

Interview with Barry McKinnon

DON PRECOSKY

DON PRECOSKY: I thought I'd ask you about your publishing first of all. I've been reading your unpublished essay on the Caledonia Writing Series. It tells all the facts but it doesn't tell why you did it. Why put up with all the work and frustration?

BARRY MCKINNON: I'd come to Prince George in 1969. At that point, I'd just been working through regular publishing outlets: Bill Reuter in Toronto who ran a small press called Aliquando Press which published my first book in 1968, and then I'd had a connection with Talon magazine and Talonbooks, so they'd accepted a manuscript at some point around 1969. By that time, I'd moved to Prince George and I had no ideas of starting a press. That actually came about one summer when I was back at Talonbooks. I went back for a couple of months to work as an editor, and I designed a couple of books, did some typesetting—that sort of thing—and I found myself really complaining about that whole notion of having to have a commercial book to get enough money to print poetry, but as in any job you get into the politics of the whole thing. Out of that I thought well, instead of whining and complaining I'd just better do something about it. So I got back here in the fall of 1971 and I decided, if you're dissatisfied and if you want to avoid things like large publishing delays for manuscripts In those days, you could send a manuscript out and if it came out within a year, you were lucky. I thought that one thing a small publishing house could do was make sure a book got out within a year. At that point I decided to at least begin something. I started a thing called "54° 40' Press." That came out of a college magazine we'd edited that first and second year here with the idea of publishing local writers, B.C. writers, that type of thing. It started from my complaint about the way publishing was being done. DP: Aside from your own work, can you tell me what you think the better, more important material is that you've published?

BM: I didn't think about publishing myself at that point. I know that a lot of small presses start that way. I guess there are ways of disguising it. You get an editor, and three books into it you get his collected works. But I didn't have any intentions of doing my own work because I had a connection with Talonbooks, who I considered my publisher. I tried to revive that whole notion of the chap-book, small books of between fifteen and twenty pages. The first one I did was David Phillips' *The Book of Snow Poems*, and I consider that an interesting little book because it got me into the technology of mimeograph, binding, and that sort of thing. Other books that stand out are by Harvey Chometsky and Norm Sibum. In a way I should have stayed at that level because Gestetner means you have control over the production and you don't have to go begging for grant money, or need much in the way of facilities. Since then, Harvey's gone on to publish several more books and Norm Sibum has written many books and, I believe, is having a book from McClelland and Stewart shortly. Later than that there's *Letters from Geeksville* which I consider a real Canadian classic. It, of course, went nowhere.

DP: That's the Red Lane—George Bowering letters?

BM: Yeah. It's a collection of Red Lane's letters to George Bowering from 1960 to 1964. I identify with it because it seems to document that problem of a writer living in a place like Vernon or Prince George or in any of the interior small towns, where to be a writer or an artist is a difficult thing to do. The letters chronicle that difficulty and frustration and the need for some kind of connection outside of that context. I think that for any young writer in this province, that would be an important book, at least from the point of view of showing how another writer really articulated his own isolation and his own frustrations about being a young writer and poet.

DP: You teach creative writing. Are there still a lot of kids wanting to be writers?

BM: If I go back over twelve or thirteen years of teaching, I've had out of that maybe six people—is that about one half a person a year—who go on to either publish books or engage themselves seriously in writing. Harvey Chometsky was one of my first students. It probably ruined his life. He's a very committed writer. Eric Berg was another writer. He died in a logging accident in the mid 1970s. He was a student of mine and a very serious young writer. Sharon Stevenson, another student, was not in my creative writing class, but she was a woman who went on to publish two more books, although she has since suicided, unfortunately. Each year there are one or two

people who pronounce they've become poets. I imagine that someone like Meryl Duprey, a student of mine for the last two years, is going to go on to do some interesting writing. He certainly is now.

DP: Did the press interfere with your writing?

BM: Probably not. For me, writing sort of accompanies what I do. I do write very quickly and I don't spend a lot of physical or literal time at it. For me it's a process of *waiting* for it to happen. It takes time to make the observations and outstake the poem or wait for it. I became obsessed with printing and the technology of it. Also, in the summers, I wasn't used to having big clumps of time, and it made me nervous sitting around. People would say, aren't you writing? I'm not a prose writer and I didn't require lots of time, so I think the press provided a situation for a few interested people to get together. We were always putting a monkey wrench to an A. B. Dick offset press. It was nice, physical activity and, I think, also very creative because we got into weirdo book designs and experimenting with the technology.

