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THE “WILD BODY” OF ALBERTA POETRY

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“How do you grow a poet?”

This question, asked a number of times in the most famous poem by Alberta’s most famous poet, certainly stands as a central one for anybody attempting to write about poetry in Alberta, or Alberta poetry. Poets can grow anywhere, of course – Heisler, Alberta, or Estevan, Saskatchewan, for example. And move through many other sites on their way to and from Alberta: Europe in World War II and Montreal before coming to Edmonton; or the Mackenzie River up north, and SUNY Binghamton on the way to Winnipeg. Or from the West Coast to Edmonton to be published nevertheless by T. S. Eliot in Britain. It won’t be easy to pin down the Alberta poet, nor how s/he has grown.



Robert Kroetsch himself offers a number of illuminating (and/but maybe not) responses. His father has no doubt that the question is useless:

Son, this is a crowbar.
 This is a willow fencepost.
 This is a sledge.
 This is a roll of barbed wire.
 This is a bag of staples.
 This is a claw hammer.

.....
 First off I want you to take that
 crowbar and driver [sic] 1,156 holes
 in that gumbo.
 And the next time you want to
 write a poem
 we'll start the haying.

(Kroetsch, *Field Notes* 38)

The poet (implied) has a number of other answers, although they tend to cancel each other out, as is the way with so many of Kroetsch's poetic statements. Here are two:

As for the poet himself
 we can find no record
 of his having traversed
 the land/in either direction

 no trace of his coming
 or going/only a scarred
 page, a spoor of wording
 a reduction to mere black

 and white/a pile of rabbit
 turds that tells us
 all spring long
 where the track was

 poet... say uncle

(Kroetsch, *Field Notes* 38)

We silence words
 by writing them down.

(Kroetsch, *Field Notes* 42)

So, are these the choices for a prairie poet in the second half of the twentieth century or the beginning of the twenty-first: some kind of offbeat pastoral or the paradoxes of language itself? That Kroetsch has managed to play both with such subtlety, as well as riff off almost every other kind of discourse only signals his essential mastery, a mastery few others have even attempted, let alone achieved.



Who is an Alberta poet? That's a tough question, but I'd like to keep any possible answer as open as possible, as open perhaps as the parkland stretching from flat prairie to the highest mountains. From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, there aren't many to point to before the general rise of new writers in the sixties. Of course, we can always mention the fact that Earle Birney was born in Calgary and spent his earliest years in Banff, but it's clear that he spent most of his writing life elsewhere. If his most famous poem is set in the Rockies, its mountain could be in either Alberta or British Columbia. That he was a great mentor and a significant figure for younger poets, including some in Alberta, does not really make him an Alberta poet. Far more likely to fit such a description are later immigrants, rather than this important emigrant.¹



Two poets Albertans can, I think, claim, who originally shared an interest in mythological and highly symbolic lyrics: Eli Mandel, born in Estevan, Saskatchewan, and Wilfred Watson, born in Rochester, England, and raised in British Columbia. Both eventually ended up teaching at the University of Alberta, Mandel for a significant period, during which his poetry shifted toward a more late modernist stance, and Watson for his whole career, during which he shifted to drama and then to a highly individual experimentation in poetry. Sheila Watson sent the manuscript of Wilfred Watson's first book of poetry, *Friday's Child* (1955), to T. S. Eliot, who took it for Faber & Faber; it then won both the British Council and the Governor General's awards that year. The poems are densely lyrical in their mythological, religious, and literary allusions. Much the same can be said of Mandel's early work although, in his poems, his Jewish heritage also plays a strong part. That both of them slowly turned away from their early poetics toward different kinds of experimentation with voice, tone, and open form suggests they felt a shift in the Canadian poetic zeitgeist to which they responded in their

individual ways. Their responses, the new poetry they each created in their own ways, are uniquely their own, and, although both knew or knew of Kroetsch, owe little if anything to his poetics. Nevertheless, because Kroetsch's work has become the foremost sign of a new Alberta poetry, one can argue that their work, like that of many younger writers to follow, appears "under the sign of Kroetsch," even when any sign of more direct influence is missing.

