

**At the Centre:
An Interview with Barry McKinnon**

Barry McKinnon is a literary pioneer in Prince George, having worked as a teacher, poet, publisher and distributor of fine chapbooks for over 40 years. The author of eight poetry books and fourteen chapbooks, McKinnon was awarded the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Award for *Pulp Log* in 1991 and has twice received the bpNichol Chapbook Award (for *Arrhythmia* in 1995 and *Bolivia/Peru* in 2004). In honour of his achievements as an author and publisher, the Barry McKinnon Chapbook Award was established in 2006. Intended to recognize the top chapbook written and published by an author from Northern BC, this accolade is given annually. In his many capacities, McKinnon has been a central figure in the advancement and development of Prince George into as a Western Canadian literary centre. Currently, McKinnon is working on a memoir-style novel, *Life is like a River - Robert Creeley: An Assemblage*.

Justin Foster: In 1969, after being part of the literary community in Montreal and then Vancouver, you migrated north to Prince George. When you moved here to teach at the College of New Caledonia (CNC), Prince George was known primarily as a resource town, a mill-town. What was your take on the literary climate of Prince George at that time? Moving from the city to "the centre;" what was the transition like for you?

Barry McKinnon: When I arrived in July of 1969 I didn't have a clue about what I was getting into, and when I arrived, felt apprehensive and literally wanted to turn back to Vancouver. This was my wife's reaction as well - in the shock of a hot stinky day in what looked like a rough mill town. I remember we went to The Inn of the North bar (the barn) and had a few Uncle Ben's super strength beer, came out into the sunlight and, I think I said, "it's not so bad!" The beer! I've written lots about the college, but to answer your question, as a literature, communications and creative writing teacher, it seemed part of the gig to look for and promote, particularly, the young poets who took my classes, and to publish a literary mag. To my knowledge, this was the first attempt to create a focus for writers. However, it's important to note that some great writers came from or lived in Prince George prior to my arrival. John Newlove lived here, in isolation, for a year. Early in the 60's, Brian Fawcett and Sharon Thesen left for SFU and began their lives there as writers (though they do acknowledge Prince George as their starting point and an "inspiration" for their sensibilities as writers). Ken Belford was also here, off and on, and did give one reading at a coffee house in a church basement. What I'm saying, is that there was no visible literary climate. I must say that Charlie Boylan, an instructor also hired in 69, became a good friend. He found out about the Canada Council program to sponsor readings. He quickly applied; the result and beginning of the scene here included readings by Atwood, Purdy, Birney, Livesay etc. etc. - an incredible reading series that put Prince George "on the map" as a place with energy, and attention to the best Canadian writing.

JF: Your work here has changed this place. The Caledonia Writing Series (1972-1980), and later Gorse Press (1981-), were successful literary ventures that put Prince George on the 'poetry map' in terms of both publications and readings. Before all that, in the early days, did you have intentions of establishing this place as a literary centre?

BM: The intentions? Our scene evolved naturally out of our feeling that Prince George was an outback and that our job as teachers went beyond the classroom. ie. that there was cultural work to do. And to make our lives more interesting - we were young and worked hard - to get active in the contexts of what interested us. I think after the first year, word got out that Prince George was a happening place for writers and beyond the perceptions of a hostile surface, we were organized, friendly, and probably as active as some of the bigger centres. I think we used to host up to 10 readings a year. Once we set the precedents, we continued year after year with readings, literary mags, and as a natural extension to these activities, I started a small press (CWS) to print local writers, but also broadsides and chapbooks by some of the more "famous" writers who read here.

JF: What motivated you to start the small press (CWS)? What was it you hoped to achieve through those activities?

BM: The presses partly came about because of my summer working at Talonbooks in Vancouver. I was critical of their list, and the pressures of running a press at that level - depending on grants etc. etc. I took Pound's advice: take things into your own hands! So I became the editor, printer, distributor etc., and worked with I think, integrity. I wasn't bound in the commercial world, and could work at my own pace. I liked printing and along with John Harris got a letterpress and various other presses to print the various books. You'll see in CWS some of the folly to this activity - but that we also created a larger presence for ourselves: writers, printers, publishers - all of this energy coming out of Prince George.

JF: What are some of the more memorable events and publications that were sown in, or grew out of Prince George prior to 1980?