DP: What about the big-name writers you've printed things for, like Livesay and Purdy and Creeley?

BM: Dorothy Livesay did a reading here, so we did a broadside of hers, and really part of that whole activity was to try to coincide the press and some of the printing with visiting writers. I made a lot of connections that way. I'd say, "Do you have a poem for a broadside or a small book?" and most of them would end up sending me something. I did little things by Al Purdy and Dorothy Livesay. Robert Creeley, who read here as part of a conference a few years ago, gave me a couple of poems for broadsides. They were quite personal connections, really.

DP: Let's discuss your own writing now, beginning with *I Wanted to Say Something*. Would you call that a nostalgic book?

BM: Yeah, in a way. I wrote it when I was in Prince George and it really came out of visiting my grandfather. This would have been the summer of 1970. As a kid, I used to look at all his old photographs. I know now when you talk about family photographs people start barfing because there have been so many books that have dealt with this whole idea, but in 1970-71 I didn't have any particular model in mind because I didn't know if there were any. I do remember seeing the photographs, and those images stuck with me, and I'd written a fragment of this thing about my grandparents. I took it out one day and I thought, this is interesting. It seems to have a real large feeling to it (i.e., a poem starting that couldn't be dealt with in one

page); so then I had the image and a memory of the photographs that I'd seen that summer, and started working on the text. I wrote the thing, leaving these blank spaces for the actual photographs to drop into.

DP: So you didn't have the photographs with you?

BM: No, I didn't. I might have had one or two but I was working from memory. I don't know if nostalgia's the exact word. Brian Fawcett once said that what's interesting about that book is the way I struggle with sentimentality. So there's certainly that in it. My grandfather had been one of the first pioneers who came to Alberta in 1908, and I kept thinking: here's somebody who migrated to the prairie when it certainly wasn't the prairie that's there now. They lived through all kinds of hardships. I had a real feeling that somebody had to document that and that somehow the local histories would get the facts and the photographs but miss this emotional element. So I was trying to deal with that. And then I become a character growing up in the second part of the poem, which then deals with a transition from that whole rural to an urban experience that his life had involved.

DP: Lorna Uher in *ECW*, Nos. 18-19 implies that this is a new beginning. There is not much poetry about the prairie experience, just all these realistic novels. Did you sense you were doing something new?

BM: I did in a way because I was working in isolation. I had, as I said, this large feeling about the poem. As Pound says, the qualification for epic is that it spans history—and as Canadians, our history isn't very long—but there was that sense of starting with a man who lived from the turn of the century into the early seventies, who experienced this. So there was the time element involved: spanning a man's life and then seeing yourself emerging out of that pattern. As far as I know, there are so-called epic poems that could provide a model, but I was working in the dark, quite blindly. It felt like it was working. The only thing that didn't work was that there was a third part that I had planned, and I got too self-conscious with it and I couldn't do it.

DP: I find the end affirmative, almost exhilarating. Did you feel a kind of lift as you were working toward the end?

BM: Yeah, ending poems can be a difficulty. As I was saying, each section seemed to end itself. I tried the third section. Yeah, I did feel it ending, literally coming to the edge of the photographs. What's beyond those images? A desk and a cup of coffee? Or some other

landscape? But I had the feeling that I'd said or chronicled what I meant to say up to that point.

DP: Would you call your poem a celebration of a way of life?

BM: In some ways it is. In some ways it's very critical, and I guess if you take . . . as a poet you say: "Well I'm not responsible for saying these things, I just wrote them down, they came to me." And how you get to that is a very mysterious process, but I felt within the poem that something went wrong with this whole vision, and I think they did have a vision—leaving, in the case of my grandfather, Michigan and a rather disturbed childhood and all that. So he did have a vision and, of course, you see the irony or absurdity of parts of that vision. So that aspect certainly came into the poem, and I didn't mean it as a criticism of him personally or the family or that whole method of approaching the landscape they had. I don't know how accurate it is really. Once again, you're given those lines, you're given that sensibility.