As time passed, many other poets would move to Alberta, and younger poets would be born and able to find their way to writing and publication in the province of their birth. But, as with so much of the workforce here, many are immigrants who have chosen to stay, for a long time, or for life.



During Eli Mandel's time at the University of Alberta, he influenced many students with his energy, engagement, and excitement at the changes taking place in the writing of the period, many of which he incorporated into his own poetry. The young Mandel argued poetically that he came from a place where "the farmer's chorus, a Greek harbinger,/Forecasts by frost or rings about the moon/How ill and black the seeds will grow" (Mandel 15). In Alberta, as he shifted toward a stance much closer to where his slightly younger poetic comrade Kroetsch would begin – more open, more contingent, more what at the time writers came to identify as postmodern – he would remember that place differently, in "Estevan, 1934":

remembering the family we
called breeds the Roques
their house smelling of urine
my mother's prayers before
the dried fish she cursed
them for their dirtiness their
women I remember too

how

seldom they spoke and
they touched one another
even when the sun killed
cattle and rabbis

even

in the poisoned slow air
like hunters

like lizards

they touched stone
 they touched
 earth

(Mandel 159)

That memory could be so altered by the new possibilities of lyric intervention introduced by the New American Poetry speaks to the way formal innovation also forces innovation in content. Mandel found in the new freedom of verse possibilities for a subversive political poetry that would not simply be a rhetorically charged gesture. He could slide from comic/satiric political harangues like "The Mayor's Papers" (93) or "Messages" (134), through sharply etched images of the new powers at work in Alberta in "At Wabamun the Calgary Power Station" (163), "Lake Wabamun: Summer 68" (165), and "Oil Refineries: Edmonton" (166), to the spare beauty of the imagistic sequence, "Wabamun" (160–62). Whereas the former poems speak directly to power, often trying to demonstrate its comic emptiness, the latter enters a different kind of spiritual emptiness, one that attains a deeply poetic grace:

to have come to this
 simplicity
 to know
 only
 the absolute
 calm
 lake

 before

 night

(Mandel 162)

Mandel's changing poetic can be seen in terms of precisely a "wild" poetics of an Alberta open to all contemporary influences in ways that perhaps academic Toronto, under the influence of Northrop Frye, would not.



When we turn to Wilfred Watson, we find a writer who, even in his most mythopoeic writing, has always been unique. And although *Friday's Child* (1955) won both the Governor General's Award and a major British prize,

his work has, on the whole, been ignored, which is too bad given its stark power and incredibly wide-ranging concerns. Certainly, the poems in *Friday's Child*, which caught T. S. Eliot's attention, belong, like Mandel's early work, "to the body of mythopoeic poetry which dominated Canada in the 1950s, and which is so closely associated with the influence of Northrop Frye" (Scobie 282). But Watson had no interest in repeating himself, nor in being part of any "school," and so he did not publish much poetry for the next two decades while exploring, partly in terms of the theories of Marshall McLuhan, new possibilities of poetic theatre. Because he published almost nothing until 1972, it appeared that he had given up poetry; the reality seems to be that he was experimenting with new forms, hints of which could be found in the few poems he did publish, like "A Manifesto for Beast Poetry" (1960) and "I Shot a Trumpet into my Brain" (1966), in which the concept of manifesto played as important a part as the looping free verse. There was also the unpublished sequence of "poems by Jenny Blake," written in the voice of a wild, virginal woman. These read like updated versions of Yeats's "Crazy Jane" poems, although they mix a near free verse with traditional rhyme.

Nevertheless, for those few who read it, *the sorrowful Canadians* (1972) was a revelation. Taking full advantage of the then new technology of the IBM electric typewriter with its various balls of different typefaces, Watson created poems full of different and often antagonistic voices, chanting in a highly politicized manner. Sometimes they explore the sexual politics of the time, as in "poem 1970," with its refrain of "**MY WILD BODY IS A CORPSE,**" and its insistence that that body will not be buried but rather "sits up,/and sings, man is a noble potato" (163). In many of the longer poems, the politics emerges from the wars of the time and the new imperialism driving them, as in "lines 1967":

they flew across our borders at the speed
of light.

