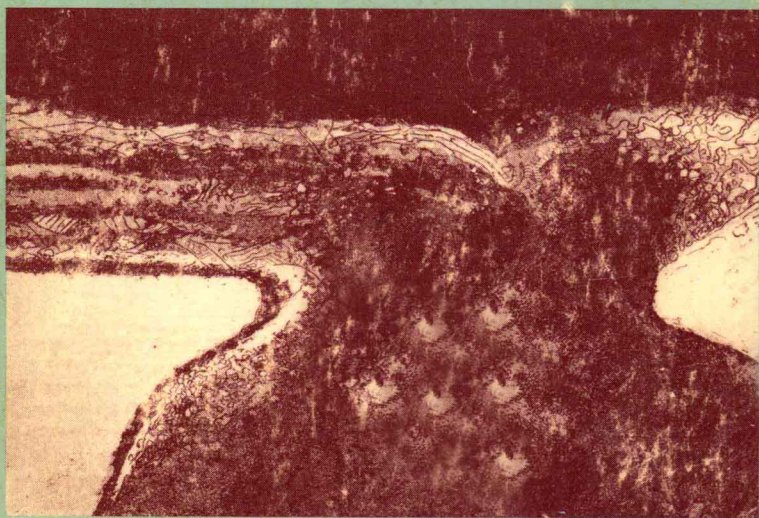


THE NEW CANADIAN POETS

1970-1985



Edited by
DENNIS LEE

The New
Canadian Poets
1970-1985

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EDITED BY

Dennis Lee



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Introduction

This is an anthology of English Canadian poets who published their first books between 1970 and 1985. They make up a wonderfully eclectic generation, unprecedented in its diversity and depth. For many readers it will come as a welcome shock to discover the quality of their work, which has been gathering force, virtually unheralded beyond their immediate circles, in the last fifteen years.

Before exploring the poetry itself, we might examine the conditions from which it emerged. These are extra-literary, of course, but the general situation of new poets in this period is intriguing, and provides a useful backdrop to their writing.

Consider the matter of numbers – which are mind-boggling. Throughout the sixties there had been a gradual but steady escalation in poetic debuts. In 1959, three first books of poetry appeared in English Canada; in 1964 there were eight; in 1965, twelve; in 1967, seventeen.¹ And after 1970, the deluge! No one can keep accurate count any longer, but one conservative estimate is that from seven hundred to a thousand poets started publishing in book form between 1970 and 1985 – an average of sixty a year.² And that is only a small proportion of the poets who were publishing their first work in magazines at the same time. The country had erupted in new poets, from sea to sea.

Yet these numbers, startling as they are, reveal only part of a larger transformation in the literary milieu – which leads to the second unique feature of the period. When I started reading for this anthology, one discovery in particular took me aback. Many of the best new poets were unfamiliar with one another's work. Not only that: often they were unaware of each other's *names*. For better or worse, this had never been true before in

Canadian poetry. Through previous decades, a worthwhile collection that appeared in Vancouver one January would be assimilated, by December, all the way to Halifax. Even at its most prolific, as in the flurry of new poets during the late sixties, Canadian poetry had always been something one person could keep in focus – particularly a younger poet, searching out peers in hope and trepidation.

After 1970, all that changed. For one thing, the avalanche had begun; who can read sixty first books a year? The rise of regional presses was another factor, since many of their titles were never seen outside their home province. As well, book prices were going up; building a personal library became more difficult. And unlike their immediate predecessors, few of the strong new poets of the seventies and eighties appeared in an early blaze of lyric glory. Whatever the reason, many developed more slowly, hitting their stride in their late twenties, their thirties, even their forties. So even when readers did catch up with them, their talent was not always immediately evident.

The result of all these developments was that the “poetry community” dissolved during the seventies into a series of blurry sub-communities, which seldom overlapped. Across the country, emerging poets were more isolated and less visible than ever before – to each other as much as to the reading public. The effect of the explosion of numbers in our poetry was a drastic reduction in the visibility of new poets.

A further change in the situation of new poetry involves the background of the poets. Forty per cent of the writers in this anthology were born outside Canada, and another ten per cent are children of immigrants.³ Individual cases are so tangled and so various that no conclusions can be drawn *a priori* about their work. But about the phenomenon itself there can be no doubt. In terms of national origins, sense of place, cultural and ethnic identity, this is far and away the most cosmopolitan generation in our history.

Questions of number, visibility, and background have more to do with the sociology of poetry than with poetry itself, and I'll leave the explanation of these developments to the social

sciences. But they serve as a dramatic reminder: this is a distinct new generation, which deserves to be read in its own right.



