

Headwaters

Robert Budde

ECOLOGUE

Ken Belford

Harbour Publishing

<http://www.harbourpublishing.com>

86 pages; paper, \$16.95

THE CENTRE: POEMS 1970-2000

Barry McKinnon

Talonbooks

<http://www.talonbooks.com>

191 pages; paper, \$14.95

Jack Spicer to Robin Blaser: "Let your way of writing the moment go along its own paths, explore and retreat but never be fully realized."

Ken Belford: "And so the north moves north."

Ken Belford lives on Central Street in Prince George, British Columbia. He came into town from further out, Blackwater Lake, T'amtuuts'whl'ax (Anglicized as "Damdochax"), north of Hazelton in the Skeena Mountains on the Nass. This is where the great rivers of northwestern North America begin. The headwaters. They will always begin here. From out there to in here, reflections of something larger, an imprint of human ecology, economy, the real flow of mental resources from the headwaters, to the resource-based town, to the southern industrialists.

Barry McKinnon has lived in Prince George for over 30 years, and his poetry comes straight from the small-center urban complex of the city's development. McKinnon's poetics is a negotiation with the city and a means of survival for a poet in a resource-based town. McKinnon's "Prince George" is an act of the

imagination; the city breathes pollution and the poems cough discontent. His poems are a radical "placing" of a poetics, but also an act of displacing language from civics. On other fronts, McKinnon's activities, the wide distribution of his chapbooks (*The Centre* is largely a compilation of those chapbook projects), and his reading series (that has pulled poets from across the continent to Prince George), have unsettled the traditionally perceived urban/rural cultural disparity. Because of McKinnon, Prince George has been a "center" for cultural activity despite its size and its isolation. Ken Belford and Barry McKinnon, both geographically peripheral, are absolutely central to Canadian poetics.

Belford's poetics is related systemically (and, so, ecologically) to language poetry (postlyric, post-everything-colonial-and-pretentious) and the transient "I" that resides, lives, like in a forest of words, in Belford's poems. Belford is not a nature poet, not an environmentalist poet, not a lyric poet, not a language poet, not an asocial poet, not an avid consumer, not a travel writer, not a lumberjack balladeer, not an academic poet, not here nor there. He barely exists. He is central.

I am going to concentrate hard on a few particular but elusive activities in *Ecologue*: constructions of an "I" and dissolution of place, or, the dissolution of an "I" and constructions of place, which, in the end, I think are one in the same. As much as we try to celebrate a sense of Northern BC writing, it is clear that that tenuous connection between writing and place is as transient and uncertain as any other connections between language, people, and place. It is as much about Jack Spicer and Al Purdy, George Bowering and Robert Creeley, as it is about eskers and salmon and pine trees. It is, I suppose,

Budde continued on page 6

Budde continued from page 1

political. And this is how Belford lives displacement politics through his poetics.

Before dwelling in *Ecologue*, I want to go back into some of Belford's previous lodgings—those self-made structures, those left but leaving impressions on the writing body, moving out and toward meaning but not arriving. Belford's writing begins with an affinity to the land but does not end there. If ever there was a white man's claim to ownership of the land, it is Belford's, but he declines. Working from *Pathways into the Mountains* (2000), it is paths and traces of *thought* that take precedence: "Always I have been afraid/ of this moment:/ breaking the land." Belford watches as the land (not nature, not wilderness: "wilderness is just made up/ like anything is, in factories") is ransacked and industrialized: "writing and rewriting/ this devegetizing kind of industry/ harms land so it suffers and aches." But this is no easy polemic; Belford does not decry a kind of traditional reactionary environmentalism. The land and its language is more complex than that. It is not premised on nostalgic "nature writing." In "For Jack Spicer, Now":

A poem cannot be as pure
as a seagull's belly.

Those who ask this of poetry
cannot fish without bait
or think carrying pencils into wilderness
brings words back out.

Stolen words are never pure,
liver flukes in the belly.

The added 'o' that alters the traditional "eclogue," with its misleadingly sublime pastoral, to the more politicized "ecologue," signals Belford's desire for a new articulation of the relationship between humans and land. His poetic interaction with place is an act of political negotiation with the powers-that-be: the developers, the industrialists, the institutions of commerce. In *Ecologue*, this aesthetic politics is even more bound up in the economics of place: "Myths sustain the agenda." Economic "progress" and formal or conventional lyric verse are analogous in Belford's mind, so he demands "Snatching words/ never put your iron hand on me,/ never develop, snag, or net me." "Myth," "words," and "narrative" here are preexisting and static configurations of cultural knowledge. There is judgment but it is one that digs for the interconnections behind social injustice:

Here and other places Belford refers to his existence as third-world, preindustrial, "1741." Belford knows how to shape tools from trees. In this, Belford is pre- and/or postcolonial and oddly gains a planetwide community of the dispossessed and the Other. Belford is a transient identity: "I'm not that kind of I." He is *trans*-just-about-everything. Belford continually un-defines himself:

Some say I disappeared
somewhere between a fable in the old growth
and a roaded narrative of simian drivers
sleeping it off.

and

Identity, by pointing on a map,
may be inaccurate.

This self-effaced identity shares attributes with a host of powerful artists and writers—those nonwhite, non-Western, feminized, and trans-cultural identities that make up most of the population of the globe. One of these kindred identities might be Gloria Anzaldúa, a lesbian Chicano woman who lived on the American/Mexican border and wrote *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1988). While this seems like an odd equivalence, Belford shares in the border existence. Anzaldúa writes that the Mexican border is "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds"; Belford's "third world" is that of the back country, the mountains, the "third-space" of industrial development.