DP: It's the same kind of question you ask about Prince George in your later poetry.

BM: The question is: "What does it add up to?" Now, my grandfather married, had children, and much later came to the city, but he ended up in the old folks' home without as much as a little blurb in the paper. I thought, here's a country where you have somebody who is a legitimate pioneer and not even acknowledged in the local Calgary newspaper as being a pioneer who died. There are several people in my family who lived and passed on, who made a contribution, but the context shifted on them so that once again . . . who cares about that life? Well, I cared about it and tried to document a bit of it, anyway.

DP: Did this exploring of your past and your roots do anything to you? Did you change, do you think?

BM: I just felt like I got rid of it. It's a certain kind of poem that you end up writing. There's a pressure on . . . certainly there's a pressure on me to deal with childhood and family and those things.

DP: How long had you been away from home?

BM: I'd left Calgary in 1963, went to Montreal, then to Vancouver, and I wrote the poem when I got to Prince George in the seventies. I hadn't really thought at that point of the prairie or thought of that as a particular subject-matter. One day you find a page that starts to develop on you, and it took me about a week to two weeks. I wrote very quickly.

DP: And you hadn't seen those photographs in all that time?

BM: No. As far as I can remember, I might have had one or two of them when I was working. I just saw the poem—a section ending and the image of those really beautiful photographs that he took as an amateur photographer with a very indelible kind of sense to them. My feeling was that they were as important as the text. They weren't meant as decoration. They captured, not in a corny way, some sense of those people standing in that wheat looking kind of stupid. Did they want to be there? Do you want to be here? Where are you?

DP: I'm overwhelmed to hear now that you didn't have the pictures with you because there's such a high level of integration between them and the words.

BM: Yeah, literally working out of the image that comes out of your mind . . . into your head. Instead of transforming that into language, I left the blank space for the pictures. So maybe if the book was a forerunner of sorts it was that the pictures were not meant as decoration. I wanted my grandfather, Fred Dalton's pictures, to act not as an important part of the text, but as the book itself. There is that sense, yeah. I've got rid of that part of the history. I don't know if I could ever write about the prairie again.

DP: Did you have to write about the past before you could deal with the present?

BM: Well, there was that feeling. It's interesting you brought this book up because the third part of the book was to deal with the present and what happens when you don't have a feeling of place or rootedness. I don't know if I require that now or not. I seem to work in a much different way; but at the time, I'm in Prince George, I'm feeling totally isolated, alienated; I've got a job and all that, but finally what does that mean too? So the third part was to take up this bleak, depressed feeling I had about ending up at the beginning of the 1970s in this northern mill town where everybody seems hostile and against any of this so-called sensitivity to the world.

DP: Maybe we can use that to move into *The the*. Some poems in it are set in Prince George; there are other poems set elsewhere, usually in your summer place on the coast. And I sense a different mood in each one. Is that true?

BM: I think I'd stopped writing for a couple of years.

DP: When was this?

BM: After I'd finished *I Wanted to Say Something*. I somehow got out of poetry, but I was trying to write an old lyric poem that I'd already beaten to death, or something like that. So I really was on some kind of search for forms. How do you chase a form down? The

intent seems to always be there. If you're a social poet you come to Prince George and write three hundred poems about unions and *unemployment if you want*. I have to wait for these things to literally take a shape. So for a period of time I was trying to work on a poem I'd already written, so it becomes . . . what you can write about? What do you see and what do you know about anything? And a couple of people . . . Paul Shuttleworth who was an American writer living and working in Mackenzie asked a few important questions. He kept saying, this is a wonderful place to write poetry, there's so much activity . . . so much happening. I thought jeez! he's right. There are the bars and there's the landscape itself which has its subtleties. If you come into town you might think it's an awful place to live, and of course you can go out of town and you can see where the forests have been ripped apart, so that can become a part of your sense of a place. So he just said, you'd better start writing about this place. I'd been teaching for a couple of years and trying to sort out that and was quite nerve-wracked by the whole thing. And then Brian Fawcett, who'd come from Prince George and had tried to locate Prince George politically and geographically with his poetry, more or less said that you could actually write with some kind of idea or notion about things. Once again, I couldn't see any prior models, although Fawcett was writing at that time, but I didn't have access to his books or wasn't reading them very carefully. And so he said, it's possible to actually have an idea and to include your intellect in a poem. Pound says you can write lyrics up until around the age of thirty and after that things change. Your emotions change and you're no longer experiencing those emotions. Fawcett, in a way, opened up a whole new thing for me—i.e., you're in the world, there are all these things happening, and this is all possible subject-matter for poetry.

