

INTERVIEW /

Barry McKinnon, Sharon Thesen

Sharon Thesen interviewed Barry McKinnon in Prince George in October, 1983. The following transcription was prepared by McKinnon as a condensation of the taped materials. The speakers are identified by initials.

ST What sense do you have of yourself as a poet in this particular territory?

BMc Coming to Prince George as a poet was quite strange. In fact I didn't want anybody to know about it — something I hid. I literally got kicked out of an apartment because my hair was "too long," so you can imagine if I told anyone I was a writer or poet, I'd *really* be in trouble. The toughness here in 1969 when I came was pretty obvious if you had some kind of interest like poetry or music that seemed sissyish, or whatever. It was worse here than growing up in Calgary, which was a similar context. I think it's everywhere. There are certain things you just don't show interest in or else you're suspect. So starting at the college was tense because I was to teach literature and poetry and I'd never done that before. I'd never taught creative writing. It was interesting, though, to find that there was an interest in this approach to things. However tough the town was, there were people who did want to write short stories or poetry. So I think over the years a group of us simply went about working as writers and found within the group that we created, that there was no problem at all. There was no problem putting on a poetry reading series because we always had audiences and student support for these events. The support for writing and poetry became almost like a normal thing. Some people go hunting, kill a moose every year, and some people go to poetry readings. Eventually it seemed like we actually had a place. You didn't have to be defensive about being an artist or writer. That's changed somewhat. Now there is a visible effort to get rid of literary activity, at least in its connection with the college.

ST And go back to an image of the city more congenial with its origins? When you go down to the mall you see people walking around, doing their shopping in logging jackets and boots, whereas in Vancouver, people go around in business suits or jogging outfits.

BMc This is one reason I like this town. I lived in Montreal and Vancouver and Calgary. People actually think they're living in these big places [laughter], where there are all kinds of styles and surfaces that people float in and out of; everything is hip and groovy. Here, those social definitions and styles have never been very operative. One punk rocker in this town really stands out, and better watch out, just like a poet better watch out, or anybody else. It seems to me you take on the characteristics of the place itself, and you take your chances simply because you will be visible and you will be confronting those people who don't like you and who will say so.

ST Just to go back and get a bit of history here, because you came when the college [College of New Caledonia] opened. When I was here and when Brian Fawcett was here, there was no college, there was no place. There was Gundy's News. We all left in about '64 or '65 and just thinking back to what you were saying, Brian Fawcett wrote a serial poem in about 1968, called *Book of a North Manual*, in which he has the image of Orpheus getting kicked to death in the can of the Simon Fraser Hotel beer parlour. Then the college opened with its English Department, and you were hired, and as you say, the musicians, the philosophers, the other academics. You may not have wanted to be visible yourself as a poet, but you wanted the poetry out, right?

BMc Originally I didn't plan to do anything. I simply got a job and ended up in a place. I didn't like it at first. The place seemed to embody everything I'd been trying to escape, and there, all of a sudden, I had this job. Charlie Boylan worked here the first year, and he said, you know, we've got to do something here; there is work to be done. He was probably thinking more in terms of political activity, but at the same time he'd graduated with an M.A. in Canadian Literature and wanted to start a poetry reading series. We thought, here's a population of people who have been isolated in every sense culturally. The money was always good in Prince George and that's part of the reason for coming. People could come and live in a trailer for a few years and make lots of money. It was that idea of going to the north and then going back south, a fact which made the city very transient. But the college became a permanent institution. Somebody decided that it was time that this other level of "culture" should take place. That's not to say that there weren't people with the little theatre, and I think Ken Belford read once in a coffee house [laughter], so there had been at least one poetry reading. Somebody decided that the town, and I guess it was a matter of population to some degree, was big enough to sustain a college. But I think the college they wanted was more along a career-vocational kind of situation and what they got were some long hairs who were imported, and who in many ways didn't know their ass from a hole-in-the-ground about the nature of this place. I found that I had to convince these kids in cork boots that there was some value in poetry. And it didn't take very long because what was the alternative? You work in the mill. The social and cultural possibilities are pretty limited. There's the outdoors stuff that happens up here, which is great, but the poverty is on that other level . . .

ST Like Olson's ghosts ducking under the projector beam.

BMc Yes, I think so. Why should people be denied access to their own language and thought and contemplation of their own experience, which I think poetry and this kind of activity is really involved with?

ST And offered a vulgar version of the material in its place. But isn't that what you also love about the place?