HANOI IS HERE

dropping images which fell alike on women
children and infants.

HANOI IS HERE

we had only a few poems to defend ourselves
with.

HANOI IS HERE

and no strong men like Thoreau, Whitman or
Lincoln

HANOI IS HERE

they criss-crossed over our houses, dropping
vowels that were block-busters

HANOI IS HERE

they set up bazookas which lopped novels into
our roofs

HANOI IS HERE

they raked our streets with plays.

they sent in lowflying jets armed with
recordings.

they blew us to bits just as we were saying

they seemed such nice people

HANOI IS HERE

(Watson 172)

By this point, Watson reveals himself as one of our most protean poets, always changing, always new. And he is happy to take on icons, usually with a savage wit:

17 ways of not looking at the face of margaret atwood on the dust
jacket of survival.

the first is, not through the eyes of the west coast halibut.

the west coast halibut will not survive.

17 ways of not looking at the face of margaret atwood on the dust
jacket of survival.

& the second is, not through the eyes of jack shadbolt.

jack shadbolt will not survive.

[etc.]

(Watson 211)

Despite their highly "political" content, it seems to me that the poems of this period carry a heavy weight of anti-ideology, as well as a concentrated satiric contempt that cannot be called comic, exactly, but does have a certain sardonic heft.

Watson continued to write plays, and turned toward a new "metric" in them and his later poems, what he called "number-grid" poetics. In *I begin with counting* (1978) and later works, he achieved a new straightforwardness that nevertheless kept readers off balance by the simple presence of numbers in the middle of each line. Unlike his early poems, which paraded his high

intelligence and wide vocabulary, these new poems appear to speak “naturally” and directly to the reader (and the addressees of so many of them), but the grid format and the numbers interrupting each line de-naturalize that speech and those poems. Take these lines from “re Phyllis Webb & Wilson’s Bowl”: “their real **1** essence/is a tombstone **2** with/the **3** inscription, I/was. **4** tiny worms eat/my bone, his **5** bones/consume her flesh. **6** their/flesh **7** chaws up/our minds, our mind **8** devours/**9** their/soul. her **1** mind/feeds on his **2** words....” (Watson 320). No doubt the sardonic awareness of mortality and its relation to art remains, but the poem seems to move forward with grammatical inevitability, sentence after sentence jarred into fragmentation by the simple presence of the numbers on the grid format of the page. Something new, which no other poet seems to have tried, has been made.

Wilfred Watson has few readers, far fewer than he deserves, but his work remains, for those who seek it out, as a signal example of other possibilities of form in contemporary poetry. It’s important to remember that he wrote all these poems while teaching early modern and modern literature at the University of Alberta, demonstrating in them the ways such an outpost could nevertheless maintain contact with all the avant-gardes in the so-called centres of civilization. And to recall that, like Eli Mandel, he had great influence as a teacher, certainly on a few of the poets of the next generation, such as Jon Whyte and Charles Noble.



Jon Whyte, even more than his friend Charles Noble, is an exemplar of both the poet of place and the poet as experimenter, even as he also argued against experimentation as such and against any form of typesetting (such as “postmodernism,” a term he apparently hated; it “was nice while it lasted, I believe. Thank goodness it’s over” [Whyte, 113]). To cast him and Noble simply as students of Mandel and Watson is to underestimate their originality and breadth of study. Nevertheless, I think the work and presence of those two certainly helped to give them the sense of possibility that their own work carried forward (sadly, in Whyte’s case only to his tragically early death in 1991). Born in Banff, Whyte spent some time in his late teens and early twenties in Edmonton as a student at the University of Alberta, and in California as a student at Stanford, but he soon returned to Banff, which remained his home base for the rest of his life. A close friend, and also a student at the University of Alberta, Noble spent his winters in Banff (as carefully notated in *Banff/Breaking* [1984]) and his summers working his

old family farm near Nobleford. Both these writers brought their deeply learned poetics to bear upon their home places, seeking in their various ways to construct some part of the wild body of Alberta itself.

