

Barry McKinnon goes cruising  
with Sharon Thesen

# Car & Driver



**Sharon Thesen. *Aurora*.**  
Coachhouse, 1995. 75pp, \$12.95

Sharon Thesen told me that during a fax-exchange between her and the poet Robin Blaser, Blaser faxed back – "I'm tired of poems that start with lines like 'I drive the car'." And Blaser, the master of erudition, the teacher and friend to poets under his tutelage while at SFU for a couple of decades, and an active mentor to Thesen, is scary enough to make any writer face the fax, or else face the poetry Gods, the dark angels, and also the drunken ghost of Jack Spicer.

What's wrong with the line, "I drive the car"? Too prosaic, too Canadian-bare without metaphoric or descriptive content, too active and pushy? It is some measure of Thesen's charms and recalcitrance that she took her mentor's complaint as a kind of challenge, head-on. The first poem in *Aurora* begins:

*I drive the car*

But Thesen's next three lines should catch Blaser's ear and interest, for they promise a poet who's wide-eyed and proprioceptive at the wheel:

*I drive the car  
while the choir ascends  
toward a far transparency  
these words tap at ...*

Here we have the choir as soundtrack, hints of the celestial, and a sense that the trip ahead will not be prosaic, or uneventful. In the active imagination that drives this first poem we'll meet "mucho federales/at the border." We'll look to see that "in the back seat/sits the ghost of your grandma." We'll find that big, polluting semis hog the dark road as dark "minotaurs." Add to this more soundtrack – "someone playing the piano/with an eye-patch on & the helium/voice of a drugged out poet." When Thesen, as she says, "puts her in drive," I don't hesitate to hop in and buckle-up beside her – ghosts of grandma in the back, and all.

Where are we going? The vista that lies ahead is wide. We get to see and know and feel "the transparencies," states of being and the world that only the best poetry can reveal, as well as the more "everyday" human territories: "the guy across the alley", "clerks tied up in explanations," a bout with insomnia – specific spaces and places articulated by a woman very much alive, and familiar with them. On one level her subject matter, tones, recognitions, and surprises remind me of Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, he's a man-of-the-world, hip in Manhattan during the lunch-hour rush, spontaneous, humorous and casual – a likable personality. Thesen shares these qualities with O'Hara, but she is darker and more serious. She too composes with the

particulars that fill her life—a pile of liver, Smarties, the GST, her 7 1/2 size shoe, xeroxing, the ten dollar fortune teller, the cold sandwich, *Honeymoon in Vegas*, hairdos, the walkway at the Chicago airport, and so on—until these particles collide to allow openings for audacious lines that express the heart of a bare self. Her method is that the “thing” be named without rhetoric or sub-textual agendas, and be unaltered by any of the other political pressures (internal or external) which, in our time, often censor the instinct to say what must be said.

A key poem, “The Watermelon,” perhaps the most “I drive the car”-ish piece in the collection, simultaneously reveals what she sees, thinks, and knows—a poetry about as succinct as poetry can get:

*The clock said 10 to 3*

*I went upstairs, wrote lines, crossed them out.*

*I felt the weight of one of those gas masks on my spirit.*

*“My spirit.” My size 7 1/2 shoe.*

*My Canada Life insurance policy.*

*I suppose this comes from the pain of living, which is like being stabbed.*

*Everywhere I look,  
books*

*I suppose Sharon Olds has just finished another fabulous poem about her child’s scalp*

*Poetry: I couldn’t care less.*

*Long lines, short lines  
two ways of suffocation.*

What’s the overall message? That whatever we can finally “know” is born of struggle, and that life is a disappointment in its tiring and suffocating moments. And the narrator, ironically perhaps, is “broken now by a too long dance,” and “stabbed” by whatever forces, precisely because she *does* care. Torpor, however—like saying to someone, “I’m really, really depressed”—is not completely interesting as a condition until it connects with some sense of its sources. If I have one complaint it’s that, behind the great veracity of these lines we listen to because of the personality writing them, I want a larger sense of the juicy goods—the sources of disassociation and breakdown that led to her accidie/anomie; I’m snooty enough to want the sociology of her work world, an account of the men in her life, or lack of same, her bank balance, et cetera.

But in Thesen’s world there are many grains of interesting sand. Liver becomes epiphany when it spills out onto a wide wooden block where,

*it unfolds like the universe,  
finding its own shape & equilibrium  
a little narrower at one end,  
a gloss of winter starlight hugging the rise  
at the other end.*

Her amazement at seeing the universe this way—liver “like the universe” is a big, risky simile not many writers could get away with—even prompts the narrator to breathlessly say, at the end of the poem,

*Boy oh boy ...  
My hat is off to that particular cow*

It is this kind of shift from description—“a gloss of winter starlight hugging the rise”—to personal declaration that is the key to Thesen’s method. She writes so that each poem is only “successful” if it dismantles itself (as self dismantles self), until the tattered truth about her attitude to life at that moment is fully revealed. She leaves herself no time to turn back. No time to invent gags and ornament. No time for fear or courage. The poems triumph because they no longer feel like “poems”: they become ways of thinking about living that an attentive reader can immediately share and recognize.

