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Ice Cod Bell or Stone: Poetry, Canon, Memory

Nicholas Bradley

At an intellectual loose end, or perhaps simply idle, I retrieved from the bookcase my copy of Earle Birney's *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*, a volume of poetry published just over sixty years ago, in 1962. I might have chosen one of its neighbours, Margaret Avison's *Winter Sun and Other Poems* (1960), a slightly older book, or Robert Bringhurst's *Bergschrund* (1975), its junior by a decade or so, but for whatever reason my eye was drawn to the Birney. It is an elegant first edition designed by Frank Newfeld: a generously sized hardcover, the dust jacket printed in black and bright blue. The same blue is used to distinctive effect in the book itself. The odd, unpunctuated title originates in the last lines of the poem "Ellesmereland," which describes an unpeopled Arctic landscape: "Nor is there talk of making man / from ice cod bell or stone" (22).[1] My copy happens to be inscribed — "For Bill Stafford / in friendship and admiration / Earle Birney" — and dated — "12 Sep 63 / Vancouver" — although I cannot say exactly how it travelled from the library of the American poet to my own. The book was important to Birney's career. As the jacket states, it was his "first selection of new poems . . . in book form in ten years," a long interval for a highly productive author.[2] Twice winner of the Governor General's Award, the "internationally acclaimed poet" (the insistent jacket copy again) might have been thought to have vanished or to be mired in a fallow period.[3] The book therefore presented itself less as an object than as an event.

And indeed *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* contains several poems likely to be considered, if a consensus about Birney's poetry can be presumed, among his best, such as "The Bear on the Delhi Road" and "El Greco: *Espolio*."[4] It also includes "Can. Lit.," with its eminently quotable final line, which commentators, whether affirming or disputing, have long found irresistible: "It's only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted" (18). The volume is manifestly eclectic, its thirty-six poems falling into several overlapping categories: poems of travel ("The Bear on the Delhi

Road," "A Walk in Kyoto," "Honolulu," "Leaving Yellowstone," the closing sequence of twelve poems gathered under the title "Mexico"), poems about colonial explorers ("Captain Cook," "Vitus Bering"), satires ("Can. Lit.," "Mammorial Stunzas for Aimee Simple McFarcin," "Twenty-Third Flight"), translations ("The Travelling Workers' Curse," rendered "From the Hungarian of Attila József" [26], "Two Poems from the Chinese of Mao Tse-Tung"), and formal experiments and exercises ("Njarít," "Haiku for a Young Waitress," "Sestina for Tehauntepec" [sic], which has an intriguing geographical connection to Wallace Stevens's "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," from the second edition of *Harmonium* [1931]). Many of these poems could be placed in more than one such category. Today, when as a rule books of poetry must not be miscellaneous but instead thematically unified and formally consistent, the conspicuous heterogeneity of *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* may seem dated and jarring. With only forty-five pages of poetry and sixty-four in total, the book is also much shorter than many contemporary volumes, not necessarily to its disadvantage. It is striking that the jacket copy makes no mention of the poems' subjects or themes; only the authorship matters.

This overview, necessarily brief, should suggest that *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* was a significant poetic achievement. At the time of its publication, when he was nearing sixty, Birney was a distinguished but not yet superannuated figure in Canadian literature; even now it would be generally granted, I believe, that Birney is at minimum a person of historical importance.[5] "David," his most famous poem, remains anthologized and is therefore probably taught with some frequency.[6] (I teach it regularly, but it is difficult to say with confidence how often any particular work is taught elsewhere or even by colleagues with whom I share a building.[7]) But "David" is not Birney's only poem; neither is any one of the others that appear in anthologies or that might be considered superlative. To obtain a true sense of his literary project as a whole, the many parts must be understood. On rereading *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*, I was engrossed by its unusual but rich eclecticism. Its contents have aesthetic merit, and dedicated students of Birney's poetry will find, as in all of his poems, intrinsic textual and biographical interest. "Captain Cook," for example, concludes with an image of death similar to that in the well-regarded "Bushed," from *Trial of a City and Other Verse* (1952), and the two passages, if not the two poems, stand to be read in relation to each other.[8] As hinted by the inscription to William Stafford, Birney also had ties to innumerable writers in Canada and beyond; the

particular relationship between Birney and Stafford has not been examined in detail. In 1962, Birney was a professor of long standing in the Department of English at the University of British Columbia. Scholars curious about the circulation of English-language poetry at mid-century and the creation of literary networks both within and outside the academy could do worse than to focus on Birney as a salient example of the itinerant professor-poet adrift on ceaseless waves of correspondence.

