

## THE A.W. PURDY COLLECTION

The University of Saskatchewan collection of the books and papers of the Canadian writer Al Purdy is one of two major holdings of his work to 1967, the other being at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. The University of Toronto also has a small but noteworthy collection.

The Saskatchewan holdings, acquired in 1966 through Montreal literary agent Laurie Hill, include the earliest preserved Purdy materials. The most interesting of these are a little book of birchbark pages onto which a poem entitled "Reilly" has been typed and seven small typescript books of largely unpublished or uncollected poetry dated as far back as March, 1939. The volumes, which are titled "The Road to Barbary", "A Prairie Odyssey", "Robin Hood", "The Land Over Yonder" (which incorporates the Robin Hood sequence), and "Songs of the Restless Ones", are filled with predominantly undistinguished poems that show little of the originality of vision which was to characterize Purdy's mature work.

There are a large number of manuscripts that would allow the interested person to trace Purdy poems from the earliest holograph stage through to revised typescript forms. The drafts are written on an astounding number of scrap paper forms, ranging from the back of Vancouver General Hospital X-ray forms, through finance and drug company letterhead, and an opened-out box of Trump cigars to a tissue. Occasionally drafts are accompanied by a note or brief letter indicating

the originals behind portraits, sources of the poem or poetic influences. So, writing of three poems published in The Cariboo Horses (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), Purdy identifies the factory of "The Machines" as Vancouver Bedding on Clark Drive, the title character of "Old Alex" as Alex Carmichael, and the source of the title quotation "'Malachi Stilt-Jack Am I'" as a Yeats poem. The young poet being elegized in "The Death of a Young Poet" from Wild Grape Wine (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), is, according to Purdy, Red Lane, who died suddenly on December 1, 1964, and the influences on Purdy's poem "Ballad of the Despairing Wife", published in The Cariboo Horses, are identified as Robert Creeley's "Ballad of the Despairing Husband" and "The Door", which both appeared in Donald Allen's The New American Poetry (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

Among the more interesting of the miscellaneous papers in the collection is a receipt dated October 2, 1963 for thirteen dollars from the Magistrate's Court in Trenton which, Purdy reveals on the reverse side, relates to the incident about which "Complaint Lodged with L.C.B.O. By a Citizen in Upper Rumbelow" was written. There is also the only extant copy of the dirge for E.J. Pratt that Purdy mentions in No Other Country (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p.125. It was composed by Louis Dudek, Michael Gnarowski and Purdy on their way to a poetry conference and it is meant to be sung to the tune of "The Bonnie Earl of Moray":

CANADIAN

After reading the English newspaper caption  
"Our ruler in Aden"  
ambling thru pubs graveyards museums  
art galleries and the Tower of London  
felt at home only in graveyards  
once visited St. Paul's encountering  
there a big-nosed plaster bust that  
looked familiar

old John A. looking thirsty  
having had a drink for 60 years  
his immortal quote

"An Englishman I was born and--"  
It decidedly annoyed with him  
passed without speaking  
Wellington's sarcophagus  
a massive red marble cuspidor for elephants  
is he that cometh like an honored guest?  
simplifies generations of limey dead  
and their weight on me being unbearably  
English  
them accusing me of having no past  
like a lion's egg immaculately conceived  
apertina prurientia dullness

Wellington's bones inside the red cuspidor  
quacked and hissed at me  
"You foreigner"  
at's alright," I muttered  
playing for time  
think of a good retort  
for all of them  
of this and that and the earls of something  
I'm alive," I said desperately  
feeling this was inadequate  
Wellington advised coldly

ped back my two shillings  
from the inefficient  
on my way I out  
Then I felt better

*you find*

*excite*  
*for fort combak*  
*for every single*  
*or other*  
*every*

NO OTHER COUNTRY

A.W. Purdy

*Producer -*  
*Joseph Top*  
*Writer + narrator*  
*A.W. Purdy*  
*Duke Eaton*  
*John Bethune*

*reader -*

Typescript of poem with holograph corrections;  
typescript of Purdy's CBC radio drama "No Other Country".

