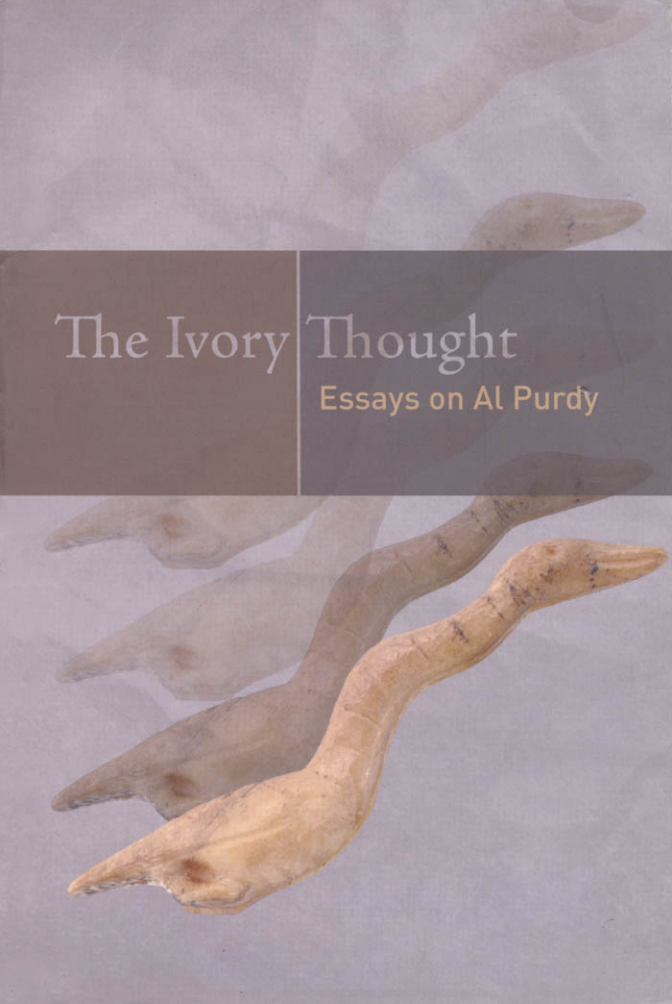




The Ivory Thought

Essays on Al Purdy



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Essays on Al Purdy

Edited by

GERALD LYNCH

SHOSHANNAH GANZ, AND

JOSEPHENE T. M. KEALEY

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For
Eurithe Purdy
and in memory of
Glenn Clever (1918–2005)

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POETRY

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BA – *Being Alive: Poems 1958–1978*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978.

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ER – *Emu! Remember*. Fredericton, NB: Fiddlehead Books, 1956.

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- SD – *Sex & Death*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973.
- SB – *The Stone Bird*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981.
- Sdu – *Sundance at Dusk*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976.
- TPNA – *To Paris Never Again*. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1997.
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PROSE

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- MS – *Morning and It’s Summer*. Montreal: Quadrant, 1983.
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- SH – *A Splinter in the Heart*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990.
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- SW2 – Ed. and Introd. *Storm Warning 2: The New Canadian Poets*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976.
- UOT – “An Unburnished One-Tenth of One Per Cent of an Event.” *Malahat Review* 42 (1977): 62.
- WMP – Introd. *Wood Mountain Poems*, by Andrew Suknaski. Toronto: Macmillan, 1976.
- PWL – *The Purdy-Woodcock Letters: Selected Correspondence 1964–1984*. Ed. George Galt. Toronto: ECW, 1988.
- YA – *Yours, Al: The Collected Letters of Al Purdy*. Ed. Sam Solecki. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2004.

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Introduction

AS UNOFFICIAL CANADIAN POET laureate from the early 1960s till his death in 2000 (the third such to occupy that role, after Bliss Carman and E. J. Pratt), Al Purdy was a renowned traveller both within Canada and internationally. In Canada he took the unusual route of using Canada Council grants to finance extended stays in remote areas of the British Columbia interior and the Canadian North, subsequently publishing groundbreaking poems, essays, and books from both experiences, works that still help Canadians to see themselves in other Canadians bound to these places. In the first book-length study of Purdy (1970), George Bowering (Canada's first official poet laureate) famously described him as "the world's most Canadian poet" (1). Equally provocatively, Sam Solecki titled the most recent book-length study of Purdy *The Last Canadian Poet* (1999). Both Bowering and Solecki intended more than the literal with their designations, but their descriptions have nonetheless entered our critical discourse as apt and lamenting representations of Al Purdy.

The present collection of essays continues the work of such critical considerations by providing a balanced reassessment of Purdy's poetry, fiction, non-fiction, letters, persona, and place in Canada's literature.

