

The Edge of the Page:  
A Response to Barry McKinnon's  
*I Wanted to Say Something*

Lorna Uher

McKinnon, Barry. *I Wanted to Say Something*. Prince George:  
New Caledonia Writing Series, 1975.

In the years since its publication in 1975, Barry McKinnon's *I Wanted to Say Something* has received very little critical attention, yet it has influenced a number of poets who have felt the same need to define their roots. Andy Suknaski, in particular, once told me that *I Wanted to Say Something* was a necessary precursor to *Wood Mountain Poems* which, in turn, influenced Eli Mandel's *Out of Place*. I don't mean to imply that McKinnon's book has no value beyond the catalytic. To the contrary, I offer my analysis as an apology to McKinnon for the lack of attention paid in the past to a beautiful, well-crafted book.

*I Wanted to Say Something* is a long two-part poem with photographs chronicling three generations of Prairie people—McKinnon's grandparents, his parents, and finally himself. Unlike *Wood Mountain Poems*, however, McKinnon's book is not much concerned with descriptions of the people and their oral stories which so fascinated Suknaski; McKinnon is more interested in the process of his own telling, the movement from the desire to say something to the words actually said. Hence, the poem is not only about McKinnon's family and their past, but also about the act of writing, about the growth of the poet himself, and about the

importance of finding a language of place and clarity, "speech to make its measure / and secure the / movement / now" ("Part 2: The Moving Photograph").

The chief strength of the book is that McKinnon is able to synthesize his concern with process and his desire to chronicle the past. This joint concern is reflected in the recurring metaphor of language: McKinnon describes the farmers' blood as "erased," the wind as "indelible," and the landscape as "imprinting." At the beginning of the poem, when Jessie and F. C. Dalton, the poet's grandparents, immigrate to Canada and come "to the edge," we know they have reached not only the edge of the land, but also the edge of the photograph and the page. They are one of the "distorted shapes" that the poet must name. Through the act of writing about what they have left him in "The Legacy," the first part of the poem, he moves towards an understanding of his own poetics. He comes to terms with the people, the history, and the land that have shaped his voice and caused him to sing.

In this first section, the poem is a movement through McKinnon's personal history book, the family photo album. The photographs, beautifully reproduced on a faded yellow paper suggesting the past, are not merely decorative. For McKinnon, they are a bridge into a past and a landscape that he wishes to reclaim. This function of the photograph is described by Susan Sontag in her book *On Photography*: "As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure." McKinnon, city man and man of words, uses the family pictures to connect him with a past and a landscape from which he has been removed. He transforms the photos which are frozen memory, pieces of time, into a fluid movement through the narrative connections and meditations that the pictures inspire. As Sontag suggests, McKinnon uses the photos to return to a space in which he is insecure, insecure because he no longer works the land and because he wishes to idealize it—"to rearrange / the fields in natural / ecstasy" ("Part 2: The Moving Photograph"). His words become an almost magic chant to return him to this Edenic state: "he will sing before he disappears. sing for the land / to return with its gifts" ("Part 2: The Moving Photograph").

Besides operating as bridges into the past, the photographs frequently function as ironic contrasts, especially in the portraits where the backdrops present an idealized landscape of lawns, trees

and rivers, the antithesis of prairie starkness. But more important, the photographs influence the style of writing. At one point, Sontag describes the photograph as a "fast form of note-taking": some of the poems in *I Wanted to Say Something* could be described as a fast form of picture-taking. Many of the lines simulate titles, for instance, "a woman, beloved jessie in the buggy / with children" ("Part 1: The Legacy"). Others function as notations accompanying photos in an album—"taken jan 1917 Edward and Ione / Ione is dead, Ed is dead" ("Part 1: The Legacy"). The photo, showing two small children each holding a cat in front of a wagon, reinforces the poignancy of the simple lines and points out the distinction between the idealized image and the harshness of reality.

This influence of the photograph in McKinnon's book lends the language a beautiful simplicity, a sparseness that suggests the quick snap of the camera shutter. In fact, in the second section of the book, the photo (that which captures the image) becomes language. Rather than the frozen picture, the image becomes verbal: language is "the moving photo // graph" ("Part 2: The Moving Photograph"). The syllabification of the last word places emphasis on "graph," the Greek suffix for writing. Significantly it is this line which ends the poem.