Cold stands the harbor and chill lies the sand  
Where the bull winds of Labrador go down to Newfoundland;  
Grey be the fishing boats with nets along their side  
And the ragged gulls go mournfully a-searching on the tide.

Long will the fisherfolk wait upon the strand  
Ere the man who hymned the whalers comes back to Newfoundland.

Down from the shanties he came to the shore  
And he left the foggy islands to see them no more;  
He went to make his fortune where the big cities are  
But he sang of the kraken and the Cachalot afar.

Long will the fisherfolk wait upon the strand  
Ere the man who hymned the whalers comes back to Newfoundland.

In addition to the holograph and typescript versions of the majority of Purdy's poems written by 1967, there are also in the collection a large number of journals in which Purdy published, so that scholars can see the poems at virtually every stage of their development. The one notable exception is the page proof stage of the books, for only the proofs for North of Summer (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), found their way into the University of Saskatchewan collection. All of the books that Purdy published, up to and including North of Summer are in the collection, though the rare limited edition, The Quest for Ouzo (privately printed, 1970), is not a bound copy and some pages are present in multiple copies.

The unpublished "Yehl the Raven and Other Myths of the Haida", which is based on the folktale collections of Marius Barbeau, is also in the collection, as are the proofs of Purdy's article on Barbeau published in Canada Month, 3 (Sept. 1963), 11, under the title "An Old Man's Memories of Indian Days".

Careful scrutiny of the University of Saskatchewan Purdy collection shows that Purdy often exploits the same materials in a variety of forms and genres. The beginnings of what was to be an autobiographical novel called "The Iron Road" is present in holograph form, but this work was later twice revised, appearing first in Canada Month, 3 (July 1963), 23-24, and then in the only collection of prose Purdy has published to date, No Other Country. Part of these materials was also given poetic form and appeared under the title "Transient" in Tamarack Review, No.27 (Spring 1963), 67-68. In a similar way, Purdy was unable to complete a play he began to write about Leo Szilard; one of the physicists who helped to create the H-bomb, but the materials were worked into a successful poem, "Biography", which appeared in Poems for All the Annettes (Toronto: Contact Press, 1962).

Another story that has undergone considerable transformation, appearing as both prose and poetry, is that of Purdy's relationship with and knowledge of Malcolm Lowry. As early as The Craft So Long to Lerne (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1959), Purdy was writing about Lowry in "About Pablum, Teachers, and Malcolm Lowry", and a prose elegy for Lowry by Purdy appeared in volume 1 of the little magazine, Moment: "... in his nightmare he screamed, and the screams were his poems. Few of us make such sounds, or make them coherently. He's dead, but his poems know what it is like to be alive." (p.9). The second number of Moment published Lowry's "Sestina in a Cantina", a poem which Lowry had recited for Purdy when the Ontario poet had visited him in his ocean-side shack in Dollarton. Purdy wrote

a further tribute to Lowry in the poem simply titled "Malcolm Lowry" which appeared in The Cariboo Horses in 1965. In Canada Month, 2 (Sept. 1962), 24-26, Purdy published a commemorative article on Lowry, "Dormez-Vous?", and on March 9, 1974 the Montreal Gazette printed the article "Malcolm Lowry - Private Hell in the Public Eye" (p.43), which was based on the earlier piece, and the Gazette article in turn found its way, in a slightly revised form, into No Other Country.