BMc What I first loved about this place was that everything was imitated from some even cheaper source. I mean the levels of cheapness, really [laughter]! I've never been in a British pub, but here you walk in one day, the pub is full of absolute drunks, with holes punched in the walls, and the next day it's been turned into an English pub. But the wood isn't real. Reds are big here. You walk into these bars and all of this red flocked wallpaper turns you into an epileptic — until you get a drink.

ST Do you know that lovely poem of George Stanley's called "B.C. for bill bissett?"

the green & grey of the land-
scape

the red & gold of the pub

the black & white of the night

BMc He's got it; those colours.

ST In many of the poems in *The the*, there is a painful consciousness on the part of the poet of a tension between two completely different perceptions of beauty, or the nature of beauty. And that there you are, between them, because really, there is nowhere else to go.

BMc Ken Belford has an interesting early poem called "Carrier Indians," which gets exactly that sense. The last stanza goes,

Ugly people with large eyes.

Having nowhere to go:

I am one of them.

There is another Belford line: "the worse it gets the better." What you want is a certain clarity, at least on one level, that throws you into the confusion about who you are, which is then somehow translated into the poem. Isn't that your job, finally! I don't like it half the time, but I don't know how else to go about it. John Harris and I were talking and he reminded me of something I'd said. I punned on the idea of writing up here as being "Woolcoco." If there is this junk pile that's supposed to be a civilization, or whatever, how do you deal with it? The "style" *isn't* Rococo. It all becomes material, picking up the imitations. But you end up staying in places. The trailer implies that you're going to be moving on, right? Well, the trailers have become an actual building, permanent trailers that will never be moved.

ST I feel that in your work there are two environments or two sensibilities that seem to be operating all the time. One is a bewildered but at the same time very clear sense of the crassness of the city — and not just *this* city, by the way — and the other is institutional, in which you're teaching creative writing to the citizens of this city. Would you talk about your experience as a writer teaching English, and specifically, creative writing?

BMc It seems that in fourteen or fifteen years that the city, whatever the city is, has been more important in my imagination than the institution. The institution is the place where I work. It provides a place to go and do this work. But now the institution, which is maybe more common as a big city phenomenon, has created its own world which I find more horrific than that logger sitting downtown in a bar who's going to hate your guts (or at least your perception might be that that's happening). There is a certain kind of danger in the street, a certain kind of violence which is clearer than this . . .

ST . . . bureaucratic violence.

BMc That's exactly what it is. John Harris in an interesting way has looked at the whole country in terms of . . . he feels that Canadians are . . . I don't know if I can really capsulize it, but it's that you get plopped into the wilderness, and given that, the next thing you do is create *lots* of bureaucracy. How do you locate yourself in a world you find chaotic . . . ?

ST I think you put it well yesterday when you said to me that it's a situation where you have bureaucrats defining what is real and valuable, and I don't know if that's a danger just in Prince George.

BMc Most of my life is spent in somebody else's imagination of what should be done. But what they do is imagine a system and then abandon it themselves and leave you there to deal with the shit. The system I'm working in now, The Developmental Centre, is not like a course you've personally designed, if that's the word. You don't have responsibility for it either, which is one scary thing about giving a course — you're responsible for it. So all of a sudden, you find yourself working through someone else's idea, imagination, or system, and that they don't take responsibility for it really bothers me. Its obvious failures are turned into "successes." Talk about economic restraint. The centre, in terms of offering English courses, is twice as expensive to run as it would be with regular classes and teachers. I have half the students I usually have and because it's all self-paced and modularized, it's also very impersonal. Work is put into a basket and I mark it and put it back into the basket — a very impersonal and alienating situation with questionable results. Which means half the students don't come. There is no reason to. You have to ask some fundamental questions when this sort of thing happens.

ST So what happens to your imagination when so much of it is engaged in filtering this other imagination? If imagination is the right word for this sort of engineering of people and "results." Any real imagination is always moral, finally and fundamentally.

BMc It should be. It's moral if you take responsibility for it. On another level, we've been in this situation of being colonials — other countries taking the wood and the resources and leaving the shit pile. I mean, isn't that what's happened? Fortunately, or unfortunately, some of us have stayed in the shit pile, to say, "Here, kid, read this poem because it has something to do with all of those trees and the shit pile." The classroom is a place, in a sense, like the poem, where you can think and do and exercise your imagination and thought

without censorship on that activity. The system is now trying to isolate kids and make certain kinds of study questionable. Students might not think the classroom is valuable, but wait until they start doing these packaged courses, where they don't have a teacher. You have a few marks on a piece of paper that says your grammar is okay, or it isn't. It's like the old story in the 1950s: that fragmentation of activity that *never* adds up. It seems to me, the act of poetry, particularly writing it, is that you're in the process of trying to make it add up: you *and* this world of experience.