My theory is that Thesen’s sensibility is partly a result of growing up in the industrial detritus of Prince George, a context and backdrop that gave her the necessary tools for perception early on. It was here that Thesen, the high school Queen Aurora, I’ve been told, probably with a little metaphorical mud on her size 7 1/2 shoes, learned to see the various dimensions and ironies of whatever context she might later find herself in. In Prince George, there is no possibility of not knowing where you are; this is a good thing for a writer, and a good place from which to start the writer’s journey.

The poems in *Aurora*, until we reach the long last poem, “Gala Roses,” are single-poem-narrative-lyrics written with a sense of closure and completeness. They stand on their own as little rhythmical universes of thought and language. An anthologist would find it hard not to take them all. But with “Gala Roses,” the book veers and changes direction in a remarkable and unexpected way. The driver of this car pulls a little switch that says “Jet Engine” and shoots us off the earth into a weightless, pure luminosity. The lines are long and continuous—a rap and rush of words “pouring a funnel of stars.” It is an inspired poem that lifts writer and reader from the earlier sense of “perpetual perplexity”—a poem that provides a liberation from the earlier exhaustion. “Gala Roses” is a breakthrough in form for Thesen and suggests a new life opening with more sanguine possibilities.

Its energy is a joy—as language and life break from, and in spite of, their sometimes toxic enclosures. ■

## Clear to the Heart: Alden Nowlan's Selected Poems:

*A Review of Alden Nowlan's Selected Poems, edited by Patrick Lane and Lorna Crozier,  
Toronto: House of Anansi, 1996.*

Alden Nowlan's great ability to write narrative poetry probably developed during his early days as a reporter when he learned to answer the 5 W's, (Who, What, Why, When and Where) - and to write the chronological details of a story without personal intervention, comment, or embellishment. But Nowlan, as the posthumous *Selected Poems* now attest, is no hick backwoods Maritime reporter of surface gossip and detail only. He wanted to say something about his life and the world, and as a poet he did so.

His narratives *do* give the clear surface, but the details, because of his ear for perfect storyteller-timing, accumulate to reveal passionate truths about universal human matters, thankfully without the bamboozlement of literary devices, subtext, political, or aesthetic agendas. Alden Nowlan, along with Al Purdy, is the very best 100 proof homebrew Canada has ever produced.

The "Bull Moose," a classic anthology piece, best shows Nowlan's modus. The poem, simultaneously simple & complex - a dance Nowlan is very good at - is "about" a bull moose out of its natural territory and trapped in a fenced pasture. The creature "like a scaffolded king" is too tired, and too lost to return to the wild. Once the neighbors hear of it, they arrive to tease, taunt, gawk and "have a little fun", as they might say south of the border.

*the young men snickered and tried to pour beer  
down his throat, while their girlfriend took their pictures*

*And the bull moose let them stroke his tick-ravaged flanks,  
let them pry open his jaws with bottles, let a giggling girl  
plant a little purple cap  
of thistles on his head.*

The moose as you can guess, is doomed despite the maudlin sympathy of those agreeing, after the wardens arrive, that "it was a shame to shoot anything so shaggy & cuddlesome". In a last burst of energy, the moose charges the crowd, scatters the yokels and is shot. If you feel Nowlan has overly manipulated our hearts for a moment to make some point about human cruelty and shameless behaviour, you might not like much of this book. A writer of lesser talent would fail with this story because of its unavoidable sentimentality. But Nowlan succeeds simply because he stands outside, ashamed but never saying it; appalled, but helpless in the face of this sick aspect of human nature he describes. The story, in this case, is about stupidity, insensitivity, and power and how closely these conditions are rooted to cowardice. But that he acts as a witness gives us some little hope. It's a masterful piece of work.