Purdy also used his "Malcolm Lowry" poem and the "Iron Road" related "Transient", along with other poems such as "The Machines", "Percy Lawson", and "The Madwoman on the Train" in an autobiographically-based untitled verse play about Vancouver, though the C.B.C. returned this radio drama. Purdy had more luck with "No Other Country", a script that centres on the Roblin Lake period of Purdy's life, though the play begins with the ironic admission of his largely unsuccessful career as a radio dramatist: "My name is Al Purdy. I write plays for C.B.C., which they buy at the rate of one for every twelve written." Sixteen poems, including "One Rural Winter", "The Winemaker's Beat-étude", "The Country North of Belleville", "Roblin Mills", "Ameliasburg Stew", and "My Grandfather's Country" are linked by a wry prose narrative that reveals something of the quality of Purdy's life at this time and the impetus behind many of the poems of this period.

The history of Roblin Mills of course provided a fascinating source of poetic materials that culminated in the appearance of In Search of Owen Roblin (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974). But Purdy also wrote a short story called "The Last Snowballer" whose

title character, Gwyn Thompson, is a thinly veiled Will Roblin, grandson of the original mill owner, Owen Roblin. In the story Owen bears a different last name (Thompson) and was born three years earlier and died one year before his historical counterpart, but the two are otherwise identical. "The Life and Death of a Village" is a journalistic piece about Ameliasburg and Owen Roblin that documents Purdy's thoughts as he was caught by and explored the history of his adopted home.

The beginnings of an autobiographical novel, "15,000 Horses", also in the Purdy collection, tells the story of Purdy's life in the taxi business, but the novel was abandoned.

The many rejected play-scripts that Purdy mentioned in "No Other Country" range in subject matter from the life of Vancouver skid-row bums, through family life in various degrees of awfulness, aging, retirement and death, an Indian who gets involved in politics, a black man who goes to live with the Indians, and the advent of the white man to the Arctic, to historical events and personages such as the World Wars, Hannibal's assassination and the story of Helen of Troy. A play called "The Streets of the City" did for Montreal with A.M. Klein's poems what Purdy had done with his own verse in the Vancouver script, but copyright problems prevented the Klein programme from ever reaching the air. Purdy's dramatization of Earle Birney's "David", while fairly predictable in its interpretation and fleshing out of the story of David and Bobbie (David is pictured as a practical joker in the survey camp and Bobbie's attachment to David is motivated by

Bobbie's having lost his father), was at least broadcast.

In "The Soundless Storm" Purdy took a satiric look at the in-fighting among poets, in particular the Montreal group. Poets like Clarence Brubeck (Louis Dudek), Herman Blatant (Irving Layton), Beryl Kine (Daryl Hine), Poetess Miriam (Miriam Waddington) and Phyllis Fillet (Phyllis Webb) exchange cutting remarks, largely directed at the sell-out Brubeck. Critics of course get in on the sport too, and Northrop Frye is deftly reduced by Purdy to the mundane, Poach.

A projected television drama, "Mice in the Woodwork", set in a Montreal, St. Lawrence and Main area nightclub, uses poems of both Al Purdy and Milton Acorn, and the tension between the two friends' opposing political and artistic views provides the reason for reading, defending and explaining (often in considerable detail) a series of the two men's poems. The principal interest of the play for readers of Canadian poetry, besides the explication of the poems, is the insight it gives into the Purdy-Acorn relationship. After some argument between the pair Purdy explains to the audience:

We've been friends for ten years, but he's a political idealist and I'm a social realist. It rather strains the bonds of friendship between us.... [to Acorn] But you'll keep your faith in a corrupt political system, and I'll continue to believe in individual goodness.... No, the only thing I believe in is life itself.

Further information about Purdy and Acorn can be gleaned from other parts of the collection. The three



numbers of the short-lived mimeo-magazine, Moment, that the two edited together in 1959 is one such source. In "Poets in Montreal" from No Other Country Purdy writes about the history of his relationship with Acorn and explains the motivation behind Moment, revealing that it was begun for reasons "egotistic (we wanted to publish our own poems ...) and altruistic (we wanted to publish good poems by other people)" (p.127). In the first number a conversation on Ray Souster's poetry among Acorn, Dudek and Purdy concludes with the latter having the last word: "I like Souster, Birney, Layton, Finch, Pratt and --- I think catholicism is best." The general tone of this little mag. might best be deduced from F.R. Scott's contribution, "The Bartail Cock", which was signed "(S.R.F.)".

