

VALEDICTIONS

Pacey and Crawley

IT IS A CURIOUS THING about living in Canada, in its literary world, that one can know a person, work with him, correspond with him, share some close thoughts with him, and yet, distances and our way of life being what they are, realize when it all comes to an end how rarely one has met him in the flesh. Recently two men have died who played great roles in the development of literature in Canada, mediational as well as creative roles, and I have felt the sadness one feels when friends depart. And yet, when I come to remember, I realize that I met Alan Crawley once only in the flesh, twenty-six years ago when I first came back to Canada from England, and that I can have sat and talked with Desmond Pacey no more than three times in the last decade. Nevertheless, there was so much in common, so much in shared thoughts and hopes that went beyond mere links of letters or of disembodied voices at the ends of wires, that I believe I knew them, and know I valued and understood what they sought to achieve and in such large measure did achieve.

Of Desmond Pacey, two men who in fact knew him more closely and directly than I did, Roy Daniells and Fred Cogswell, are writing in the pages of this issue. I myself have said what I feel I must of him in an article published recently in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, in which I remarked on his importance as a literary historian, on his more limited but genuine virtues as a critic, on his role in encouraging younger scholars and fostering literary magazines, on the long unchallenged position of his *Creative Writing in Canada* as "the only up-to-date handbook of our literary history that we had available." I remarked that "Pacey's role in arousing interest in Canadian writers and writing has been enormous, and rivalled

in recent years, I think, only by that of A. J. M. Smith with his great anthologies which were acts of history and criticism as well as of discriminative selection.”

I will be content to let the writers who follow say what else must be said of Desmond Pacey, though I feel impelled before giving place to them to add that only now he is dead and his work can be seen as a whole, within its context, does one realize fully what a presence he has been in our national cultural life over a whole generation, from the day his first book — on Frederick Philip Grove who remained an enduring interest — appeared in 1945. It would be false to say that he cannot be replaced, for it is a measure of his achievement that others have emerged to sustain the role he once upheld. But one can look back to times when his influence was crucial, and when he was irreplaceable, if by that one understands that without him our literature — or at least our image of it — might have been greatly different from what it became. He was an abiding influence, yet perhaps, though he died early and at the height of his intellectual energy, his role was in the major sense fulfilled.

The same could be said of Alan Crawley, whose active role was of much shorter duration than Desmond Pacey’s, but equally crucial. When I came first to Canada there were, apart from *Canadian Forum* and the short-lived *Here and Now*, only two literary journals in English, both of them small in size and financially imperilled. One was John Sutherland’s *Northern Review*, edited from Montreal, and the other was Alan Crawley’s *Contemporary Verse*, edited from Victoria. Both of them vanished in the early 1950’s, and there followed a hiatus of several years before their places were taken by *Tamarack Review* in 1956; after that the age of subsidized and surviving journals began to give writers a varied and assured field for publication such as had existed at no time before in Canada.

I remember with gratitude that Alan Crawley published the first of my verse to appear in Canada, but I am not sure whether he or John Sutherland published the first of my Canadian prose. Certainly it was one of them, for there was nowhere else but their journals to go, and much as one eventually regretted the varying necessities that forced these courageous editors to end publication, one appreciated the devotion with which they had kept their magazines operating in a milieu where few but writers themselves and a handful of their friends seemed to care about the existence of literature, and where even fewer were convinced of its importance in embodying whatever consciousness of themselves and the uniqueness of their land Canadians were developing.

For Alan Crawley his editing was a labour of love, but also part of an extraordinary drama of self-regeneration. He had always been interested in the arts,

and in literature especially; it was part of his upbringing, of the atmosphere he had breathed since his Ontario childhood. But the interest had remained unactivated during the years when he studied and built up his practice as a successful corporation lawyer. In mid-career, in his forties, an illness unexpectedly struck him incurably blind. He came west to British Columbia, learnt Braille, and in rediscovering poetry he found his vocation. Poetry, felt through his fingertips, listened to, learnt by heart, became his life, and, having the leisure and the will, he conceived the idea of the magazine, devoted entirely to poetry in a contemporary tone, which he felt was lacking. In 1941, when its first number appeared, *Contemporary Verse* was not yet the only poetry magazine in Canada, but places to print verse were so few that it could not help play a vital role, during the eleven years until its end in 1952, in encouraging both the already known poets like Earle Birney, Dorothy Livesay and P. K. Page, and the younger poets like James Reaney and Jay Macpherson who were to carry the tradition forward into the 1950's.