DP: Would you say that the lyric poet is very self-involved? My emotion, my feeling. Does *The Death of a Lyric Poet* mark a change in your attitude?

BM: It's kind of a spoof. I had a lot of fun in that book. They're all lyric poems in a way, but it's also a pronouncement that, yeah, I can actually go on beyond . . . not beyond . . . but what are the subjects for lyric poets? Your relationships. I always thought of them as short poems, partly about your relationship to nature as well, and your relationships with other people. But pronouncing the death of that shot me out into a whole other area, where I could start talking about literal experiences of Prince George, at the same time trying

to get an idea of what this place was, who the people were.

DP: Did you get any flak from local Prince George people?

BM: No. Who reads? It's filled with all kinds of little jokes. At the time I was writing "Bayday" there was a contest on CKPG radio, and they'd blast this thing out about every hour: "If you write poetry this is your chance to be discovered." So, of course, I'm writing *The Death of a Lyric Poet*. I thought, these people won't accept one of these poems as part of their contest. I guess they were looking for "moose" rhymes and so forth. But literally, who reads? There is no reading public; there are a handful of people in Prince George who might have read that book, and in terms of critical approach . . . I don't know. When they tore Giscome down—there's a poem about that—nobody much seemed to care, which becomes a part of the northern ethos as well. You wipe out a northern mill town. It's hard to make generalizations, but it seems there is that transience here: well, there goes some of the forest over there, there goes a town, and there's a feeling that well, let's move on and do something else.

DP: I've just jotted down some lines from various poems. You've mentioned this idea of transience. In "Wired Music" you write:

so it goes, slowly to realize yr own
mortality: it gives the trees an edge & a
beauty.

or "Bayday":

Giscome shack town, no more
saturday nights there. one man remains

or "Astoria":

& Ellen if beautiful once
is speculation

There seems to be in earlier poems in *The the* this awareness, perhaps even anxiety about transience and aging. Is this an important feeling in your poetry?

BM: I think it probably works through all the small books in that collection and certainly with the line about "to realize your own ortality." I guess if we ever have any consciousness about it, the question becomes: "What do you want to record as a writer?" I've

taken it slowly and seriously. I don't think the notion of death inhabits me at every moment. At certain moments, when I find myself drifting into the poem, it's like I gotta deal with the large things, the verities, the old-fashioned notions of truth and beauty. What literally gives those things an edge is their own transience. I don't know if I have that informing every poem, but that's what prompts the question finally. You see your life as these momentary things, and what do they add up to? In the face of the possibility of it adding up to nothing, the poet invents. Certainly I find comfort in the poems—going back to the Chinese—I find comfort that they also looked dumbly into their trees.

DP: Their poetry has beaten oblivion.

BM: Exactly. I don't know if that's a prime motive, but I think at one point you want to say, "This makes great sense, this has great meaning." I think this is what lifts us in poetry, when people discover these lines that we know are true. They give us some kind of meaning and rootedness.

DP: Do you think living in what's basically a very new community and a kind of boom and bust economy makes this awareness sharper for you?

BM: Yeah, I've thought at times about what would have happened if I'd stayed in Vancouver or Montreal where somehow that edge isn't there. The first thing I noted in Prince George was a kind of weird hostility. As my dad once said, "Root hog or die." Get your head right in the shit boy, or you ain't gonna make it. So you find yourself up against that, particularly in a smaller town, where there's no liberal pretense at all. I got kicked out of an apartment because I had long hair. That kind of thing was happening, people getting beat up in bars, and police brutality. It's not like the city, where you don't literally see the pollution every minute. Here you can smell it. So you're up against it. I think for me it was very important. I think that this is a good town for a poet because it keeps your senses pretty keen. You keep observing, you keep seeing things that don't quite make sense. You're constantly reminded really what this civilization's come to, at least the industrial part of it. I think it was important for me to get to a place like this.