Robert Bly believes Nowlan was a "brave man." I agree, particularly because of the way he faced his own illness and death - two big dramatic subjects for a poet. In the poem "In the Operating Room", the narrator speaks without overt fear, whimpering, or confession, though it's quite possible he won't wake up. The poem begins as factual reportage: "The anesthetist is singing/"Michael, row the boat ashore,/Hallelujah!"/ And I am astonished /that his arms/are so hairy." Nowlan, knowing "it may be/the last living thing/I will ever see/" wants to reach up and touch the hairy arm, and to curl the hairs around his forefinger before he goes under. At the point of attempting to make this last gesture, he says, "I

discover/they've strapped/my arms/to the table." Such is real life: the wish to be in it, to touch and connect, to give or receive a poignant human gesture in the face of inevitable darkness and demisc. This theme is Nowlan's constant: "Yes, it's what we all want in the end/not even to be loved, but simply to be held." Much of the world he describes, therefore, is inhabited by those *not* held: the lonely, the wounded, the abandoned, the hapless. And Nowlan, you sense, knows and is sympathetic to the characters in his poems experiencing these conditions because he, also, has lived them.

Nowlan survived those cancer operations in the mid sixties, but he died young in 1983, at age 50. But to that point, this Maritime/world poet bravely went on to give the drama of daily life shape and meaning. His poetry is a wonderful legacy that lights the way to the possibilities of compassion and love, that we might be held as the darkness surrounds us.

The Catch, by George Bowering, McClelland and Stewart, 1976,  
128 pages, \$4.95.

### The Land

So, we have George Bowering's The Catch, a book composed of two earlier books published in limited editions, with a last section called Cereals for Roughage - all long poems which give some sense of Bowering's post lyric concern for discovery of form.

In the first book, George Vancouver, George Bowering enters the history of the West Coast, exploring the particulars of Captain Vancouver's voyage of 1792 - and equally, enters the poem itself, as an explorer without a preconceived notion of what the boundaries are or where the poem will go - "a discovery poem", as the preface says. What are Bowering or Vancouver looking for, what is found and what is finally known of the land & "the distant mind"?

Firstly, we do know that the job is:

To chart this land  
hanging over ten thousand inlets  
and a distant mind of as many narrows

an impossible thing -

If vision is "fear and hope", it is also the ability to deal with and know the particulars.

A drawing of an Indian weed  
is some surity  
an illustration of a leaf  
with only a thousand lines in it.

The task for the poet, then, to leap thru time and place, knowing that whatever history there is, has to be created or re-created and made human. Maps and poetry are a precise exercise in perception. What does any man really see, who gives the orders, and what prompts the search and where does the value lie?

An old story, as we take the backward glance, to know that the "fortune" can be all about and never seen. Gold, fur, and the misplaced North West Passage to it, is what the King wants. (George III is a constant figure in this poem with the pressure of his orders, his crazy vision of what is necessary and by this time also locked away in his room).

But, Vancouver does take the orders. "The King owns the boat". The conditions for Vancouver's failure, within the king's terms, are also present - the irony finally that what is looked for simply ain't there. It's someplace else.

For who would come home to say  
I have found no passage and no gold  
but only some new plants and  
a number of inlets

Here are the terms:

*It was the king's fancy that Cook's "River" was the passage  
across British North America that would allow him to send his  
fighting men to the Pacific to defend his interests.  
Captain Vancouver found that the "river" was just an inlet,  
& so it was renamed Cook's Inlet.  
Captain Vancouver's botanist, Menzies, spent his time finding  
& describing the new plants on the Coast.  
The Indians weren't asked what they thought about the Anglicans,  
so they never discourst on the relationship between fancy &  
the real.*

The Indians weren't asked anything, of course. But here, in this poem, we have them, The Nootkas

dug clams peacefully all winter,  
heaping the shining shells by their houses,  
a fortune. Vancouver sailed by ...

Which is not to say that Bowering draws any easy historical moral. All images begin to create their own sense, as Bowering the ghost/writer who inhabits this same land after the fact of literal discovery, finds condoms washed up, knows that as the sea acts up - "clouds fell over the Indian whores in North Vancouver". The White Goddess and that purity the poet seeks, now wears water skis.

Did Vancouver discover anything in this journey? There is always the sense of returning "empty handed" and therefore a sense that the journey is valueless. If there is a meagre compensation it is that he did what he had to do; the charts are his record.

Vancouver's job was to look at the coast  
north to the passage  
& check on foreign squatters  
especially Spanish.

This he did.

*Some of the islands are called  
Quadra, Texada, Aristarcus.*

And Bowering, the historical/poet/eye among the details, does get us somewhere and back thru those narrow, channels, and islands.

Once on that open sea, if there is discovery, it is this:

I have seen some  
of what lies in the mind  
the fancy of the British King  
gone like fish odour  
into the life giving fog of that coast.

### The Body

Off the body of that coast, the next book, Autobiology, takes us into Bowering's past. He moves now, conscious of his own evolving body, having to create a rushing prose line to contain what the child/man/saw/sees/felt/feels/knew/ knows. I think this kind of book is necessary for a writer to write and may be one that fills in, among other things, those questions of "where did this guy come from?" - a book for those who are curious and want autobiography. Autobiology is an exercise of sorts - an experiment which takes the idea of composing a memory for fear that otherwise that part of life will be lost. There is a kind of obsessive-remembrance to get it all and more without the limitations of standard written narrative (which in this case would slow the whole process down). "And, and, and," strings the details together.