The closeness of Purdy and Acorn is suggested by the former's copy of Acorn's The Brain's the Target which is inscribed to Al Purdy "Who taught me more about imagery than I'll ever know", but it is the correspondence between them that fills in the details. These letters are invaluable to students of both Purdy and Acorn, as political and poetic theories, publishing and personal details, including the smooth and rocky parts of the two men's relationship, are all documented here. In a letter dated 15/9/60 to Bob McCormack, Programme Organizer of the C.B.C., Acorn asks if Purdy could read a selection of Acorn's poems to be broadcast on the network since Purdy had kept a sympathetic editor's eye on the other's poems, had been a kind of godfather to Acorn's writing and was a constant enthusiast and prodder to get Acorn to publish.

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There is much of interest and value in the Purdy collection correspondence, and there are few if any Canadian poets and editors working in the fifties and sixties who are not represented here. The letters from Lorne Pierce are fascinating, especially one dated July 30, 1958 which discusses the circumstances surrounding Raymond Knister's death, circumstances Pierce clearly found as strange as those surrounding Tom Thomson's death. Letters from Earle Birney discuss, among other things, the source and diction of "Mappe-mounde" and what Birney calls the "scattered and unconcentrated influences" on his work. American poet Charles Bukowski was certainly the most graphic and colourful of Purdy's correspondents for Bukowski's letters are frequently illustrated with paintings or drawings, but the written contents, when not reflecting mutual admiration, are largely despairing and often show the effects of too much alcohol.

In this way they resemble many of John Newlove's letters. But Purdy had been instrumental in finding Newlove a publisher, and the latter clearly considered Purdy a close and genuine friend. Correspondence with Margaret Atwood and William Toye of Oxford University Press shows that Purdy introduced Atwood to her present publisher, and the wry affection she felt for Purdy is indicated by her inscription of The Circle Game (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1966), "To Awful Al from Perfect Peggy".

There is also some revealing correspondence with Irving Layton, Dorothy Livesay and George Bowering, as well as some curious letters from John Glassco which

indicate a paradoxically lively exchange on car cemeteries. Glassco's characteristic closing, "Automorphically yours", gives some idea of the tone of those letters, but Purdy's poem "My '48 Pontiac" may well have been stimulated by this exchange of letters.

Purdy does not seem to have been particularly successful in getting his prose published, though of the twelve short stories in the collection (some articles have been catalogued as short stories) there are at least three that have been printed in periodicals and at least two more that seem worthy of publication. He was more successful in placing articles and reviews, many of which have been preserved in the collection. "A Kind of Witness", an article and poems about Purdy's arctic experiences, forms an interesting gloss to the volume of poetry North of Summer. Purdy has reviewed not only a good number of books of poetry, but also novels, biographies and books relating to places he has visited such as the arctic or Newfoundland. The only axe Purdy seems to have to grind in his reviews is with the Tish or Black Mountain group, and this is not because of their poetic practice, but rather what he sees as their intolerance of any other way of writing poetry but their own.

Purdy's scrapbooks of his earliest periodical publications and the reviews of his work up to 1965 help to fill in the history of the early years of A.W. Purdy, poet, and make it possible to map critical reaction to his work, which on the whole, has been strikingly favourable.

Other noteworthy parts of the Purdy collection are four illustrated broadsheets put out by Tako Tanabe which reproduce the Purdy poems, "Lament for Robert Kennedy", "The Horsemen of Agawa", "The Peaceable Kingdom" and "Nine Bean Rows on the Moon", and a complete set of tapes of Purdy reading his own poetry, beginning with The Enchanted Echo and working up to North of Summer, adding for good measure a few prose pieces that had been previously published.

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