Contributors cover such subjects as Purdy's continuing significance to contemporary writers; the persona he crafted and the life he dedicated to literature; the influences acting on his own development as a poet; the ongoing scholarly projects of editing and publishing his writing; particular poems and individual books of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction; and such recurrent themes in his work as the Canadian North, the archaeological, and the elegiac. As such, the essays in the present volume can be seen to address, explicitly and implicitly, a number of questions central to any writer's achievement. What is Purdy's place in the continuum of Canadian literature from the late nineteenth century to the present? How has he continued to influence contemporary writers? How has the poet's reputation been influenced by the ways in which his work has been edited, by himself as editor and co-editor? What are the implications of Purdy's being among the first poets to explore the meanings of the Canadian North? What at this time is the measure of his achievement when weighed against the great poets whom he himself most admired?

The present volume is also graced with original poetry from Stephen Brockwell and Gwendolyn Guth, both Ottawa poets of growing national reputation. Brockwell's "Ingredients for Certain Poems by Al Purdy" provides, as its title suggests, a dazzling synthesis of Purdyesque allusions, images, and attitudes. Guth's more lyrical offerings constitute a remarkable poetic performance in the spirit of Purdy, something of a translation into her sensibility of the Purdyesque take on character, situation, and event.

The essays proper were selected from among the papers delivered at the "Al Purdy: The Ivory Thought" symposium, hosted by the Department of English at the University of Ottawa, 5–7 May 2006. Our series of annual conferences devoted to Canadian literary subjects began in 1973 and has continued virtually unbroken. In 1990 the symposium subject was Bliss Carman, and we thought to open proceedings with a panel of poets talking about Carman's importance to them. Naïve academics, we'd anticipated no obstacle to finding well-known poets versed in their country's literary heritage and un-anxious about acknowledging a major poet-predecessor's influence. And right off, a couple of eminent poets, Elizabeth Brewster and D. G. Jones, accepted the invitation. But only two, even with poet-professor Seymour Mayne moderating, would have made for a scant panel, incommensurate with what we had assumed was Carman's lasting importance.

Then someone thought s/he remembered that someone else had once whispered that Al Purdy in altered states sometimes slurringly

conceded the influence of Carman in his own early poetry. A few letters (Purdy's preferred medium) were exchanged, with his being written on a material like onion paper, making it feel already like a fading message from the past. Purdy demurred, even while he typed couplets and stanzas of Carman from memory (as with a ventriloquist on the radio, we took his word for it). Clearly, though, he was indeed something of a rackets-closet admirer of Carman. But he continued reluctant to participate in a scholarly conference (our somewhat affected use of "symposium" probably didn't help, though it should have at least connoted drinking). Unfortunately, in 1990 Purdy was still labouring under that anti-academic pose that does no serious writer any good, and can even be a danger to others (earlier writers) as well as to himself.

Eventually he capitulated without really having made much fuss. The panel of poets was a great success, for many the highlight of the Bliss Carman Symposium. And we vainly believe that Al Purdy enjoyed himself throughout the proceedings, all of which he attended. He was by turns gregarious and shy, stentorian and quiet, declamatory and unassuming, amusing and bemused. Throughout the weekend he seized on every opportunity to recite, in that much imitated and sorely missed voice, reams of Carman from memory (our faith in the letters' performance was not misplaced). To borrow from F. R. Scott: it really was a most delightful symposium.

In the formal (the word sounds oxymoronic connected to Purdy) part of his performance, he slouched at the University of Ottawa lectern and held forth: "For the last dozen years or so I didn't think anyone but me considered Carman to have much value" (*BC* 21). And he concluded,

Not to quote Auden again, I doubt that time will be any more intolerant than it has been already of Bliss Carman. It's unnecessary to mention his shortcomings—we all have some of those; he is still in the company of Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Yeats, Lawrence and the rest. They will not be snobbish about his intellect, even though most writers are very noticeably snobbish about such things. They will all be silent together, those famous writers, for obvious reasons. (24)

Except for its first sentence (and as for that, who knows what time has up its sleeve for anyone), we like to think that Purdy's closing appraisal of Carman can stand as first appraisal of Al Purdy in this, the introduction to his "Reappraisals: Canadian Writers" volume. At least as important, we would like to see Purdy's unfashionable, post-Modern and post-Postmodern, respect for his poet-predecessors—those

nineteenth-century Canadian poets whom James Reaney described as our “dear bad poets / Who wrote / Early in Canada”—be emulated by more Canadian critics and writers (2).