What does the poetry of these people have in common?

The first artistic fact about this generation is the neck-wrenching variety in its assumptions about what a poem is. There are recognizable schools and tendencies. But if you take a step back and survey the range of what new poets have been doing, the pattern is one of exhilarating variety, of many incompatible models of excellence. The period has been called “eclectic”; provided it’s not taken to mean that individual poets write eclectically, the term is apt.

To put such eclecticism into perspective, we should consider the manner in which this generation came of artistic age. There have been as many paths as poets, of course. But most of these writers have one thing in common: while they were working through their apprenticeship – in the late sixties, or during the seventies⁴ – they had to reckon with a dramatic model of how a new generation does things. This was furnished by the slightly older poets who had appeared in a rush after 1965: Atwood, bissett, Bowering, MacEwen, Newlove, Nichol, Ondaatje, for instance. Within a very short time those newcomers had stormed into prominence; between 1966 and 1972, they collected the Governor General’s Award for poetry no fewer than seven times. This was quite an act to follow.

It is not just the youthfulness and talent of the sixties poets which matter here; it’s the collective impression they gave, of overturning traditional apple-carts left, right, and centre. That was the model of “new poetry” with which the poets who followed them had to deal. You were now expected to chant the poem, it appeared; to set fire to it; make visual designs from it; breathe it and serialize it and concretize it. You had to spend nights on Black Mountain, and cross-pollinate genres. And the preferred mood was hard-edged *extremis*. A spirit of icono-

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clastic innovation prevailed, even if only some of the new writers exemplified it fully. The essence of literature lay in its radical novelty; each generation, by implication, was obliged to rebuild poetry from the foundations up, if it was serious about poetry at all.

In fact, not every new poet of the sixties would have urged non-stop experimentation as the only proper path, in all times and places. But that is by the bye. After 1970 or so, those poets were *there*; they were highly innovative; and they were good. For a younger poet, still groping to find his or her voice, the prestige conferred upon "radical innovation" by their example was very great.

This presented the same danger, for the younger poets, as would any other orthodoxy. The model of the poet as perpetual iconoclast and innovator had not emerged, with a struggle, from *their* own needs and practice; it was presented to them, by circumstance, as a *fait accompli*. It would have been a temptation to follow that model out of timidity or opportunism, rather than conviction. Reproducing avant-garde gestures could become a panacea, a way of avoiding their own necessary odysseys. They might drift into a hectic, faddish pseudo-experimentalism, which aped the externals of their predecessors' work but had no grounding in any serious artistic vision of their own. . . . And in the early seventies, it must be said, a number of emerging poets went through the motions of being experimental simply because "experimental" was in fashion. The results, though occasionally flashy, were as dismal as you might expect.

This puts in its proper light the eclecticism which finally emerged as the hallmark of the period. In a great many cases, the pattern followed by stronger poets was one of standing back from the sixties poets, and hunkering down for an extended apprenticeship elsewhere; spending a decade or more in private obscurity, while new paths and possibilities took shape; and then emerging with a voice and preoccupations which had a momentum of their own, whether traditional, experimental, or whatever. Sometimes poets coalesced into groupings configured along quite different lines from anything

the sixties had envisioned. And many are finally consolidating their long period of independent growth by issuing a Selected; a third of the poets here have recently done so.

That is to say: this new generation – poet by poet, and with little or no public discussion of the strategy – did the only thing a self-respecting new generation can. It ignored the hard-earned wisdom of its elders, and found its own way ahead. It has plundered much from its predecessors, here and abroad: but on each poet's own terms, not as a procession of clones. The final result is the confident and exuberant variety of the poetry here – the work of an eclectic generation.



Putting together an anthology from such a fertile period has been a challenge. The main question was, how to do justice to individual writers, and also to the period as a whole? Representing a dozen poets, say, would misrepresent the bursting-at-the-seams quality of the period. But printing a couple of poems by each of a hundred writers would simply leave the reader's head spinning.

The solution I arrived at is this. I have chosen twenty poets for intensive coverage, with up to fifteen pages apiece. These are writers whom I could not conceive of presenting in shorter compass, because of the quality and scope of their achievement. And I've sought more extensive treatment of the period by presenting another twenty-five poets at three or four pages apiece. I've tried to present them at their characteristic best; however, my primary aim has been to represent – as far as space permits – the wider range of endeavour in the period. Each of these poets deserves to be read independently and in greater depth – as do several dozen others I've been unable to include, but who would be welcome additions here. It saddens me that limits of space have made such rigorous guidelines necessary.