ST I have a sense of your poems as architectural — that they build, add up. That's exactly what your poems do: they *add up* a number of statements and images, which, together and incrementally, add up to a certain state of affairs.

BMc I agree with you. If it isn't adding up in any other way. . . . The people who are devising these systems in education and what have you are not concerning themselves with those questions of what it all adds up to.

ST They don't believe there is an image in those systems.

BMc No, they don't. Though the image is me, and those students wired into computers and head gear and slide shows. There's an anecdote that might have something to do with classrooms and these systems and the fact that we've still got people, humans, bouncing into each other. I was in Hazelton once, actually it was up at Kispiox, where they've got this rodeo. It's a really wild northern rodeo where you have guys really drunk at 8 in the morning, crawling out of tents and campers. I was up there with Ken Belford. We were sitting there one morning and it was just chaotic. Guys were starting to yell and scream already: early morning, lighting fires, revving up their cars. Ken looked out over the vista, the corrals and all of these animals, and he literally meant it. These horses and cows are wandering around together, and he says, "You know, rodeos are great, because it's a good place for the animals to get together." Like, the horses could talk to each other for a while, saying, "Hey, what's happening, man" [laughter]. And Ken meant it. He has this great way of distilling things.

ST That's a lovely image of paradise, the animals conversing and so on.

BMc The humans themselves are rolling in the mud, and they're not very happy. They want to be. But the animals seemed quite happy to be together. It seems to me that classrooms and all of these situations should be like that. I'm not complaining. I think within it you can survive and get the so-called work done, but it's getting harder all of the time.

ST Do you find that teaching creative writing has helped your writing or hindered it or both?

BMc Personally I always felt a lot of pressure in those classes because nobody has come up with a particular formula, or way of going about it. In some regular English classes you can "control" the situation, if that's what's required, and sometimes it is. You can't work 15 hours a week in the classroom jumping around like Big Bird all of the time. It's just too much. I found Creative Writing difficult because there never really was a way of getting

at it, and really never a way of, on one level, of criticizing or showing how it should be done. I didn't feel it was my right to tell some student to quit writing, or go away because he'd written a hymn, or something. So I always found great tension. I always wanted the students to say, "This is what should be done." They didn't know what to do either [laughter]. I found it embarrassing a lot of the time. But the class did provide a place people could wander in and out of. Eventually I collected thousands of pages; I managed to get a couple of anthologies out of it, of solid writing. John Harris just published a book by Meryl Duprey this summer. Meryl was ready for a book and so the Creative Writing class was a place for him, someone who *was* writing poetry. I took a Creative Writing class from Irving Layton in the mid-60s. At that time in Canada, who was visible? In Calgary there would have been George Bowering, but I was too afraid to approach him or to take his Creative Writing class. Well, actually I didn't *want* to take a Creative Writing class then anyway. But later I saw Layton and Leonard Cohen talking and laughing on TV and I thought, he looks like he's having fun, maybe I should take the guy's course. So, in a way, if you're visible as a writer, and if somebody is interested, they'll look you up, they'll find you.

ST You write poems that deal with the tension of work, or your sense of your value as a poet. For instance, in a couple of lines in *thoughts/sketches*, you say you are "kept from your work by work." You talk about your own "absence from what you know," which I gather is part of the condition of work. There's a lot of press about work poetry lately.

BMc I guess what you do is make your job experience part of the subject matter because it's a major part of your experience.

ST How come you don't just sit down and write a narrative poem about when you arrive at work and all the bullshit that goes on all day?

BMc I suppose if I wrote prose, all of those narrative details, if I could find the form for them, could turn into a great tragi-comedy. But for me, the poetry is a quick take and the quickest take. All of a sudden all of these forces come together and I find myself scribbling a line, or a thought, trying to make some sense out of the sources of my tension. I want to nail something down. I really want to nail it down and if I'm stupid enough, I might be able to do it.

ST Exactly.

BMc But instead of filling the experience out with narrative detail, I find myself leaving out specific and literal and contextual references, particularly in my recent work. I don't want people to know where it's coming from. I don't even want to know where it's coming from [laughter]. Lately, I've been thinking about how poems generate. I've almost started to think it's a result of some kind of chemical thing, because all of a sudden, I just feel like I can write a poem.

ST I know that feeling too. I feel it in my stomach and my adrenal glands start acting up. Maybe all art is pathological symptoms.

BMc I've sort of turned it around to non-projective verse. It started really as a little poem in *The the*. I thought quite consciously, "I will write a poem tonight." Maybe once in your life you have that privilege of saying, *tonight!* [laughter] and I thought, I would drink while I did it.