BM: Al Purdy for sure was always more than exciting. He stirred the shit on every visit: "his first visit was the wildest - fueled by much beer and typical Purdy raucous incorrect behaviour. At the Inn of the North bar - 'the barn' as it was called, a gymnasium sized hang-out - a student at our table bragged that he had the biggest testicles in the room. Purdy took the challenge seriously: he chomped his cigar, harrumphed, stood up, reached into his pants lifted and cupped his bare balls and bellowed 'whaadda yaaa think of theeese!!' it's true, from my view they were damn big - pinkish baseballs or grapefruits? But any accuracy or true gauge was made more difficult by the speed and shock of the event" (from *Life is Like a River*). Margaret Atwood helped me give birth to a litter of 9 dogs. We had an impressive list of writers: Ondaatje, Livesay, Kroetsch, Newlove, PK Page, Bowering, Marlatt, Hindmarch, and on and on. A few of our publications won awards: the Malahat Broadside Award for Design and The Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize for Victoria Walker's "Suitcase". I printed short pieces by Purdy, Livesay, John Newlove, Ken Belford, a few of my own chapbooks and broadsides, etc.

JF: In the winter of 1980 the Words/Loves conference (named after a line taken from a Jack Spicer poem), was held at CNC. In discussing the timing of this conference you wrote, "February in Prince George is the height, and a breaking point in the seeming unending nature of winter's hold ... no one would want to come north...." What influenced your decision to host the conference in what many consider to be a harsh and unforgiving time of year? Why was the event such a success?

BM: In the 70's the creative writing instructors in the BC college system decided to hold yearly

conferences for instructors and students. We decided to move the event from campus to campus and since most of the colleges were south, we met in Vancouver at Cap College and Langara and then Nanaimo. Fred Wah suggested Prince George; it was our "turn" etc. I agreed and spent the next year organizing the event. The first task was to set a date and then invite headline readers, set the format, and make all of the arrangements for the 100 or so people that we expected would attend. Firstly we thought that a spring break event would work best and attract the most people. Spring in the south, spring in the north? In a second I just made up my mind to schedule the conference in the depths of winter - the prevalent condition and context for those of us working and studying here. I thought the Vancouver and southern kids needed to experience the winter, but simultaneously also thought that February would limit attendance, so then had to think at that same moment, "how attract people into this weather?" I wrote to big time writers as the draw: Atwood, Ondaatje, Cohen, Audrey Thomas, Betty Lambert, etc. Most had other commitments OR didn't want, I suspect, to bundle up for Feb. in Prince George. The one commitment came from Robert Creeley, the great major American writer, who stood at the top of my list and a writer I knew would guarantee a flock of his admirers, and this he did. But the "success" of the event is also a result of hours of work each day for a year - myself, Joy my wife, students John Oscroft and Randy Kennedy - who planned the 3 day event in minute detail (with a few glitches unexpected but solved along the way). Creeley was the draw. Why the hell would a major American writer come to Prince George? This culmination of factors got people curious. Why not put on a parka and head north? It was a full, crazy, useful and huge event and a climax of sorts for the college creative writing conferences in BC. *Words/Loves* was the end of it. As Creeley once said: "Top that!"

JF: In several of your essays you cite Robert Creeley as having had a significant and influential impact on you as a writer. What was it that attracted you to Creeley's work? Do you think that Creeley had an impact on Prince George?

BM: What I like about Creeley, particularly his book "For Love", is the power and intensity of his emotion/thought. If you look at "Life is Like a River"(McKinnon, 2010) you'll see a few paragraphs here and there where I describe, or attempt to, the effects of his poetry. He also has a didactic sense but gets away with it, because the speed of his perceptions, overriding the censor mechanisms we all carry, to establish quick truths (or it is that they "sound" like truths we need to hear: "when I know what others think of me/I'm plunged into my loneliness"). Lines like this move thru his work. For my ear he does what I think poetry should do: sound, rhythm, sense and meaning, as complex as it is and had to be. He remarks his love of Olson's poetry: "He says things!". So does Creeley. Also a measure is - how durable is the poetry. I find I can go back to his work re read it and it still seems fresh, contemporary. I'm sure he earns "timelessness". His affect here, despite the criticisms (and chair incident) was large. "After my brief introduction, and a reading of Spicer, Creeley sat down but wasn't comfortable with the low chair or the mike placement. I spotted a hard plastic briefcase next to the stage riser, quickly grabbed it and placed it on the seat of the chair. The simple physics is *thus!*: plastic on plastic, the reader sits, and the various gravitational forces combine and the reader goes WHOOSH! Americas greatest living poet, slides and lands flat-ass on the stage floor. Audience laughs, reader laughs, then nimbly jumps to his feet, and says: TOP THAT! and begins to read and talk for the next hour and a half" (from *Life is Like a River*). What was important for me was to get to know him, correspond and hang out when we could. He's an attractive figure, or he sure as hell was here.