Eclecticism calls for an editorial policy as well; mine has been to follow the grain of the period and be equally eclectic. That is, I've attempted to represent conflicting schools and

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tendencies by their best work (including cases where they are schools of one), rather than screening out groupings *a priori*. Readers may mentally edit a slimmer version of *The New Canadian Poets* for themselves; I welcome this, while pointing out that readers of other persuasions will do the same, with very different results. A whole series of sub-anthologies is contained here, kicking and fighting between the covers.

Another policy decision derives from the fact that this anthology is part of a series.⁵ Its immediate predecessor, Eli Mandel's *Poets of Contemporary Canada* (1972), dealt with poets who reached maturity during the sixties. Understandably, Mandel did not include a dozen or more poets of that generation who now look very good, but whose strongest work began after his collection appeared. It was a temptation to represent those late-blooming poets here. I've decided against it, however. Poets of the sixties have generally been well treated by anthologists and critics, while the subsequent generation is still waiting for a first round of serious attention. This policy has meant interpreting the starting-date in draconian fashion; no poet who published a book before 1970 has been considered.

The other end of the period was problematic too. I have had to pass over many poets—mostly in their twenties and thirties—whose work is, in the best sense of the hackneyed term, promising. It will be up to the next anthology in this series to represent them as they'll soon deserve.

What you'll find here, then, are forty-five Canadian poets who published their first book after 1970. Most were born between 1945 and 1955, and so were in their thirties when this selection was made.⁶



In the sections that follow, I have drawn four sketch-maps of the terrain. They indicate patterns found in the period, each of which applies to some but not all of the poets here. They focus in turn on *content*, *voice*, *image*, and *phenomenological stance*. While these afford ways of finding coherence in this very hetero-

geneous body of work, they are relevant to the poetry of other times and places as well; there is no suggestion that they reveal something unique to this generation alone. And other approaches would turn up further patterns of coherence, which would enrich those investigated here. The ones I've chosen reveal common-denominator aspects of the poetry, rather than going deeply into poems or poets who are singular.

But at this point you may want to turn directly to the poetry, and consider what follows as though it were an Afterword.



I

A first way of sorting the period is by looking at "schools of content." These are not simply themes a critic might choose to trace, such as "the relation of parents and children," or "the threat of nuclear holocaust." They are conscious, deliberate groupings among poets who share an obsession with some urgent body of experience, often one which had not been taken as a fit subject for poetry before. On the basis of that shared concern, poets have come together to found presses and magazines, write manifestos, compile anthologies, and the like.

Perhaps a third to a half of these poets have been involved in a school of content, or write at times from a sense of common cause with one. None of them can be read solely in terms of participation in such a group. But the period as a whole begins to take on more coherence when you recognize the presence of these schools.



The first is that of the *Prairie documentary*. There were already precedents in the work of Anne Marriott, Dorothy Livesay, John Newlove; the touchstone figure in this generation has been Andrew Suknaski. In 1973, his *Wood Mountain Poems* established a normative range of subjects for the genre: auto-

biography, family politics, small-town lives and yarns, immigrant experience, native life, Canadian history, the relation between folk art (such as pub talk) and poetry – all focused from a consciously Prairie perspective. And the book found a normative voice for such material: the anecdotal vernacular. While few of the poets who responded directly to the new centre of gravity of *Wood Mountain Poems* are represented here, there are independent approaches to the central material in poems by Leona Gom, Gary Hyland, Robert Kroetsch, Kim Maltman, Monty Reid, Dale Zieroth.⁷

It has been striking to watch a communal Prairie story itching itself into poetry. But then – to widen the focus briefly – the Prairie-documentary poets have been doing something which is incumbent on some poets all the time: that is, to explore, challenge, and confirm the spirit of place. While this is decidedly a time of regionalist poetry, there have been no comparably developed “schools of place” outside the Prairies during the period. But the same impulse can be felt – in very different modes – in works like Christopher Dewdney’s “A Natural History of Southwestern Ontario,” Don Domanski’s sequence *Heaven*, Charles Lillard’s “Rivers Were Promises,” Al Pittman’s Newfoundland vignettes. In fact you could probably find the impulse in every poet here, if not always in the poems I’ve selected. Love of one’s own, as Plato observed, is how a human being first approaches love of the good. On the Prairies as elsewhere.