Each page is a chapter. Bowering gives himself, or is given a topic (ie. The Teeter Totter, The Bush Fire, The Verandah, The Breaks, The Front Yard, Roger Falling, Fainting, The Operations etc. etc. 48 chapters in all) and then gives himself one page to get it down. That's the form. Perhaps the idea comes from those old days of the 250 word in class essay assignment with the condition that once it was done, you were free to go play baseball. Therefore the speed at which these pieces move. But in this case, the topics are Bowering's own and the style is that of fast talk, Gertrude Stein, down home stuff with the kind of personalism of David McFadden.

Yet, I find an ambiguity with this book. 1) that the voice is borrowed and 2) that the voice is entirely original - a work that is perhaps saved by Bowering's ability as a writer to create something new, no matter where the borrowing comes from. The content is no elses. I don't want to labour over this detail, but it seems to be this kind of work that attracts Bowering's enemies. They might say the idea goes too far. They might not pay enough attention to that other thing (the poetry) that sustains and holds the idea. For my own ear, everything has

to magically disappear, (particularly form and content as 2 separate elements), until you are left with the very real life - the very real scars any one of us must have. Here we have them. We talk this way. Anyone can do it. Try it.

## CHAPTER 46: IT

It was not a loud buzzing but it was like a loud buzzing & my mother came into the room & said what is it & what was it, a private thing to be afraid of & possess & I couldnt tell her & she was angry at me the same old son, George uncontrollable. It was not just a loud buzzing but also not the right distances, the things in the room were too far away & not coming closer & in the daytime I connected it with the double vision, two of everything you could live with. It wasnt madness because I was inside it. No it was not sad, it was true. It was not a loud constant buzzing or humming but it was what would be there besides the sound if there was a loud buzzing or humming. It was there. It was there & they were outside it. they could not hear it but I could not hear it but it was different & so was I. If I stared at the things they did not go away but they were too far as if I were looking from high in an airplane but the things were of a scale to appear as if the airplane were on the ground but the airplane was high in the air but it had nothing to do with airplanes. I still do not know what it was but it was not a loud buzzing. My mother said what & I just knew or said it it it it it it & it was all around but she was not in it & she could not hear it but it was not a thing to hear or be in, it was there.

All of it

"and take my waking slow" T. Roethke

In Cereals for Roughage Bowering returns to the sense of poetry I most admire. Nothing intrudes that is not real. The man enters his life again, but this time quietly, when it should be nothing but quiet - knowing, it seems, the cost of all life and that the writing is not writing, but a way to come to terms with all that is disparate and at the same time beautiful because of it. What we are given is a man's full and honest consciousness - in the face now of the growing daughter in "Summer Solstice", innocent within the world Bowering knows. Yet, there is that attempt to teach what he knows - a kind of reaching to say:



Thea, never read my lines, love your mother,  
love your father, distrust circles, reach  
this way & that. Remember how you can  
the afternoon a bird came to sit at your shoulder  
& let me remember how I dropt my game  
to fly to your side, protecting your eyes.  
Accept no promise from the mountains.  
I have never seen your face before, & when  
I leave you I will leave you time.  
Forgive me the light that fades not fast away,  
forgive me the continuous feast  
we make from your remembered day.

What are the important events in a man's life and what are the elements that combine to make the poem and the life? At some point, all a man knows, out of some kind of world tiredness, can get said if he has learned to see himself both as alone and as the other. It comes down to a difficult but persistant love in the face of pain that finally takes, for a writer, its form in language. In "Desert Elm" the father has died. It's a long way to the love you find here. It's a long way to come. Bowering does what he does, as a man first, which is also the condition that forms the greatness of this poetry.

Two more things. I have been trying to remember something I read, in order to give the exact sense of what Bowering does. Ironically, I find that it was Bowering who said it -- a line from "Desert Elm"

Men who love wisdom should acquaint themselves with a great many particulars.

and, from his introduction, we have this line,

Not battlements but that the land go to  
the settlers --E. Pound.

You got it George.

**barry mckinnon**

Review of George Bowering's *Craft Slices*, Oberon Press, 1985, ISBN 13: 9780887505805

George Bowering, a major Canadian poet and novelist, has been part of the literary scene for the past 25 years. His new book, *Craft Slices*, is a collection of short essays, notes, reviews, talks, and autobiographical sketches, or, as he puts it – “a pile of slices by a writer who wrote them and typed them and gave them titles and then stacked them alphabetically. I have a lot to say about the world of writing I have happily inhabited during the last couple of decades.”