JF: With a new administration in charge, CNC suffered heavy handed cutbacks in the early 1980's. Among others, you were at the center of this conflict, opposing the new conservative administration's vision for the college. Tell us a bit about what went on during those turbulent times.

BM: I don't want to go back into the details here. See the Creeley essay, and what I claim there is documented in the "no method at all" article. What made it difficult for me was that it was "personal". The bully waits in the school yard etc! And he's there for 12 years.

JF: How did your struggles as a teacher at CNC manifest in your writing?

BM: I made my life at the college "subject matter" and didn't drift off into some safe/lyric or false world. This was the real world of politics, struggle in every sense. See Pulp Log for a "journal" of a rough period. See "the centre" poem as a measure of my despair. See "into the blind world" for the "bully" line and my discovery of "all corrupt". I feel fortunate to have seen the devil close up. It made me a better writer, and to use Hemingway's line: write and live with a "shit detector". My regret was/is the effects on my family – ie. I was preoccupied with keeping a job/money and struggling with all attempts to keep an integrity. I think the poetry helped me do this. I'm also convinced I was black balled in the system, so felt, as they say, chained to the warden.

JF: You have twice won the prestigious bpNichol Chapbook Award, first in 1995 with Arrythmia and then again in 2004 with Bolivia/Peru. As a proponent of small press publications and an established chapbook maker and publisher, why do you think chapbook making is important/relevant? What purpose does it serve in the context of northern matters?

BM: When I taught creative writing there was one question that always came up: how do I get published? The common assumption and illusion was that you send off a manuscript to a prestigious publisher and in a matter of weeks get accepted with a contract etc. I'm exaggerating a bit, but not much. If a writer is going to go to trade publishers he/she needs to research - find a publisher that is interested in the kind of writing you do (and this runs the range from lyric, to narrative, to poems with political content, experimental, language, concrete, etc etc.) The snowball's chance in hell. Again, I took Ezra Pound's advice and took things into my own hands. The precedents for "self publishing" are well established: Walt Whitman, WC Williams, Pound. Vanity publishing is another matter; the writer pays a suspicious printing company a lot of money to have 100 copies printed which then allows the writer to boast, "I'm a published writer!" Anyway, self publishing (editing, designing, and distributing) your own work in chapbook form eliminates most of the hassles I've described - gets the work into the world and in some ways, clears the way ahead to produce new work. It's a great and accepted tradition - the small press movement that works in the underground and bypasses the commercial and its various demands. It allows the writer to avoid compromise. The chapbook is crucial; it forms a community and practice that is really what keeps new literature alive in many ways. The next step, or one that I practice, is to self publish in this way - usually 10 years - and then seek out a publisher that is sympathetic to the work (usually what are considered small presses that receive grants and can publish 500 plus copies for a larger distribution ie. in my case, coach house, talon, and new star). In the north, the chapbook keeps the art current and alive - and I'm thinking of all of the students and others who have produced some beautiful little books and someone as gifted as Greg Lainsbury in Ft. St John, Tanya Clary, Rob Budde and his students, Ken Belford and as you

know, the list goes on and on - Graham Pearce and his students. It proves we're alive.

JF: From your experience, what are the advantages of writing from Prince George?

BM: I have a friend and writer who describes Prince George as "peeled" back. I think she's right and for a writer, a crucial part of the process is to peel back surfaces, plumb to some kind of truth. I'm thinking here more so of the social, political and economic world. In Prince George, although you can barely find the phone number for the biggest institutions in the town - the pulp mills/northern industry - it's important to see how they work in and create the overall context. I sometimes think that the lyric writers, and writers in bigger cities where it's harder to see anything beyond themselves. It's more complex, obviously, than this but: I find PG as, at times, an abrasive context. This is good because it brings the fighter instinct out, those irritations that, for me, can lead to poetry. In a tough place you gotta be tough - hone the senses, the intellect, the poem. No better place to be for a writer in some ways, tho I'd also like to encourage young writers to get the hell out into the bigger world. But it's interesting to see and read how Brian Fawcett's writing and living sensibility gives huge credit to PG. A peeled back microcosm of sorts that points its particulars to the larger world. This is also why I like New York city! ha.

JF: Briefly, how would you describe the literary climate in Prince George today?

BM: Lively, to use the euphemism - provocative, wide ranging styles, approaches. All of the "isms" coming to the surface. The tradition: writers group up, factions emerge, and establish territory for literary quarrels. This is ok if you don't get stupid and close-minded. It's a small town. Learn to live and write and ignore what you're not interested in.