

Review of the Tribute Evening Celebrating Al Purdy

by Carole TenBrink

On Thursday, October 19th, at Albert College, in Belleville, over two hundred people paid tribute to poet Al Purdy, the Ameliasburg giant who is now gone. The evening was great, down-to-earth, full of reminiscence, good food, good stories and good poems. I wish everyone in the county could have been there. You'd have felt proud. Actually, since I agree with the growing consensus that he is the greatest of our poets, probably every Canadian should have been there.

Sam Solecki, Purdy's editor was our host, leading off with some wonderful stories, like the time he and Al were in a bar and someone sent them over expensive cognac. When they asked the bartender who to thank, he pointed over to four young guys in baseball caps, who lifted their LaBatts and said, 'to the best g-d poet ever'. Solecki said that Purdy loved most that the kind of tribute from ordinary people.

When Purdy died in April, poet and fiction writer Michael Ondaatje reportedly said that the government should have declared three minutes of pandemonium. The audience in Belleville learned that that's the kind of man Purdy was, an iconoclast, full of outrageous humor, innocence and possessed of a great love for the immense land that is Canada. He was a 'grass roots', six foot three giant, loping across any distance, wearing his plaid pants and shirt hanging out.

He disliked any hint of pedantic intellect. Solecki told another story of how one day he was trying to explain to his son the meanings in a Purdy poem. Purdy happened to be sitting across the room, and would not stop booming out in his low, hoarse voice, 'booring,... booring,... booring'. The man also had other words to cut through any sort of fakery... words like 'phony' and 'bullshit'.

Then we saw slides of Purdy on his travels to all over Canada, including the arctic, and to Mexico and Russia. So many places, and so many people.... pictures of Purdy with his wife, Urithe, with other poets and friends. Along the way, basic things about his life came clear. His writing was rooted in ordinary Canadian vernacular speech. Purdy has written, "I'd prefer to be understood

with a minimum of mental strain by people as intelligent or more so than myself." This speaks volumes about his plain speech, musically cadenced poetry. I invite anyone to read it. You'll move right into it, as easily as if it were a mystery novel.

During the intermission, we had a chance to take a look at the new book of collected poems, just hot off the press from Harbour Publishing. It's called *Beyond Remembering*, and is edited by Sam Solecki and the poet, with forewords by Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje. Purdy worked on it right up until his death this last April. Solecki told us that in his last conversation with Purdy, the poet barely had enough strength and breath to get one word out at a time. Yet he was still thinking about poetry and had stressed his decision that the poem 'Her Gates Both East and West' must be the last one in the book, this because it speaks of every area in Canada. The collection is important, both because the previous collected works is shamefully out of print, and because it contains all the poems the poet wanted to be remembered for.

Four poets read at the tribute. Along with their poems, they related other information about Purdy. Louise O'Donnell remembered that she first saw his poems when her high school aged daughter brought some home. "They just blew my socks off". This was not poetry in the British style with traditional features such as rhyme. This poetry swore and ambled and talked about real Canadian things. John Oughton has called Purdy "the voice of the land". This epitaph will become the quote on his tombstone. Mary Cameron spoke of how Purdy was always inviting young poets over to his place in Ameliasburg, "not because we were important or well known", she said, "but just because we loved language too and he wanted to talk poetry with us".

Peter Jones said that Purdy has placed us here in our land. Culture comes out of a sense of place, that deep sense in your gut of where you are. Only when that happens can culture and nationhood come about. So, Purdy's contribution to Canada is absolutely fundamental. He not only gave voice to the land. He gave voice to us.

I must say, I was moved and I agreed with Jones. That night, I came home, and tired as I was, for it was past midnight, I read through about 150 pages of his language. It speaks so plainly, so directly and powerfully to your insides. I just couldn't put it down.

But I get ahead of myself. The last poet to read was Steven Heighton. He finished with a sort of word collage he'd created of Purdy lines which give a spellbinding

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