Ken Belford and Barry McKinnon, both geographically peripheral, are absolutely central to Canadian poetics.

Like Belford's title *Ecologue*, McKinnon's playful title *The Centre* also defies convention and hinges in acerbic irony as it addresses the many "centers/centres" of power in contemporary society. For McKinnon, "the centre" is the poetic mind at work. While the poet engages with (battles, seduces, lives, succumbs, enlightens...) the physical environment, it is the city of the imagination that is most affective and *present*. Prince George was invented by Barry McKinnon in 1970. He has been regretting it ever since.

It is a Prince George that is ugly and irrefutable, like Ellen in "Astoria": "she says, *yr all fuckheads*." This gritty real that makes the lyric obsolete. McKinnon announces this, the death of the lyric poet, "at the end of the line" with

We don't know much.
If we did we'd spend more
on replacing living things
than on buildings.

This exploration of absurd development and unabashed pillaging is the center of Belford's project.

For Belford, "all the world is flesh," and land interacts, his kind of ecology, human/animal/plant, the cut of wood as part of a place, not as a carcass going down a dead logging road. A William Carlos Williams "local pride" taken as social, but a social that includes a "third-space" of nonhuman living, "earthlings like you." An Al Purdy *North of Summer* (1967) but more firmly THERE; Belford would know how to take a shit with dogs around (See Purdy's "When I Sat Down To Play the Piano").

Belford positions and repositions himself often in his poems. This functions not so much to place himself in a context but to indicate his motion and refusal to stand still. His most locating poem is "The journeyman," but even this declaration is conditional:

I'm not invited to read in the universities....
I'll never be a sucky white boy. I was 58
or 59 when I wrote this in 1741. There
were times I had no store food so I lived
from the land. I'm an unregulated voice
from the Nass. Alfred Purdy noticed me.

fingers to touch breasts
with, make a fist

hold cigarettes
beer

The "end of the line" is both literary—the line break and McKinnon's use of it to disrupt the lyric, fragment its ease—and geographical: Prince George is "the end of the line" in many respects. It also may be "the end of the line" for poetry in that poetry is a threatened state of being in McKinnon's city, an art form his students "don't get" and the city ignores. In the face of industry, the poet is an endangered animal, a necessary silence:

it's the Mill in all its forms that rules—power
and source, that one joke will bring its wrath
or smug indifference. (Mill managers say the
NO SMOKING sign's *too small*—weigh a few
cigarettes against their polluted air.)

The poet hangs on. "Arrhythmia," the most recent long poem in the collection, was written with the poet's heart literally rebelling. Even here, there is a dependence on the thinking self: "scribble—// the self-centred—a latitude/ near paradise." Both in the poem's refusal of the sentimental or soothing (like Belford's refusal of the pastoral) and its fragmentation ("scribble"—his notational style), McKinnon creates a distinctly *remote* antilyric impulse. His poetics is not emblematic of Prince George, but the poetics are a facet of the city's creation. Placed in a world of constructions, the poet draws inward, releases new energy:

in the imagined
landscape,
I see a world. we are gathered
and almost as in this world, tethered
(which is not to exclude pain and
death

we believe the sounds in our heads—the
songs and
momentarily these emotions, real—that draw
us off.

and each day, a multiplicity—small
city of thought...

The poem as act of resistance is the music of a place unfettered by the southern barons.

Economies, ecosystems, and writing all begin from the periphery, the outside. The outside can be many places: *the hinterland, the outback, the north, the edge, the rez, the gateway, the bush, the back country, the borderland, the in-between, the small town, the headwaters, the forgotten places, the mountains, Third World, nowhere, nature, the middle of nowhere, God's country, the interior, the coast, the boonies*, etc. You know the place. It's not where it's at. And it is a place the centers of power necessarily silence.

Economies depend on these places for raw resources, but the relationship to the center has to be one of extraction, not reciprocal recognition or nurturing. Outside is outside because the inside *depends on it* in a parallel process identified in Said's "Orientalism" and the abjection of the Middle East. The discourses of power must *construct* the outside as outside in order to fully realize the (artificial) potential of the inside. The outside, as a construct, is built to disavow itself. It is self-deprecating and without a strong identity. It lacks self-awareness and has low self-esteem. Its history is erased and its culture undermined. But while this imaginary identity is instituted as a pervasive and grim map of Northern BC, the place's real living goes on underneath it. And it is rich.

In *The Inhuman* (1988), Lyotard describes the manifestation of a luminous absence, an "outside" presence that defies order:

The inhumanity of the system which is currently being consolidated under the name of development (among others) must not be confused with the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage.... The system rather has the consequence of causing the forgetting of what escapes it. But the anguish is that of a mind haunted by a familiar and unknown guest which is agitating it, sending it delirious....

Lyotard's use of "development" is an intricate type of "grid" which informs the way we see the world, the "wilderness," people. What is added, though, is the suggestion that what escapes remains integrally bound up in the grid. Indeed, the system constructs itself around "forgetting," around an exclusionary program, around what the gaze cannot accommodate, around *the very thing it denies*. Belford and McKinnon might be versions of that "unknown guest"—an unsettling, integral presence in the middle of our collective cultural economy.

Robert Budde teaches creative writing and critical theory at the University of Northern British Columbia. He has published two books of poetry, Catch as Catch and Traffick, and two novels, Misshapen and The Dying Poem. Flicker, a series of prose poems, is scheduled for release in fall 2005. Check out his online literary project at <http://stonestone.unbc.ca>.