After his “ABC” introduction comes “Adding” and as the other slices that follow (from Birney, Eliot, Ginsberg, Montreal, School English, *The Ubyyssey* to Exogenesis - and a lot more in between), Bowering gives us intelligent judgments and insights that debunk many common and clichéd notions about literary process. Here’s a sample: “I do not compose poetry to show you what I have seen, but rather because I have seen. That is, this poet’s job is not to tell you what it is like, but to make a poem.” And hasn’t every serious creative writing teacher at some point in the “creative writhing” experience also wanted to say to that clutch of self-expressers: “The poets job is not to disgorge, but to read all the great and good writing that has been granted the human race, to learn all the mechanics of language, tune his body and then listen. The poet is not an expresser but a teacher.”

As you read on, Bowering’s ideas and theories about making poems get seriously tested on the big and little names of Canadian Literature. Is Bowering “malicious” and “gossipy” as the back flap says? The attacks might at first appear malevolent, but unlike those barroom sessions where poets really do get personal and nasty when sorting out the good writing from the bad, and unlike those tough-guy reviewers who jump to the soapbox with finally little to say - Bowering focuses clearly on the work before him. He wants the truest sense of the world as it can be revealed by words. For instance when Seymour Mayne writes, “up the mountain the snow shrieked/its name and wind of fear/blew through his chest”, Bowering rightly states, “I cannot imagine anyone, much less that somehow ascending white stuff, shrieking the name ‘snow’. Moaning maybe. Or maybe it shrieks ‘neige’.”

Pat Lane gets a harder slap for images that are “overweening, and sentimental making for a kind of logging-county soap opera.” But Bowering knows also that Lane is a serious writer, and that with more “self searching” is capable of “another world of saying.” David Weevil’s *Christ of the Ice Floes* gets a “yawn” for “stupid antagonizing images” like this: ‘the sun came worrying through clouds’, or ‘the three day blow/had tossed the lakeshore to its knees’.” Horrible stuff that often gets falsely praised and wins awards. But even the writers Bowering admires (Al Purdy, Gerry Gilbert, Frank Davey, Fred Wah, Raymond Souster, etc. etc.) get his critical eye. He admits Daphne Marlatt is “obscure”, and then gives a step-by-step lesson on how to read her work so that the poems might yield what he intelligently believes, their intended meanings.

Isn’t Canadian Literary criticism usually dull stuff? Hell yes! Typical books give us themes of survival, the garrison mentality and hostile frontiers, etc. - academic theories that often plod from beginning to end with 25 footnotes per chapter that prove some difficult point (i.e. that Al Purdy has a sense of humour, or Leonard Cohen is a religious writer, etc.). Or, at some other critical extreme we get complex and convoluted linguistic lingo that deconstructs “texts” to show that a rose is a rose is a non-referential referent. But Bowering in *Craft Slices* does none of that. He tells us in straight-ahead speech what he’s learned, and generously gives us what he knows, out of a true love for poetry and the written word.

This is a necessary book for students, teachers, writers, and anyone interested in Canadian Literature and the craft of writing.

## Breaking Surface

*Permanent Relationships* by Brian Fawcett. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1975. \$3.50.

You don't get, 'oh that I were in the arms of my love again' — but rather,

a series of, a string of, a growth of  
resentments

and — what is under the writer's nose: the fact of permanent dissolution of a permanent relationship, a situation which don't allow for poetic gloss. The bust up is the bust up of the man, driven to *this* kind of action:

Looking for someone or something  
to bust up. I'll kill  
myself  
first  
and hate you for it.

*Permanent Relationships* is a book of examinations, admissions, analysis of the admissions, a series of anti-lyrical, lyrical letters and finally a process of the mind itself attempting to take hold of a breaking heart. The heart takes care of itself — moving against the conventions which won't allow hatred (hating enough that that itself becomes the final form of love, when the sense of permanence, bred by conventional marriage, is over).

I have thoughts of killing everything  
that sings or loves or lives in the rain

Many won't like this book — an achievement in itself — especially if readers expect the old lyric mode — not wanting the real pain and the immediacy of that pain. They won't like the self-indulgence of the writer, consciously writing out of the real state he's in.

no nothing times anymore

Not that he can't rhyme. That is another side of the struggle for some kind of self-legitimacy and the singular voice that must be listened to. Even image and metaphor are suspect. Fawcett believes in the didactic and that writing must become direct statement, out of an insistence to be understood by what's being said. Literally, we are told of the sub-vocal 'mutterings'.

when will they break the surface  
and what or  
how much  
do they mean?