DP: Another idea that comes up in your poetry is a sense of possibilities that have been thwarted—something missing. For example, again some lines. This is from "Steak":

I want to go beyond all things, & sometimes sing

of nothing

or, this is from “Six Songs for a Small Lounge”:

without looking I must imagine them or
imagine you (as I imagine myself) parts missing.

In both there is this sense of something absent, something just not quite coming out the way it should.

BM: Part of our tradition is that we’re given some sort of idealism and, of course, poetry in our time almost gives us the disintegration of all of these things. That doesn’t mean you don’t want that world that has some kind of integrity to it. I think our experience is that we wander around. There’s that beautiful opening to *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, where Lawrence says civilization is ended and we’re merely trying to form habitats or live in the rubble. So I see that, in a very general way, in what I’m dealing with. You want some kind of integration, some kind of sense of yourself in the world, and you find all of these forces that are stopping you from these simple possibilities. Bureaucracy maintains and seems to keep that old-fashioned alienation at a fever pitch. I don’t know if somebody wants us to feel bad all of the time or not, but certainly I want to address these things in poetry. I find more and more poets of my generation are doing that. They’re quite political in this larger sense of trying to find out who these people are who have created this world that we live in.

DP: You mention Lawrence. Do you ever have the feeling he has in his novels that there’s something beyond the rational consciousness and that the writer wants to reach that beyond—that new territory?

BM: I think the best poetry does it. That’s why you write it, in one sense. The rational mind never interested me much. The beauty of poetry is that all of those structures that were imposed for whatever reasons just don’t work in poetry. In university I had a terrible time writing critical essays. It just seemed stupid to do that. With poetry—the mind, collision and flight of ideas, the interesting combinations of words and language that might not be grammatically and syntactically exactly correct but still . . .

DP: Which is how your style is?

BM: But I love it when it happens. I love it when these chunks of logic and rationality disappear in one sense. I sort of know what’s in the space . . . in between each line. That’s that timeless point that

and in a way I'm just trying to continue the kind of poem I was getting in "Wired Music" at the end of *The the*, but for me it's very slow. I find myself scribbling and at some point I have to dig it all out and see what I've got. I think most of the time of my work in terms of chap-books or a summation of a year or two, and I'll try to get that stuff together, if there's something bringing it together, and maybe put out a little chapbook.

DP: Do you think living away from a metropolitan centre like Toronto or Vancouver or Montreal has hurt you in any way?

BM: Well, yes and no, but it's not really a concern. In a way poetry is portable. You should be able to do it anywhere, carry it with you. Being away, well here the poetry reading series has been valuable in that I've kept in touch with and probably met people I never would have met in any other circumstance. Over 100 readings since 1969—I've met everybody in this country, just about. In more distant regions I don't have a clue about what's going on, but I made all kinds of really good friends with poets who've come through on Canada Council tours. They're quite marvelled by this town because the audiences are good.

DP: You were short-listed for the Governor-General's Award this year. Do you feel this will help you at all?

BM: Well . . .

DP: Get you a little recognition?

BM: That part's interesting. I thought it was a wonderful joke in a way to have that happen. In another way there is that feeling . . . gee . . . living out here, feeling isolated this long, if I won that award what the hell would I do? The first thing that came into my mind was, it's the kiss of death, so if I won I'd probably feel really shitty, and if I didn't win it, well who cares? I'd just go back into the wood-work but . . .

DP: For example, you're going to be translated into French.

BM: I don't know if that's a result of it or not but . . . a bit more recognition, a couple of more reviews, a couple more readings, for whatever it's worth. I think part of my work, going back to the idea of publishing, is to recognize the work when it's being done. In this country there's the whole delay system. You end up getting what you need way after the fact.

DP: Good old Canadian cautiousness.

BM: I think so. In my work too I feel that moving into this area of what form and poetry is and staying engaged with it . . . I like to think that the work is new somehow, and you don't want too many people saying, "Oh we understand everything you're doing, here's a thousand dollars." In a way you want to remain alone with it. You want to stay out there with it, and I don't know . . . it was an interesting experience but it'll soon be forgotten.

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