Jon Whyte's poetry is incredibly wide-ranging, but the posthumous *Mind Over Mountains* (2000) offers a good introduction to its variety and breadth, with its selection of shorter work, much of *Homage, Henry Kelsey* (1981), and large parts of *The Fells of Brightness: Some fittes and starts* (1983) and *The Fells of Brightness: Wenkchemna* (1985). Whyte liked to point back to both the riches of English poetry from at least the Middle Ages (he did his MA thesis on *The Pearl*) and to the high modernists (he liked to hold up the poetry of Marianne Moore against those who tended to revere the Pound-Williams tradition), but he was certainly aware of what was happening in poetry and poetics in the sixties and beyond. As Harry Vandervlist points out in his Introduction to *Mind Over Mountains*, however, he had also "been immersed in visual culture from birth. His aunt and uncle, Peter and Catherine Whyte... both painters, had enormous influence on their nephew, and it's clear he looked at pictures and printed pages as carefully as he listened to words" (Whyte vi). Many of his shorter poems, and all his longer works, demonstrate his desire "to treat the page as a canvas" (vi). He also wanted to avoid the personal in his poetry, and so chose large themes – Henry Kelsey's journey, or the history of the mountains around Banff. But many have done so; it's his ability to build huge linguistic constructions out of the pre-texts and history of these that sets his poems apart.

If he can play across the page in a painterly manner, as page after page of the long poems show, he also has a strong sense of the play of sound and sense through the line, as well as a painter's eye for the complex image of nature:

Fell:		the darkness
And in:		my dreams
Summing up:		it adows me
Brevity:		succinct summering
Alpenglow:	and after	stillness

At its shadowed edge
the frayed shore of the dark forest
beside the lake shored

looking at the lake
 its farside scene reflected
 noting
 in the darker parts in nearness
 through the surface of the water
 toward that which is thither
 but the water nearer
 the darker, clear bottom of the
 lake
 the branch-strewn bottom
 of the lake
 on which a scene is etched
 a sketchy scene
 and

for a shimmering moment

hold both

(Whyte 117–18)

This is but one example of the kind of rhetoric of the page Whyte could pull off with equipoise. There are, of course long sections of the poems that read as highly informational modern narrative poetry, and others where a highly specified knowledge, and the vocabulary thereof, is brought to bear. And there are the flashes of intellectual punning that draw tentative conclusions before the poem carries on, regardless:

The Earth's intelligible because we share
 with annelids, cyclops, elephants, bacteria
 a tumor on the spine we call a brain?

The Earth intelligible before
 intelligence sensed it,
 before sensing all the world's bounty,
 making sense of it,

it provided sense
 sensation
 the sensational

(Whyte 152)

It's hard to judge Whyte's influence; he was not part of the Banff Writing School, yet he was a presence in the town and a formative figure in its culture. His poetry, too, awaits a more complex and complete critical response.

As does that of Charles Noble, whose early work ventured into poetic sequences while his more recent work engages the long poem, as such. Like one of the characters in "Banff/Breaking," Noble's poems "ride the discrepancy train" (Noble, *Banff* 56) of thoughts meandering across home place and the world at large engaged in a complex dance of motive and meaning, as in "Scatterbrain Gathers," where

the fields on the table
are next to my heart
and the list of machinery
is growing into the world
where the gentle lawyer, a minister's son
my mother remembers from high school,
is unfolding the law
into our hands

(Noble, *Afternoon* 11)

Such poems, full of intimate knowledge filtered through an intellectual screen, set Noble's poems apart from the usual prairie anecdotal lyric. But he was also interested in what length could do, as *Banff/Breaking*, with its two longer poems, full of characters caught in moments of attention and intention, demonstrates. Banff emerges as "this jagged edge that stays" (Noble, *Banff* 34), while almost all the people come and go. Noble's ear for the punning and rhyming edge of language sounds in lines like the following, about a hardworking waitress:

Car lights move blandly
through the atmosphere,
a day in a moment,
against her silently furious quickstep
between tables

her head above drowning.
Her aching feet,
a measure for pleasure
to dawn.