A second conscious school of content is the *feminist*. The term means many things to many people; I’m using it here in a broad way, to refer to poetry which manifests any of the concerns or approaches raised in the women’s movements of the last few decades. One type of feminist poem takes established political topics, such as male chauvinism or experiences unique to women, as its explicit content. Jeni Couzyn’s “The Red Hen’s Last Will and Testament . . .” is an example. Another type in-

vestigates wider subjects from within a clearly feminist consciousness – Bronwen Wallace’s “Reminder,” for instance.⁸

I have the impression that no one Canadian poet of this generation has established norms of feminist poetry to which others are now responding. (Insofar as older poets have influenced this school, they include Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood, Adrienne Rich. But many of the deepest influences have not been poets at all.) That said, a central figure is certainly Bronwen Wallace; exploring human experience from a female and feminist perspective seems to flow naturally with the grain of her imagination. Strong feminist poems come also from Mary di Michele, Robyn Sarah, Anne Szumigalski, among others.

Again, we can broaden the focus to consider several related points. Not every poem written by a woman is “feminist,” obviously, nor is every poem on the subject of men and women. There was a recurring poem in the fifties and sixties, which dealt with sex and was written by a man; the counterpart now is a poem about the sexes, usually though not always written by a woman. And in man-and-woman poems such as these, the central point is not the author’s stand on feminist issues. I think of Roo Borson’s “Talk,” Pier Giorgio Di Cicco’s “Relationships” (though not his “Male Rage Poem,” which does take the feminist agenda as crucial), Judith Fitzgerald’s “Past Cards 21,” Diana Hartog’s “The Common Man.”

Something striking in poems by women here – feminist or not – is how broad a range of roles and speaking stances they claim. In fact, several poems by Lorna Crozier, Paulette Jiles, Susan Musgrave, Sharon Thesen are likely to provoke a double-take in the reader – partly, at least, because it is still startling to read a poem in which a woman is forthrightly angry or aggressive. Or in which she deliberately speaks from within one of the stereotypes that have been off-limits as personae, being considered too unflattering: as vamp, for instance, or as bitch, jailbait, blues momma. Crozier’s “This One’s for You” or Thesen’s “Dedication” are no more shocking than were earlier poems by Layton or Cohen. But they are no less shocking, either; they confront social/poetic stereotypes just as vi-

gorously (even if the stereotypes they challenge are different), force us either to reject the poem out of hand or to re-group our reading assumptions.

What's intriguing is not just the breaking of taboos, though. Once you've assimilated that, you notice that other good poems by the same writers enact impulses which should stereotypically be excluded by anger or aggression – playfulness, intellectual rigour, nurturing, joy. To react to the “taboo” poems alone would miss the larger point: that these poets seek to articulate as full a range of being human as possible.



The common theme in the third grouping is the experience of *being an immigrant, or the child of immigrants*. This grouping shows only some of the attributes of a conscious and fully self-defined school. True, there have been anthologies of immigrant poetry. And beyond that, a good many poets have written about immigrant experience. But there is less of a sense than with other groupings of poetic energies consciously coming together, or of poetry itself being recast by the experience whose pressure the poets share. These writers seem like individuals who have dealt with comparable content in varying ways; when they do come together, it seems more after-the-fact.

Be that as it may, there are many such poets writing. Here they include Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, Mary di Michele, Raymond Filip, Leona Gom, Kristjana Gunnars, Andrew Suknaski, Dale Zieroth. As their surnames suggest, it is when the dislocation of emigrating to Canada has been most severe that poetry on the subject has been most vital. Literal displacement is seldom a subject for British or American immigrants.

One thing these poets have in common is a sense of loss that is attached to a specific place abroad – however mythic it may have become in memory, lore, or fantasy. This can lock into the here-and-now as well. Andrew Suknaski's elegiac perspective, for example, whether it is illuminating the experience of native peoples, Chinese railway workers, or small-town per-

sonages, resonates with his own sense of a holy communal place in the Ukraine, lost by his immigrant forbears before he was born. Something comparable is true of many immigrant poets.

•

A fourth conscious school of content takes *daily work* as its subject. A good many poets have identified centrally or occasionally with this school; two of them are represented here. Tom Wayman is the leading exemplar and spokesman; he has edited several thoughtful anthologies of work poetry, and has made the vernacular voice a provocative medium for the subject. And Howard White, with an ear and vision of his own, focuses on macabre, tall-tale elements in the lore of lumbering, fishing, and truck-driving.

Perhaps because this tendency had roots in left-wing analysis, it began by taking blue-collar work as the subject of choice, along with frontier-job experience. Latterly the emphasis seems to have shifted to work as the daily lot of most human beings, whatever their class.