What *they* mean is a complex clarification that the reader may often feel left out of. We are not companions in this. The three-fold push is to the self, the other, and the language. Somewhere along the line, the writing becomes more important than anything else. The other, whoever she is, giving way

And how I talk now  
about other things, and think  
only of poetry when I'm alone

to write & get the shit in too,  
to break the lyrical to make  
the landscape clear

They will say, he got the shit in too — the marginalia is often the muse at work — the surprise of what was unintended — *the shit*. Saying sometimes, 'I can say it this way, but won't'. Fawcett's toughness is that he won't yield much. He's stubborn, but something important lies beneath that. Perhaps the new forms

arise from the artist's direct treatment of whatever he finds himself in, driven by the fear of what he will say, writing to cease disturbance and not to yield to some pre set of conditions. This book moves freely in that sense and begs several questions. Would you want to mess with this sucker? Yes.

On the surface of Fawcett's other writing, there is violence, cruelty and a necessary toughness in the face of it, without allowable sentiments which would change or colour the facts at hand. Fawcett's pose and personal compensation is perhaps to become as tough as he can — but that he doesn't (almost a 'weakling' at times) — attracts me to his work. The tough pretense doesn't always work and I think that's where the energy comes from. The voice is strong, but it is on the edge even though his intentions seem to want to exert complete control. Out of this his presence is created. O.K. Yeah etc ... punch. The revelation and what pokes thru the surface is the language of his vulnerability and for a change, some intellect, some statement of his relationships with language and women, permanent or not. After it all,

women are splendid, different,  
difficult as hell & I will  
want to lie next to them.

Barry McKinnon

Fawcett, Brian. Capital Tales. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984. 204 p. \$8.95 pbk. ISBN 0-888922-221-5. CIP

Fawcett, Brian. The Secret Journal of Alexander Mackenzie. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1985. 206 p. \$8.95. ISBN 0-88922-227-4. CIP

Brian Fawcett is a poet and short story writer who's been involved in a long and serious study of a particular territory (Prince George/North America) for the past 20 years. He's a literary surveyor, a persistent lone wolf circling the burning fire — an explorer who looks closely at the world from "odd angles" and perspectives until the complex and haywire truth begins to emerge.

What do we see and what do we learn in these two books? Some of the stories are a kind of unofficial journalism — quick, accurate, "realistic" sketches of northern life and attitude: Two young men who work part-time in a clothing store casually watch, as entertainment, a drunk get repeatedly beaten and tossed from a bar. Friends and enemies fist-fight to prove macho notions, seemingly necessary rituals for young men who want to survive a raw, tough, and brutal place.

Do we know the northern myths? This is a world of loggers, stripped forests, town administrations that justify any form of industrial work in terms of "progress" (sulphur pollution is "the smell of gold"), the real estate/chamber of commerce cornball boosterism, foreign-owned mills, fly-by-nights and entrepreneurs, drunks, Indians, the 4-wheel drive moose hunters, and those who are hopelessly boozed-out in trailer parks and shopping malls, etc. These are the common images. This is northern sociology. But these images by themselves are without much meaning or interest. Fawcett's task as true mythmaker, historian and surveyor is to get us beyond these surfaces and clichés into the heart of darkness, and to put us in touch with "the deepest passions and intelligence of the human species". He wants us to "learn" this world, and know it as our "true inheritance". How he does this takes consummate skill, intelligence and imagination.

The Secret Journal of Alexander Mackenzie gives us an imagined history. It is a "secret" journal and the unofficial truth written by an explorer moving dangerously and blindly into new territory, always in anticipation of discovery. The 1793 journal reveals Mackenzie's sense of "the savagery and vacancy of this land" and his own struggle to defeat the emptiness within himself. He also dreams the future: "Should these wilds be one day civilized it will be by men of will and opportunity to whom all grace and soft arts will be nothing." These and other prophecies that come in his dreams define an ethos that ruthlessly informs the world that Fawcett, finally, wants to reveal. Big business invades the town. Two guys named Glen Smith (the "invisible invaders") fly into town, blackmail, threaten, and apply their big corporate "methods" to squeeze out the local little guys. What everyone learns is "screw your buddy before he screws you." This "modern" world becomes an industrial waste land. "The surplus is gone" in the land of plenty. Those who survive it seem beaten, paranoid and stunned and keep their mouths shut, or make simple homilistic excuses to keep the real truth at bay. Others suicide, or lessen the weight of their own failures at "success" by various illusory means (i.e. heavy drinking with pals from the Modified Golden Rule Club). "Hand Grenade Gary", the American-hero-hunter, charged with manslaughter after arguing with and blowing up his hunting guides, blows himself up in his camper before the jury's verdict is given. A young man writes about shooting his brother during a bear hunt. His doctor suggests it would be good therapy to do so. But these characters, whether lost in the woods (or misled in some bizarre way by their own foolish "manly" confidence that usually ends in disaster), never seem to know, in any deep sense, the source of their intense and disturbing alienation. They tell "the stories" as if it's not really their job to understand them.