...

The word "tempo" came out of a poem that George Stanley had written. Somebody told him about this word "tempi" and he really liked it. So he wrote a poem with the word "tempi" in it. And so I thought, well, it was one of those situations where Joy had gone and the kids were gone and I was sitting in the cabin and I didn't have anything to do. There's no TV and the radio doesn't come in clearly after 10 p.m. or so. And so I poured a drink and thought, I'm going to write this poem. All I had were the words "tempi" and "tempo." So I wrote the word "tempo" down. I suppose a projective verse writer would say, tempo, blah blah blah — cook through the poem quickly. But with this one . . . I just stared at that word for quite a while, and then something was said on the radio: "the world's 20 biggest songs. . . ." That was the next line, or close to it, so I wrote that down.

ST "All night long, get the job done . . ."

BMc That line was out of a song, or it was something again, said on the radio. I'm not sure of the actual rime sequence between these poems but . . . I'd write another line down and then wait for something else to happen and enter the poem. So in the period of two or three hours I'd written this thing with very little revision. More and more I find myself doing that. Pat Lane was saying, a couple of years ago, referring to John Newlove: if you stay with poetry, it's going to do some strange things to you [laughter]. When I was 16, I was writing 20 pages a day, because I thought I was in love. I probably was. But as Pat was saying about Newlove, Newlove would sit down and write down, say, the words "the rock" and just stare at that for a while. And Pat was, in his own humorous way, saying, "man, that's far-out enough, just to get the words 'the rock' down."

ST Is it ever!

BMc One word is enough to — is a devastating experience. And I've been thinking even just the word *the* is a strange. . . . Once again you're in this experience of actually putting a word on a piece of paper, which is pretty far out.

ST Sitting there looking at or through or with that word, you wait, literally, for the whole world to come in, and you think, what a strange occupation.

BMc Yeah, it is. But then again, to sort of tie it together, why not do this? You're not doing it all the time, but in a way it's your life. I mean I don't jump out of bed and put some leotards on and go to work as a poet. Robert Creeley is beautiful for this because he makes writing seem like normal human

activity, which it is. What better thing to do, in one sense. I'm not thinking of that Williams line where you scream out, "I am a poet, I am a poet," which I think is a great privilege when it happens, but most of the time we're not. But I'm constantly looking for the poem. And that's what separates us from the moose hunter. He's looking for a moose; we're looking for a poem [laughter]. And other people are looking for something, too. I was reading through Joy's women's magazines with all of these articles and ads for courses and approaches to help you find what you're looking for. For some people it might be just to lose weight or get a different job and then they'll be happy. Poetry doesn't always give that privilege, but what it seems to do for me — it's like making anything. If you get a line, a perception or an actual poem, what better thing to happen to you? Some of the poems that I've carried around, that have been important to me, are sometimes just goofy little discoveries in language that seem very quickly to capture those large states and you think, "that's what poetry is." It reveals that thing. And you feel this poem or line is necessary. This had to be said, and somebody said it. God bless them [laughter]!

ST I wanted to bring up, in relation to David Phillips' writing, the blossoms, the flowers, the garden. You find this in John Pass' poems as well, even in Norm Sibum's — that especially in Vancouver, one is living among all this beauty, right? And in Prince George, you say something about the heartless wasteland. The heartless wasteland is in Vancouver too and so you get all this irony vis-a-vis the physical beauty of the place. Not that you need beautiful surroundings in order to write, and in fact it can be totally distracting and intimidating, but in a way, in Prince George, there isn't that easily discerned degeneration from garden to wasteland.

BMc I think there *is* the garden here. All geography has incredible subtleties. What looks dead to somebody else is actually alive. A biologist will go and find a bug crawling around, a beetle or something. In winter here, you put some skis on and you go out into the snow. You might just experience hypothermia, visions of yourself dying. There is a great opening paragraph in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Lawrence's notion that civilization itself was the rubble. We are living in the rubble. It's kind of an industrial rubble that we've created. We're not even talking about pollution anymore. We've accepted it as part of the rubble. Within the rubble you form habitats, so this little community of writers, or the press and publishing work we've done, is like forming a habitat in a larger sense of decay.

ST Robin Blaser says we're entering a new monastic age.

BMc I think the worse things get, the more you find people devising ways of handling it. Some of them are pretty corny. Now everybody is joining health and exercise clubs. The air still stinks, the environment hasn't really been cleaned up, as they say, but everybody is jogging. They're breathing more of that shit in now than they ever did. But people want to feel healthier. They do form habitats and their activities take on some pretty strange and maybe

aberrant qualities. People are involved in different kinds of therapy, again, to sort it out. I've always stuck to poetry. And it is therapeutic so some degree [laughter].