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It goes without saying that there is as much "content" in the other poets here as in the ones cited above. Moreover, there are thematic concerns – destruction of the environment, for instance – which can be traced in poet after poet across the period. But as far as I know, these four cases are the only ones where poets themselves have formed "schools of content." A reader interested in other themes, such as relationships, ecology, peace and war, will want to track them through the poetry for him or herself.

A final thought: not on schools of content, but on the convictions that may give rise to such schools, and that often play a contentious part in poetry. I find several of these poets compelling when they write most directly from ideological conviction – to which (a reader is bound to assume) they subscribe in

daily life, and in whose service the poem speaks. Common wisdom in contemporary English-speaking letters has it that doctrinal poetry is invariably bad poetry. But while I certainly recognize the pitfalls of versified ideology, the maxim strikes me as no more sensible than saying that all poetry about daffodils, mothers, or God is bound to be bad. There are reams of sentimental dreck on those subjects. But you can write badly about anything; recognizing that says nothing about the possibility of writing about it well.

And when I follow the trajectory of Brian Fawcett's determination to "slime the Beautiful with facts"; or feel stirred by the passion for social justice in Tom Wayman's sermons and curses; or (in a different vein) track with bemused pleasure through some elaborately propositional ramble by David Donnell or Robert Kroetsch – then I find myself unwilling to accept the dictum that doctrine must always and only kill poetry. Mind you, I'm usually in a tug-of-war with these poems. I'm never sure if I trust their rhetorical stance (which seems so much more *certain* than I'm usually able to feel); at the same time, they leave me questioning my own moral and aesthetic commitments. But when a poem is making life uncomfortable for me in that way – as in any other – I usually end up cherishing the experience, however gingerly, and respecting the poem.

II

A second way of sorting the period is by trying to *hear* it, by tuning in to the range of voices found in the poetry. And across the whole period – though possibly not across this anthology – the most commonly heard single voice is one I think of as the *vernacular*. A minority of poets here write in vernacular all the time; others do so selectively; others, not at all. A vernacular poem may be addressing a beloved, recalling an incident from the past, issuing a political denunciation. But we need to examine the voice itself, not the uses to which it is put.

This is a sturdy, flexible tone, which draws on the resources of daily speech in Canadian English. During this period the

strongest vernacular influence has been the poetry of Al Purdy. But that doesn't imply a purely native genesis; the impulse to cast literary baggage aside and write in a way that approximates daily speech has often arisen before. Think of Villon, Chaucer, Donne, Wordsworth, Pound, Frost. The range of what can be accomplished in vernacular is broader than you might expect; the following is a brief sampling from this volume.

Vernacular can be absolutely bald – as in Andrew Suknaski's work, where the poet tries simply to get out of the way and let a story that matters come through:

in 1914

[philip] well and my father walked south from moose jaw
to find their homesteads
they slept in haystacks along the way
and once nearly burned to death . . .

Taking that relatively neutral tone as a point of reference, you can then see one branch of vernacular swerving away into a racy, substandard "folk" diction. Consider Howard White's sardonic:

Used to be in the woods all you had to
watch out for was junkies nodding off
getting caught with their ass in the bight
now it's these Christly poets . . .

In the same direction, vernacular can reproduce the speech conventions of a sub-culture, as in Gary Hyland's audition of teenage English:

Okay so I'm crazy, but I could be rich
with acne clinics all across Canada
cause I developed a surefire treatment
scarless, painless, and inexpensive . . .

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In a similar vein, Paulette Jiles can move vernacular towards the idiom of song lyrics:

Honey, you know when you talk like that
you're the only man I'll ever love.
Just keep talking.
That's what you're good for . . .

And Lorna Crozier can catch a comparable honkytonk idiom:

Hey, big talker,
waited all my life
for a man like you.
Come my way, I'll blow
the fuses in your big machine,
short all your circuits . . .

These examples work with slangy or “substandard” English (using the term to describe their diction, not to judge it). And that is not an easy thing to do well, as one can discover by trying.

There is sometimes a quality of *jeu d'esprit*, for a highly literate poet, in writing in “substandard vernacular.” But usually it is not just a playful exercise. The refusal of correctness implies, in the hands of a poet of substance, at least, a conscious stance on matters of social or personal importance, one which the reader is tacitly invited to share. It may suggest, “Ordinary people's lives are considered sub-poetic – but you and I know they have a passion, savvy, and dignity that make most ‘poetry’ feel insulated from real life.” Or the implicit stance may involve the speaker's own feelings; it may convey, for instance, “I don't know any Officially Certified Poetry in which feelings as direct and subversive as mine have been expressed. But I'll write an *un*-certified poem – and we can go ahead and enjoy their tang and reality anyway.” These unstated ver-