On the surface these marvellous tales are "entertaining", but Fawcett doesn't want to let his readers slip off the hook, nor does he want to pound them on the head with messages about capitalism, industrialism, ecological stupidity, or about pioneer redneck politicians who could be too easily blamed for mistakes of the past. What finally, then, can the artist say when the field of experience is as complex as Fawcett's is?

A key to Fawcett's vision might lie in the stories that move beyond the recognizable "real" surfaces to a recurring fantastic image of a cottage/castle with herds of tame deer, formal gardens, and flamingos -- a landscape out of time, out of kilter, out of place. It is a "paradise" on an island in the McGregor river that mysteriously exists and then as mysteriously disappears in the mist -- Garden of Eden that creates a puzzling unfathomable dimension for those characters who experience it. Mackenzie tries to write about it on June 18, 1793. "I do not know the purpose of the island, nor how it (the cottage/castle) came to be built upon this wilderness I thought myself the first man of European origins to invade..." The narrator's footnote unconvincingly explains that the physical trauma of Mackenzie's near-drowning "has produced a series of visual and intellectual hallucinations", and that he is a temporary victim of an "altered state of consciousness". August Jenson, a surveyor, comes across the same place in 1932, and tells his "secret" 50 years later: "I had blundered into paradise, into what seemed the Garden of Eden itself". This paradise/garden motif is repeated again in "The Castle", a story about Ozzy Schultz, a hard-nosed self made cat-skinner millionaire. When he returns to this "paradise" a second time, it is gone. He garishly attempts to recreate an artificial version (plastic trees, moss, deer, beaver, and seven hundred plastic flamingos, etc.) -- but the results are an insane parody of human imagination and possibility.

What is this world, what is real, and where lies the truth? In the last story "My Friends are Gone", Don Benson makes his retreat from a corrupt and violent human universe to live in a cave with the bears. he is a kind of self-expelled oddball who glimpsed some of the truth. At night, in the cave, he hears another creature singing. The singing becomes a howl and then a moan. Don Benson knows that the bears will hunt this creature down. And while Benson's fate is not as clear, Fawcett might be asking us to make a guess.

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INTRODUCTION    Pulp Log

"Study the familiar to penetrate the sublime. But time is short and what is to be done?"

Lun-yu (the Analects)

"Prince George, for those who havn't been there, is a terrible place. It is ugly, far away, and it stinks."

Scott Watson

"Root hog or die!"

(words of advice from Ben McKinnon)

When I arrived in Prince George in the summer of 1969, my first sense of the place was as direct and harsh as Watson's description, but circumstance wouldn't allow me a quick, or as it turns out, even a slow escape back to Vancouver. I don't think that the 57 Plymouth would have made it back past Quesnel -- and besides signed a contract to teach in the new college, and didn't have any money etc. Given the anxiety of being in a northern B.C. mill town, with no immediate prospect of leaving, there is a quick attempt to locate yourself and to go beyond the obvious surfaces.

The obvious surfaces hit hard: we were kicked out of an apartment because I had 'long hair' ("we don't want youse types around here" etc), saw brutal bar fights (pool cues as weapons), watched natives being boarded into paddy wagons at closing time on George Street etc . . . . And the ever present stink! ("It's

the smell of pure gold," as the locals used to say). So much for poetry, the old verities of truth, beauty, and liberal thought.

In the years since, not much of the surface has changed -- although there is the attempt to make it subtler and to revise the myth of the drunk-cork boot-logger-hardhat stereotype. The bars have been renovated in fake Spanish or English pub motifs, and the "proper dress required" signs keep the 'riff raff' down the street, land deals are less visible and therefore seem less shady, pollution control devices have been installed (but the air still stinks), the new library is being built after a couple of referendums, but with a reluctant civic attitude -- given the belief that people who read might be subversive, suspicious, or wasting time ("loafers" as one official described them).

Well, beyond the sociology of a small resource city given over to the values of progress and profit, what do you expect? As Gerry Gilbert once asked, "why isn't this Athens -- and why havn't you grown hair over your bodies to keep the cold out?"

The progress, as I see it, is of another sort and perhaps old fashioned, slow and backward in the face of the industrial, managerial, "frontier" context we find ourselves in. It is bound up in that old humanly complex task of finding out who and where you are, to locate yourself in relation to others,



to what has preceded, and to what is directly in front of you. The poem is the beginning and maybe the end of this process -- requiring a hairy nakedness and courage, given the elements and forces that go against it and what it might discover.