ST Sure it is. What do you hope?

BMc There is a strange kind of hope. I used to be more pessimistic than I am now. I think that some of the signs are very interesting. Whatever this search is, through the health club, so to speak, people are turning in on themselves and trying to find, literally, what can be beautiful about themselves, their own lives. That might be a monastic kind of activity. And in a sense, giving up is part of that process. You just give up. That's the extent of my pessimism. I don't believe that you can march and change anything large at this point. That kind of idealism is gone.

ST That's what I wanted to add to this business about the garden, paradise, and so on. You can describe this landscape, that way, and another landscape, that way, or you can go to Greece and write your poem. It doesn't matter where you are.

BMc There is only one landscape. One moving part.

ST One paradise. That sense that Phillips has, that conversation with your friends is paradise.

BMc Yes. There is a kind of singleness and maybe the poetry tries to get at that. What is it that connects us all? I mean thousands of years of poetry and so forth that make all of these conditions.

ST Because when you're writing the poem, whether you're conscious of it or not, you're having a conversation with that poetry of the last two thousand years, with your friends in poetry. Sometimes I'll think to myself, oh, this is a McKinnon line, or a Phyllis line, or a Wallace Stevens line.

BMc I've stolen a tremendous amount from everybody and sometimes I acknowledge it [laughter]. I've learned from David Phillips, Ken Belford, Pierre Coupey, Brian Fawcett and many people. It's all out there anyway. George Stanley has taught me something about weird inner cadence. Occasionally I've taken his cadence, and then my own will take over, if it's possible, at some other point. But I'll almost start a sing-song just to get me into the poem. So, there is a community and there always will be, I hope. Writing is solitary, but in another way it's not.

ST Can you articulate, at all, what happens when you end a line and then move to a new one? Why does it go there, instead of there?

BMc I think it's totally arbitrary in the sense that I'm not consciously thinking about where to break it. It happens quickly.

ST Not that you have this preconceived, triumphant little intention, but I don't think it's arbitrary. Something happens.

BMc Right. If a thought occurs in your head, does it break at a certain point, to go on to another thought? If we think of a stream of images, the implication is that there is no break. But I don't think it works that way. There is a break. Now, wherever those lines break, hopefully, or maybe technically, it's to avoid confusion — that you're not running two thoughts together and to keep a momentum or rhythm going.

ST I can distinguish between your line breaks, line lengths, and so forth, and those of somebody who just doesn't know where to break a line. You do know where to break it. But you break it all over the page. I was just wondering if you have a certain feeling of space or sense of rhythm at that moment that makes you put those two words way over there as opposed to against the left margin.

BMc The sections themselves can be variable. I can get short sections or longer sections. A lot of the time when I'm writing I just run out of something to say at that point. If you're lucky, another little chunk will fall in. It might be something, again, just to get you on to the next section. It might not be the most important part of the poem, in your own mind. Ultimately, it might *become* the most important part — what you let drop in at a certain point. Poetry to me is all a mistake of sorts. What you discover is the result of a mistake. So a lot of the time in the poem, I'm trying to out-trick myself. Do you know what I mean? When you write for this many years, you learn a lot of tricks and this is why it keeps you pretty straight. The people who don't go on with poetry usually discover a form and they'll stick with it. No, that's not quite it. It's that they don't make enough mistakes anymore. Even with a tight poem, you've got to make a little mistake somewhere to allow the poetry to happen, it seems to me. I haven't worked out a scheme or schemata. The poem starts and it seems like I have, for myself, found a way, or a certain form. I don't know what it will end up as. But you have constantly to be involved with technique. I'm as capable as anyone else of writing an awful poem. When I say, make a "mistake" in the poem, I'm saying, allow the poem itself to happen. I'm working on a thing now called *The Centre*. It's taking so long because I'm trying to incorporate grammatical errors that work. There is no grammar. There is, but in poetry it's not the Standard English grammar we have to teach.

ST As we were saying yesterday, the whole process in poetry is to misplace the modifiers . . .

BMc To make instinctive moves. In terms of the poetic, it's by the seat of my pants. Everything I do is. You want to do something [laughter] — play those drums, play that piano, and if you're going to do it, and *say* you're doing it, you've got to learn how to make it look like you're doing it [laughter]. You don't want anyone to say, this isn't a poem, or this guy is terrible; they *might* say that, but inside, within yourself, you've got to know that with all of your lack of technique, with all of your hangups and bad syntax, that you actually pulled the thing off.