(Noble, *Banff* 13)

These qualities, plus a growing philosophical distancing, have continued to operate in his many books since, including his most recent, *Doubt's Boots* (2003), which he calls “a long poem that gathers itself as it scatters to chance, to pre-conditions, indices of how the times themselves are guilty” (9). Such comments indicate that, like his friend Jon Whyte, Noble has carried on the modernist project of constructing the long poem out of collage, bricolage, intertexts, and what he calls in an interview, “a wild, free play of language” (MacKintosh n.p.).



Our politicians talk up Alberta's immigration these days – how it's where everyone wants to come. This has been true of poets for a long time now. Some came to stay (how long do you have to live here to become a “real Albertan,” at least according to the prevailing ideology?), some to return eventually to other places. Of course, in art, the importance of place can be overdone. And how do we locate that sense anyway? We still call Kroetsch an Albertan poet, although he has spent much of his life away. I think we now call people like Bert Almon and E. D. Blodgett Albertans, although they immigrated here in the 1960s (I assume four decades counts for something). Today, there are so many poets in Alberta, some born here, some who moved here; like all artists, their sense of inheritance, their poetic ideals, and their poetic mentors are scattered across the planet and through history. I'd call them Albertan, but that's not the most important aspect of their self-image as poets, I suspect: what they write counts most.

In 1988, Fred Wah came to Alberta as writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta; the following year he moved to Calgary where he became a major influence and mentor in the writing program at the University of Calgary. Already recognized as one of Canada's most innovative poets, a founding member of the West Coast TISH group, Wah brought all his energy, invention, dedication, and delight in language-play and experimental poetics to his teaching, and helped found a poetic community in Calgary, which continues to expand today, after his retirement in 2003. While in Alberta, he continued one of his most fascinating series, *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, in *Alley Alley Home Free* (1992), while writing other kinds of poetry, a poetic biotext, *Diamond Grill* (1996), and a number of important essays, collected in the award-winning *Faking It: Poetics & Hybridity* (2000). This kind of thinking at the heart of things – “If this is the edge of of, that's skating. If those/words

aren't full of an ankle then nobody'll read them." (Wah 40) – others could and would read as a challenge to think poetry differently.

During a few summers in the mid-eighties, bpNichol taught at a writing summer school in Red Deer, where he too influenced a number of young writers from all over the country. Among his students there, Nicole Markotic, who later studied with Fred Wah, stands out as a major innovative writer in the Calgary scene of the nineties. But there are also Suzette Mayr, Hiromi Goto, Susan Holbrook, and many others who began to publish little magazines, run reading series, and create poems, stories, and novels, exploring modern genres and the interpenetration. Mayr and Goto are best known for their fiction (they also studied under Aritha van Herk, who was one of those responsible for hiring Fred Wah at the University of Calgary), but both have published poetry in various journals, and Mayr has two poetry chapbooks, *Zebra Talk* (1991) and *Tale* (2001). Holbrook published a very funny and subversive first book, *misled* (1999).

Although she is best known as a novelist and historian, Aritha van Herk has also written poetry, and has published one long poem, "Calgary, this growing graveyard," a work that certainly shows itself under the sign of Kroetsch. Van Herk studied writing at the University of Alberta, and wrote her first novel as an MA thesis, under the supervision of Rudy Wiebe, and on the whole seems to have mostly agreed with him that, as quoted by Robert Kroetsch, "You must lay great black steel lines of fiction, break up that space with huge design and, like the fiction of the Russian steppes, build a giant artifact" (Kroetsch, *Field Notes* 39) in order to satisfactorily represent the prairies. And even in her long poem, the lines spin out, more like the prose verses of the Bible than contemporary free verse, as it uncovers the lives and inevitable deaths and their memories in the four quadrants of Calgary.