Contemporary Verse, whose whole achievement in physical shape can be held in the two hands, so slim were the issues compared with today's Canada-Council-fattened journals, is an extraordinary feat, even in retrospect, since Crawley's judgment — perhaps because it was inevitably a judgment of the ear, was so true that amazingly little that passed his editorial view seems even now discardable. The issues of the journal, read together, have the containment of an anthology, a selection by a brilliant connoisseur and critic of the best works in an art he did so much to foster and in his own way to shape. Crawley never wrote poetry himself, but his feeling for it was almost faultless.

As an editor, as a man, Crawley made an ineradicable impression on those he encountered. I remember over almost half a life the one afternoon we talked away at Floris McLaren's house so long ago in Victoria, and the extraordinary feeling of alertness and — strangely — of probing watchfulness this blind man projected. Losing his eyes, he seemed to have toned all other antennae to their maximum receptivity.

Six years ago, in *Canadian Literature's* tenth anniversary issue, we published a documentary which George Robertson had compiled on Crawley's life and work. Let me end by quoting from it three passages spoken by P. K. Page, whom Crawley encouraged when she was a young poet and who remained his friend until death. Uttered by a poet who knew Crawley personally in a way I knew him mainly through his work, they give as close a feeling as anything I have heard or read of what Crawley was like to encounter as an editor, as a man.

I remember that he would write back and tell you that he just didn't think the poem was good enough. I have no idea how he went about doing what he did. He certainly communicated with you. I think probably the thing that one needed more than criticism was encouragement, because, in my own case any way, I wrote rather for myself, and when I suddenly found that you could write for somebody else as well, you could write for a response — it was a very curious experience. This may sound ridiculous, but it's true nevertheless. Alan as far as I was concerned had a facility to turn on the tap, but how he worked critically, I've no idea. If he didn't like what came out of the tap, he'd send it back quite ruthlessly, at least ruthlessly isn't the word, but quite directly. He was always very direct in all his dealings with you. If he liked the poem he told you; if he didn't he told you. But the main thing was some kind of a contact, some kind of a tension between two people, some kind of a polarity.

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He was a very emotional man, Alan, a very undemonstrative emotional man. You saw very little of the emotion, but you felt a great deal of it, and you felt that he was very much in touch with you in some way. That he had a strong empathetic quality, is the feeling I had about him. As a result of this, one had no shyness with Alan and this was his great strength for me — I was a rather reticent person and to suddenly find somebody with whom one was not shy, someone in an editorial capacity, that is — because after all one did find one's own individuals with whom one wasn't shy of course — but to find somebody in an editorial capacity to whom you could show a poem that you thought maybe was simply awful, "but it doesn't matter, if it's really awful, Alan will tell me it is; and if it isn't awful, well, we can talk about it."

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I remember this marvellously Spanish looking man. He looked as if he might have come out of — or he might almost have been an El Greco painting with this extraordinary alive quality about him, and a tremendous capacity to know where everybody was in the room and to be following and with you in your conversation. Periodically I used to stay with Alan and Jean in Caulfield where they were very generous to poets, I must say — long suffering and generous and we'd get mildly drunk in the evening and quite bawdy, and laugh a tremendous amount. I think it was the laughter I remember as much as anything. I don't know whether he was dominating the room he was in but he was on top of the room he was in; and seemed a good deal sharper than the rest of us, which indeed he was, I think.

P. K. Page on Alan Crawley. I can conceive no better or more truly felt and spoken tribute.

GEORGE WOODCOCK