So we hope too that the present volume of essays will help prevent from happening to Purdy what happened to Carman and his contemporaries following their deaths, and always prematurely: that dismayingly odd Canadian cultural amnesia, that blighting of the very literary past that feeds us, whereby eminent writers are soon forgotten following their deaths or a change in literary fashion and cultural politics (for example, Morley Callaghan, Hugh MacLennan, Ethel Wilson, Robertson Davies, Irving Layton, and even Margaret Laurence and Mordecai Richler, to name but the best known whose reputations should be higher, but who are being read and taught less). These writers are often radically devalued (Carman was deleted entirely from the latest [2001] edition of Oxford UP’s *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*), and are sometimes denigrated and vilified (see the Confederation group of poets at the hands of Canada’s first Modernist poets; or simply see the poem ironically used above, Scott’s “The Canadian Authors Meet”). The editors’ primary hope, though, remains that the essays in this volume help towards an ongoing objective critical reappraisal of Al Purdy (though personal response is an often welcome turn in a number of the essays included here).

But for one moment longer, we want to remember another event from the Bliss Carman Symposium back in 1990. During a Saturday afternoon lull (the weekend conference’s version of baseball’s seventh-inning stretch), Purdy came in quietly and sat with the conference organizer in the back row of the room—and shifted a number of his books, inscribed gratefully, into the organizer’s lap. He was returned profuse thanks, but he only smiled small through those smoky glasses and past a toothpick that in its balancing act must have been glued to the middle of his lower lip. Purdy wrote again a couple of times, expressing his pleasure and gratitude, on that flimsy paper like a cloudy lens, material that in its very fragility still conveys much warmth to a lowly conference organizer.

Here ends the brief reminiscence, which must serve as the editors’ Purdy anecdote. We thought we were entitled to one, since we’d actually considered legislating only one Purdy anecdote per presenter at “The Ivory Thought” symposium.

IT IS UNNECESSARY HERE to provide an introduction to the life and work of Al Purdy, because Sam Solecki does so in the first essay,

"Materials for a Biography of Al Purdy," authoritatively and superbly. Solecki probes the generic definitions of biography and its close relationship to autobiography and follows with a discussion of the worthiness of the biographical project, drawing on various sources of information about Al Purdy's life. Pre-eminently these are *A Splinter in the Heart* and *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea*, as Solecki proceeds through the mostly unrecorded early years looking at the unpublished poetry of this time, the correspondence of the years that follow, and various poems written by and about Purdy. As remarked above, a number of other essays contain biographical and anecdotal material, memoir, and reminiscence. Towards the end of the book, Steven Heighton traces the trajectory of a relationship that begins with his bemusement at a reading by Purdy and Earle Birney and proceeds, as his and Purdy's friendship grows, through mentoring and into a mutual respect. And Doug Beardsley's paper, "Reflections on a Dynamic Collaboration," provides a charming personal memoir of his collaborative editing projects with Purdy: an anthology of twentieth-century poetry, a selection of D. H. Lawrence's poetry, and the unrealized project of a new translation of *Gilgamesh*.

Following sequentially from Solecki's biographical survey, the essays chart a course through early influences; editorial matters (touched also by Solecki and Beardsley); studies of individual books, poems, and groups of poems; analyses of Purdy's poetics and some of the recurring themes of his poetry; and finally to considerations of Al Purdy's place in the continuum of Canadian poetry.

D.M.R. Bentley's "Unremembered and Learning Much: LAC Alfred W. Purdy" looks at Purdy the forgotten air force serviceman of the 1940s poetry. Bentley examines 1944's *The Enchanted Echo*, Purdy's first book, which would be dismissed by Purdy and others but nonetheless contains the seeds of his celebrated later work. Bentley analyzes influences on Purdy's poetic development, including the echoes of Carman and the currents of Anglo-American Modernism. Of particular interest is the relationship between Purdy and the editor of the *Vancouver Sun*'s "Poets' Page," Joan Buckley, author of *The Technique of Poetry*, a manual that seems to have had a formative influence on Purdy's poetics. Sandra Djwa opens her paper, "Al Purdy: Ivory Thots and the Last Romantic," with a personal note on making the poet's acquaintance. She proceeds to argue the influence of E. J. Pratt on Purdy's poetry, with close readings of a number of Purdy's and Pratt's poems, with discussion of Purdy's letters and criticism, and with analysis of shared poetic vision, including their Romantic interest in the impact of artifacts on the imagination. In "Purdy among the Tombs," George Bowering positions

himself in relation to Purdy and, in a polemical epistle, extends their lifelong conversation to beyond the grave. Bowering discourses on Western and Eastern Canadian writers and academics, the Black Mountain School of poetry and poetics (William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson in particular), and Charles Bukowski.