Nicole Markotic² has published a novel, criticism, and two books of innovative poetry, *Connect the Dots* (1994) and *minotaurs & other alphabets* (1998). In these, she explores various forms of lyric deconstruction and the possibilities of a postmodern and feminist prose poem, with an eye for savagely ironic intertexts, as in the sequence, "In Turn," each piece of which begins with a quote from a woman writer:

Lovers desire and seduce only to murder and create.

Aritha van Herk *Places Far from Ellesmere*

mythic hands transform from birds to fish and back again. just in time to pull up the reins. just in time to be cut off by the evil twin brother who has trained his snakes to swallow birds whole to slit fish with their tongues. the cross on your eyelids etched with tapwater

trauma begins at the level of the sentence

evil brothers are heroes gone mad

the hero is a brother gone too too sane. a perfectly good alphabet, trembling at the level of sound. his fingertips drip blood as he strokes her frozen skin. his newly adopted snakes slither into his iron sable hair

(Markotic 39)

As she plays across contemporary fiction, ancient myth, and textual/sexual critique, Markotic demonstrates a subtle mastery of all.

In years since, under the influence of such elders as Wah and van Herk (and Tom Wayman in the early 2000s), as well as younger teachers like Markotic, Mayr, and the recently hired Christian Bök at the University of Calgary, not to mention Ashok Mathur, Yasmin Ladha, and others who were such an important part of the burgeoning scene in Calgary, its writing community has become one of the liveliest in the country, with far too many younger writers to name them all.

As the reference to van Herk's studies at the University of Alberta suggests, the writing program in the English Department there has also been an important literary impetus. Back in the late sixties, Margaret Atwood and Dorothy Livesay taught there; Bert Almon has been teaching poetry for four decades. The presence of such important poets as E. D. Blodgett and Stephen Scobie on campus, as well as the many fine poets who have served as writer-in residence since 1975, has helped to produce a lively writing scene in the capital. Monty Reid, who left the university to work around the province – finally settling in Drumheller, where he worked at the Royal Tyrrell Museum and edited *The Dinosaur Review*, before moving to Ottawa – has published a number of volumes of innovative and delightful poetry. Recently, Andy Weaver, a visitor perhaps, as he has moved to Toronto to teach at York University, with his poet friend Adam Dickinson, helped start the Olive Reading Series in downtown Edmonton. His first book, *Were the*

Bees (2005), certainly reflected his studies and life in Alberta, even as its many intertextual allusions demonstrated his commitment to a postmodern poetry and poetics that knows no borders.



Such an ongoing list of names reveals an Alberta poetry scene all too rich and varied for any chronicler to cover. I have left out far too many fine and interesting poets, partly because my gaze has generally been directed at poetry I define as innovative. It is not enough simply to acknowledge such fine poets as Almon, Blodgett, Olga Costopoulos, Shawna Lemay, Scobie, not to mention many others, whose varied poems achieve a wide range of lyric possibilities. Yet that is what I must do in an essay that turned out to be a glance backward at important beginnings, as well as a quick overview of the present.



So, is the past truly prologue? I would tend to argue that it is, and that those three elder poets, Mandel, Watson, and Kroetsch, made in their work a complex of possibilities that later poets could build on. Indeed, in the case of the latter, it's a prologue that keeps expanding, as his recent books, especially *The Hornbooks of Rita K* (2001) demonstrate. *The Hornbooks of Rita*, like all his longer poems, asserts a novelist's rights in the middle of a poem, tells and untells a possible story, and argues itself into a reason for Alberta being – absent-ly – poetic. Its narrator is all too aware of the ironies and negations involved. His abstractions on the matter in Hornbook # 8 provide a fitting conclusion to these peregrinations:

Rita is painfully absent when I let myself in at the back door of her richly modest home.

.....

Is not poetry a questing after place, a will to locate?

.....

I was stuck for words.

(30–31)

NOTES

1. It is interesting that Birney became “younger and younger” as a poet in his later years, under the influence of such youthful experimenters as bpNichol. Nevertheless, he was not really an Alberta poet, nor should we call him one.
2. She was a graduate student, and then a member of the University of Calgary faculty, thus coming to influence other younger writers.

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