Another technique McKinnon uses to synthesize his central themes is to write lines that operate on two main levels, lines which describe his ancestors and their past but also the act of writing. One of these recurs throughout "Part 1: The Legacy": "it all begins in innocence." The word "innocence," however, appears in variations on this line throughout the entire poem. It is a signal line not only thematically but also structurally because it defines the circular movement of the poem.

In reference to his family, the line describes the Daltons' move to the Prairies, the promised land of their dreams. In the beginning, they have a naive faith in the dream:

someone promised land or gold (similar  
 obsessions that somewhere  
 you could be free thus the migration of F.C.  
 Dalton and wife Jessie arriving  
 .....  
 she was to have  
 children and grow  
 old

in innocence

("Part 1: The Legacy")

However, there is the inevitable fall. The initial romantic vision is supplanted by nature's harsh reality. Crops fail, children die, nature rebels against the imposed geometric order, "no images / grace the eye . . . / . . . and earth / turns to sand" ("Part 1: The Legacy").

The line also refers to another kind of innocence—the settlers' implicit belief in language. It was their faith in the old news reels and in word-of-mouth which brought them to the Prairies in the first place. They had listened to "the man [who] had come earlier to take stories / back / abt the lovely new land / where we now stand" ("Part 1: The Legacy"). It is this faith in words (also reflected in the preceding description that they travelled "until the map sd / stop") that allows McKinnon's grandfather to describe his first winter on the prairie with such simplicity and verity that it could be told in no other way. It is language working at its best:

lived in a granary. cold even  
 with the stove and me  
 20 yrs old and didnt want to lose  
 my new wife. in the morning would  
 warm her shoes in the  
 oven good thing she had a  
 nother pair, burnt them one  
 morning (toes all curled  
 up

("Part 1: The Legacy")

"It all begins in innocence" has a different implication when it applies to the poet himself. He begins with an edge of distance and distrust—"we all laugh in the / innocence — that its all past that nothing lasts once the / dream ends" ("Part 1: The Legacy"). Although one of the legacies of his grandparents is the importance of language, the poet lacks their naive faith. He is separated from both the land and language by knowledge, the knowledge that the stories of the lovely land weren't true, that the dream came to an end. At the beginning of the poem, his grandfather's definitive "I can tell you" contrasts sharply with the poet's hesitant "I wanted to say something" ("Part 2: The Moving Photograph") and his "I begin to speak . . ." ("Part 1: The Legacy").

His distrust of the legacy is implied in his editorial comments about the family tales, "or so the stories / go" ("Part 1: The Legacy"). Yet in McKinnon's description of the family farm there is an insistence that the words must be found—

... the sun sets always  
in the west, behind the rocky mountains (appearing as one  
naked jaw. we are in the mouth, then, — sky for the skull  
that disappeared.

("Part 1: The Legacy")

If they are in the mouth of the skull, then they are the tongue and, as the tongue, McKinnon writes, "I speak to discover, to trace / the lineage, to claim my innocence / amidst the photo album" ("Part 2: The Moving Photograph"). This discovery of innocence is a rediscovery of his grandparents' dream, a reassertion of the validity of language and the proximity of the land, the spiritual closeness that was lost:

I wanted to say something  
is wrong and provide an  
alternative — to reclaim the spirit  
from the dust, and allow the sun  
to appear clearly on the horizon: to say  
the animals are always holy — to rearrange  
the fields in natural

ecstasy  
("Part 2: The Moving Photograph")

But to reach this state of regained innocence he cannot ignore his family's definition of the land as enemy and their ultimate defeat. Rather than the refined, romantic view that he wishes to hold, he must face the decay, the deaths, the broken men. He must "eat the literal earth (to make it seem more / real // to make this language / pure // the carcass circles in / the blood" ("Part 2: The Moving Photograph"). Only when he can work his way through the family album, the failure of the dream, and the legacy which is also ignorance, can he begin again, can he sing with the final legacy which is love. Thus the book itself is circular, reflecting the cycle of land and seasons that brought the dream back to the Dalton/McKinnon family, for the end of the book is also the beginning.

The assertion that "he will sing before he disappears" takes us back to the starting point, for the poet's song is this book which he has given us. "It all begins in innocence"—thumbing through the dream, searching for the song, trusting the photo/graph.

Note

<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell, 1973), p. 9.