Through a careful analysis of the correspondence related to Purdy's production of some anthologies as well as of his own volumes of selected poems, Dean Irvine's essay, "Beyond Forgetting: Editing Purdy] Purdy Editing," looks at the collaborative process that characterized the poet's selection and editing of the various poets he anthologized. Irvine concludes with a forward-looking call for what is wanted in selected and complete editions of other major Canadian poets as well as of Purdy.

Joel Baetz's "'I couldn't write it like that anyway': Al Purdy's *Hiroshima Poems*" revalues Purdy as a war poet, drawing particular attention to the opportunity that such war poetry provided Purdy for moral critique. In "Purdy's Ruins: *In Search of Owen Roblin*, Literary Power, and the Poetics of the Picturesque," Robert David Stacey considers the picturesque wandering figure of the Purdy persona. Through an attentive reading of *In Search of Owen Roblin*, Stacey traces the autobiographically situated psychological growth of the poet. Margaret Steffler's essay, "'Living in a Land of Giants': Locating and Sustaining Boyhood," employs elements of the Wordsworthian and Romantic tradition regarding childhood to explore Purdy's writings of boyhood in *Morning and It's Summer* (1983) and *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea* (1993). Using Freudian terminology, Steffler argues that Purdy actively seeks to keep his boyhood feelings alive in his poetry. I. S. MacLaren's "Arctic Al: Purdy's Humanist Vision of the North" reflects on the regional and human elements in the poems of *North of Summer*. In concluding, MacLaren posits a heretofore unrecognized, so surprising, indebtedness of Purdy to his often maligned predecessor-poet of the North, Robert Service.

Janice Fiamengo's "'Kind of ludicrous or kind of beautiful I guess': Al Purdy's Rhetoric of Failure" prefaces a discussion of failure as both theme and technique with a reading of those motifs in "Lament for the Dorsets." She then proceeds to explore the vacillating stylistic abilities of the poet-speaker as a fumbling everyman struggling and failing with art and language in "The Horseman of Agawa." Opening with a discussion of the tradition and history of elegy, Jeremy Lalonde's "Song and Silence in Al Purdy's Family Elegies" examines Purdy's elegies written for his mother and grandfather. By looking closely at the published and unpublished family elegies, Lalonde shows the ways in

which Purdy utilized the elegy to understand his lineage, his own peculiarities, and his life as a writer. Tim Heath's "'Buried bones and ornaments and stuff': Purdy's Reliquary Poetics" argues for a new "reliquary poetics" as alternative to the Canadian tradition of documentary poetry. Through a discussion of different versions of "The Stone Bird" and other poems, Heath explicates Purdy's poetics of "silent speech" in stones, flowers, trees, and carvings.

Tracy Ware rounds out the volume by engaging Sam Solecki's *The Last Canadian Poet*, countering its titular claim regarding Al Purdy. Ware denies that Purdy is either the first or the last Canadian poet and places him instead both in Solecki's global literary context and in dialogue with other Canadian poets past and present. David Bentley does double-service in providing a re-appraising conclusion to this Reappraisals volume—and the editors are most grateful to him for accepting our invitation—closing out his conclusion with a personal testimony to the value and power of Purdy's poetry. And here it is worth remarking a perhaps familiar phenomenon of Purdy criticism, one to which this volume further testifies: it would seem to be impossible to talk or write at length about Al Purdy unsentimentally, as Bentley illustrates and as the editors themselves have shown above.

IN CLOSING HERE, we extend thanks to those who helped make possible both "The Ivory Thought" symposium and the present volume. In the first place, we are most grateful to our many contributors, all those who participated in the conference and those who reworked their papers for inclusion here. From the first bandying about of the idea for a conference on Al Purdy, Sam Solecki has been unstinting with support in many forms: enthusiasm, advice, recommendations, even unto supplying most of the highly useful coded list of Purdy's works. Sam's exemplary generosity and collegiality have been much appreciated indeed. To our Canadianist colleagues in the Department of English at the University of Ottawa we owe profuse thanks for support, advice, and assistance, with special thanks to Janice Fiamengo, who agreed to act as general editor on this number in the Reappraisals: Canadian Writers series. And another special thanks to David Rampton, former chair of our Department of English, who was strongly supportive of the Canadian Literature Symposium series in his tenure from 2002 to 2007. Annual conferences such as ours depend for success on the energies of many volunteers, and we had many indeed from among our department's graduate and undergraduate students. For financial support in organizing and staging "The Ivory Thought" symposium, we are

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