to display that combination of inverted academicism and competitive ambition which characterizes the ingrown atmosphere of the writing classes. Now Sono Nis — like its creator, has withdrawn from academia, but the signs of the shift are slow in appearing. The uniform series of \$2 booklets which the Press is issuing has almost every initial point in its favour. The 28 pages to which all the booklets run is a sufficient length to give a fair sampling of each poet; they come with a quite attractive surrealist drawing or photomontage on the front cover and a romantic chiaroscuro photograph of the author on the back cover, and they are printed in a clean and legible typewriter facsimile process on good paper. Yet one bites into many of these attractive fruit, and the dust of pretentious failure dries one's palate. Reading them, one seems to hear the sneakered tread of the legions of *poètes manqués* tramping away from the writing schools of North America with those fine diplomas which may make them teachers in other writing schools but will never alone certify that they are poets.

Yet there are exceptions among the Sono Nis booklets, and three of them impressed me: three out of ten — a good publishing score! *File of Uncertainties* brings forward once again the extraordinary baroque talent of Andreas Schroeder, a poet of metaphysical cast and verbal fertility who already stands out among the young poets of the Far West. *Private Speech: Messages 1962-70* is the work of an established and accomplished elder poet, Robin Skelton; the "messages" are, in the better sense of the word, notes for poetry, wellings-up which the poet has wisely left unrefined. Finally, there is *In the Meshes*, the work of Mieszko Jan Skapski, a poet who appeared fairly widely in little magazines, but has never before published a volume. Skapski is a working fisherman who for six years has operated his own boat off the coast of British Columbia — this after a Paraguay boyhood. He is in the process of turning deeply felt experiences into a poetry awash with correspondences.

Currents corrode currents.
The onwash breaks on iron rocks.

He wakes the days it drizzles —
Caulks the open seams in existence:
Rot tangles in his nets.

Twilight finds him turning home
At the upper reaches of this tributary.

The shore breezes turn back to the sea.

Blew Ointment Press sends out its books like those guerillas whose ostentatious carelessness of dress betrays them immediately. Everything is done on a highly economical scale, on paper that takes ink badly, and by processes, of which Bill Bissett holds the secret, so devastating that my copy of a set of neo-surrealist montages by Gary Lee Nova (*Cosmic Comics*) tantalizes with mere hints of a visual wit almost completely concealed by the baffling greyness into which everything is blurred. That baffling greyness, indeed, seems to epitomise Bill Bissett's achievements, obstinately and by principle amateur, indefatigably performed in the shadow of arbitrary persecution, all of which can only inspire in one an esteem he perhaps neither wants nor reciprocates, so much a man of the tribal outside inside he has made himself. One encounters the uncompromising outside insiderness even in his poetry, which he so fences in with arbitrary spelling and bad mimeography that one advances into it seemingly against the poet's will. The primitive warrior pointing his spear, white blade flashing out of shadows of grey ink, on the cover of his latest mimeo-pamphlet, *S TH STORY I TO*, seems to have more than decorative intent. There is a no-trespass atmosphere about it all which contrasts, even among like-minded experimenters, with bp nichol's disarming and inviting elegance. Yet in these enormous wads of tangled typescript (deliberately avoiding anything that might be remotely suspected of visual attractiveness in the same way as the poems themselves avoid audial gracefulness); in the vast minglings of zany fantasy, and life style propaganda, and political criticism, and piteous lyricism, and batik-like typewriter patterns, and drawings that recall Cocteau's *Opium*, one is reminded that to most people who first read them Pound's *Cantos* seemed equally chaotic and devoid of meaning at the core; they still do to many, including some of Pound's self-proclaimed disciples. There *is* a meaning in what Bissett has to say, but it is as diffused as Monet's light. One does not *read* that meaning; one absorbs it by osmosis, surrendering oneself to the baffling greyness, to the god who appears as a potent fog. Bill Bissett, I conclude, is both a myth and a mythmaker.

I have mentioned Monet's light and bp nichol, and this brings me to Talon Books, last of the presses whose books appear in my pile. Talon's publication of Ken Belford's *Post Electric Man* I have already mentioned; the press's most original recent publication is something very different — a little black box filled with white cards each bearing a few words or even one word printed in sans-serif type. It is an artifact — one can hardly call it a book — by bp nichol, named