It is my intention that the poets, and the work in this book, might become a small testament to the fact of another, or at least possible world of thought, emotion, experience and language.

Here-in, a kind of tough and necessary love from some momentary citizens.

*Barry McKinnon*  
editor

EZRA POUND (1885 - 1972)

They will come no more,  
The old men with beautiful manners.<sup>1</sup>

Ezra Pound dead at 87 and now acclaimed by the world with superlatives reserved for those who achieve greatness - and ironically that is the same world where Pound lived through hell. So much misunderstanding of the man. There are the details of his life that become "fact": anti semite, social creditor, madman, traitor, etc. Though, when looked at closely you might deny that he was in "fact" any of these. The radio broadcasts during the Second WW might be considered harmless when compared with the forms and content of dissent today. His intentions were to save the American Constitution and to initiate social and economic reform, by denouncing and exposing the practice of USURY. Exercising freedom of speech at a time when speech is apparently not free, particularly when his truth was intended for a world gone mad, could only lead to disaster.

"I do not believe", he wrote, "that the simple fact of speaking over the radio, wherever placed, can in itself constitute treason. I think that must depend on what is said, and on the motives for speaking". He claimed he had not spoken to the troops and had not suggested that the troops should mutiny or revolt; the idea of free speech became a mockery if it did not include the right of free speech over the radio. "I have not spoken with regard to this war", he said, "but in protest against a system which creates one war after another..."<sup>2</sup>

Pound was "captured" and sent to the American Disciplinary Training Centre at Pisa (a camp reserved for the toughest criminals of the American Army), and was placed in a steel reinforced cage, not for fear that he would escape but for fear that Fascist commandos might break in and release him. Six months later he is shipped to America to stand trial. The details become history. America's and perhaps the world's greatest poet is not hanged or shot but found "insane" and sent to St. Elizabeth's hospital for the criminally insane, where he continued to work on the Cantos for the next 13 years.

<sup>1</sup>Pound, Selected Poems, Faber & Faber

<sup>2</sup>Noel Stock, The Life of Ezra Pound, RKP

Pound was always a poet, whatever else we might call him, and it is that fact that will make him immortal. The misadventurous biography exists for those who need confirmation that the poet's life is difficult. It was this "Latin Quarter-type" fired from his first teaching job for keeping a homeless girl in his apartment overnight, who was in effect, to become the father of modern poetry. On the balance of his salary (paid to him most likely to avoid a scandal) Pound travels to Europe where he begins to meet writers and poets. Out of a common dissatisfaction with the legacy of the sonnet and other outworn poetic forms, Pound, H. D. and Richard Aldington draft a manifesto known as Imagism which was to change the course, or begin the course for 20th Century poetry. Simply, the 3 guiding principles were:

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.<sup>3</sup>

Pound becomes central thought Imagism as a movement "fails". His ideas move beyond dogma to the central premise that the writing must at all times be clear. Clarity, clarity - an idea that lies at the root of all his activity and an idea that leads him in his late life to conclude that he himself had "failed". The Cantos may never be "understood" or understood by many as no more than a garbled rag bag of useless disconnected historical/ economic/ political/ information. Yet, for those who care for poetry, and the beauty of the Cantos, will affirm Pound's literary immortality and affirm the complex nature of his emotions and ideas.

What can be said. He knew and helped or inspired the great writers of our time. Yeats may have remained a lesser poet without Pound's influence. His insistence for "making

<sup>3</sup>Pound, Selected Essays, Faber & Faber

it new" became a dictum and a guide for those who may have been trapped by the iambic pentameter metronome. T. S. Eliot once handed Pound a series of rhyming couplets. Pound said, "Pope did it better" and handed them back. Here Hemingway, Joyce, W.C. Williams, Frost, ee cummings etc. at one time or another were helped by Pound either through his criticism or because he gave them the faith and/or money to continue. And if we in our age treat the artist with disrespect (or no respect at all) or believe that he is no more than an inspired dunce (or at best, an entertainer) - it was Pound in the 20th Century who insisted that "the artist is the antennae for a race"...that he has the responsibility of renewing the language and bringing news of the spirit in a language which renews us all.

Go, my songs, to the lonely and the unsatisfied,  
Go, also to the nerve - racked, go to the  
enslaved-by convention,  
Bear to them my contempt for their oppressors.  
Go as a great wave of cool water,  
Bear my contempt of oppressors.<sup>4</sup>

And finally he too is dead, but with the words left behind for this world continuing and for those who love the words and can use them.

Barry McKinnon

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<sup>4</sup>Pound, Selected Poems, Faber & Faber