If the basic importance of *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* is allowed, then what are the implications for the academic discipline of Canadian literary studies, and more generally for an imagined community of readers, of its disappearance from collective memory along with countless other volumes from decades past? To answer, I must first establish that the book has in fact vanished; that question is tied to a broader consideration of Birney's reputation. My hunch as a reader, teacher, and scholar in conversation with colleagues close and distant is that no one much cares about book or poet. At the time, *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* was complimented by reviewers (see Guy) and highly praised in an appreciative but intermittently cutting essay in *Canadian Literature* (see West).[9] Later it was remembered on the occasion of Birney's death (see Higgins).[10] Passing references crop up now and again, as would be expected of any book with a claim to significance, but sustained discussions are rare to the point of non-existence.[11] A watershed is marked by the years 1994, when Elspeth Cameron's biography of Birney was published, and 1995, when Birney died. Studies of Birney and his works are either contemporaneous, and therefore suffer from a nearly unavoidable lack of historical perspective, or posthumous, with commentary then informed by Cameron's detailed treatment of the poet's life. Some recent books, of the last ten years or so, refer to *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* but almost always briefly; the limits of the term "recent" could be tested without greatly affecting my point.[12] Articles examining Birney's writing appear on occasion (see Getz; McFarlane; McNeill), and likewise additions to the Birney library appear now and then — new selections of his poetry (Birney, *Essential*; Birney, *One*) and critical editions of his correspondence (Birney and Purdy) and other material (Nesbitt) — yet there is little ongoing exploration of his body of work. The commentary is sporadic rather than uninterrupted. Decades have passed since the first monographs on Birney — both Frank Davey and Richard H. Robillard published books titled *Earle Birney* in 1971 — but they have not been displaced by a truly revisionary study. It is faintly absurd to

ask how many scholarly citations would confirm persistent interest in a poet's works, but whatever the number, Birney falls below the threshold. *Forgotten*, *disappeared*, *vanished*: these words overstate the case, but I am nonetheless confident in my assumption that no one is really talking about *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* even if its author stands this side of obscurity. Well then, so what?

So nothing. Perhaps the book is not as monumental as the jacket copy promised (as jacket copy is wont to do). *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* is but one of roughly three dozen books that Birney published during his long and eventful lifetime (see Higgins 197). And despite his erstwhile reputation and his indisputable accomplishments — the books, the awards, the influential teaching positions, the associations with renowned authors, and so on — Birney is one writer among many in Canadian literature, let alone the wider world of literature in English. Critical fashions come and go. Nor would it be healthy if all scholars of Canadian poetry, an admittedly small group, were permanently fixated on the same poem, book, poet, or movement. My bookcase, as I tried to imply at the outset, is home to several equally venerable and dusty volumes. The same is true of the figurative bookshelf that represents the field in its entirety; like Whitman, it contains multitudes. Birney, moreover, belongs to a period of Canadian literary history that for all readers is increasingly remote and to many decidedly unpalatable. Despite his long life (1904-95) and his extended literary career, which lasted roughly from the late 1930s to the mid-1980s, Birney is associated primarily with a nationalist phase of Canadian literature that stretched from the end of the Second World War to the 1980s — the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 is a convenient if fictive end point — and that was in no small part a consequence or concoction of the Massey Report of 1951. (This is not to suggest that Birney himself was a nationalist in an uncomplicated sense.) Public and academic reassessments of Canadian history and culture in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its *Final Report* (2015), which in the interest of brevity could be described as an emerging consensus about the colonial and genocidal nature of the Canadian state, have made unappealing the often celebratory tone of Centennial-era criticism.[13] Authors of the time, oblivious in the main to what would come to be called Indigenous concerns, are liable now to seem irrelevant or worse. *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* was noteworthy in 1962 — it would be perverse to argue otherwise — but its interest may no longer be self-evident. In Birney's "Captain Cook," the British explorer

meets his demise in Kealakekua Bay: "he felt the spear leap through his back / and sank to explore his last reef" (*Ice* 13). At the end of the poem, the ship is "Luffed," turned into the wind, but its captain is not loved. There is ample opportunity for an account of the poem's anti-colonial sensibilities, but perhaps any focus on James Cook, even as he appears in this ironic representation, is less germane than it might once have seemed.[14] Commentators on Canadian literature and culture have bigger fish to fry (but not Frye).

Nor do contemporary writers demonstrate in their poetry or criticism a strong interest in Birney. Jim Johnstone, a poet who edited *The Essential Earle Birney* (2014), a slim selection of poems, is the rule-proving exception. In the quasi-Eliotic terms of Nick Mount, Birney cannot be a canonical poet if living authors do not engage his work. Attempting to show the existence of literary continuities established by Canadian writers themselves, as opposed to those perceived only by critics, Mount distinguishes, in an essay on the Canadian tradition, between the present era of Canadian literature and the past:

> Young Canadian poets, said Leo Kennedy in 1928, have "no worthwhile tradition of their own." . . . "In most parts of Canada," said Mordecai Richler for novelists in 1961, "only Mazo de la Roche and snow have been there before you." . . . But the field has since changed dramatically, precisely because of the achievements of the writers, publishers, teachers, civil servants, and readers of the CanLit Boom, the literature and the literary infrastructure they created and left behind. Canadian writers now have actual ancestors, actual influences, actual traditions. Unlike the kind of tradition that T.S. Eliot had in mind . . . , it is not one that writers must know, and there is more than one of them. But it is now there for them to use if they like, and on the evidence [of] my reading over the last twenty years or so, some are doing just that.[15] ("Tradition" 255)

Although Mount finds "evidence" of recent interest in historical Canadian authors, nothing in his article suggests Birney's vitality. He recognizes that the term "tradition," even if understood in the plural, is somewhat misleading: "[T]o write within a Canadian tradition does not necessarily mean following the past; it can also mean challenging the past, reinventing the past for present purposes" (267). Yet even this inclusive definition does not help Birney's cause: no one is emulating him, no one is responding to him, no one is refusing him. *Ice Cod*

Bell or Stone is simultaneously assured of a place in the canon — an encyclopedist or literary historian would be required at least to mention Birney, and therefore his books all retain a degree of consequence — and moribund to the extent that it lacks readers, especially those capable of creative response. This is an ironic canonicity at best. A critical task thus comes into view: to re-examine, in a sense to re-review, *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* and books like it. To remember and reassess.

My observations concerning Birney's relative neglect are a footnote to Paul Martin's *Sanctioned Ignorance: The Politics of Knowledge Production and the Teaching of the Literatures of Canada* (2013), a gloomy but supremely interesting study of Canadian literature as it is disseminated in the classrooms of post-secondary institutions. Martin is distressed above all by the problem of the two literary solitudes, the teaching of Canadian literature in English in isolation from Canadian literature in French and vice versa, but he identifies further troubles that beset the profession, including unawareness of past scholarship and a looming loss of first-hand knowledge of the origins of the field (xxvi).[16] His inquiry into teaching practices suggests that fiction and contemporary literature are emphasized at the expense of other genres and earlier writing (118, 175).[17] Works in languages other than English and French, which could be taught in translation, have practically no institutional presence. In addition, Martin notes a general falling off in the teaching of Canadian literature:

> In English [Canadian] universities, the place of Canadian literature in English departments has not markedly improved since the 1970s. While there is today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, undoubtedly, a presence of Canadian content in introductory or genre-based English courses where there may have been none before, the number and variety of Canadian literature courses ha[ve] remained nearly the same since its period of rapid growth in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In fact, during the 1990s and 2000s, the number of Canadian literature courses has declined at many universities. The lack of variety in the types of Canadian literature courses offered, a predicament caused primarily by the reluctance of many departments to depart in any way from the model of the all-inclusive survey course they have relied on since introducing their first courses on Canadian literature, is even more troubling. (105-06)

Martin demonstrates that Canadian literature as a subject in the undergraduate classroom is a highly constrained version of Canadian literature in its most comprehensive sense. (Possibly the situation has improved since 2013, but I doubt it.) What takes place in the lecture hall does not dictate what occurs in scholarship, but it is not hard to see how diminished pedagogical attention to poets of the mid-twentieth century is likely to lead indirectly to their marginal status in criticism. The decline of Canadian studies is tied furthermore to the general decline of English and the erosion of the professoriate in the humanities. Professors are professional rememberers, and without a critical mass of Canadianists disciplinary memory will become attenuated. Yet my intention is not to elegize Canadian literature, especially if a decrease in Canadian literature courses has been accompanied by an overdue increase in courses on Indigenous literatures, nor is it to mourn Birney's disappearance from the curriculum. My point throughout this essay is merely that Canadianists, as a community of researchers and teachers, have failed to come to terms with the relation of the field to history and even to the recent past.

Assessing Birney's career, Iain Higgins concluded that he was "not a great poet, but a good one" (199). I am susceptible to the argument that life is too short to read good but not great poetry, but of course the question of greatness can never be settled. Nor is aesthetic excellence, however judged, the only reason for reading. But in the end all critics make evaluative decisions, choosing for a multitude of legitimate reasons which authors, books, poems, and stories to teach, to recommend, to examine, to anthologize. Discrimination and selection are inseparable from our professional activities, even if we say *This is useful* or *This is representative* instead of or as well as *This is good* or *bad* or *good but not great*. Judgment, moreover, is omnipresent in the life of every reader. I am reminded of a remark made by Richard Greene: "No reader can be responsive to all the threads of writing spooled out in a busy culture. I have my preferences, and as Sam Solecki, an expert on Canadian poetry, says, 'Only the auctioneer likes everything'" (224). In what remains of this essay, I endeavour to suggest ways in which *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* rewards rereading — why, in a word, the poems are worth remembering.

*

Birney was exasperated by the notoriety of "David" (see, e.g., Birney and Purdy 251, 308-10; Cameron 376-77, 508-10), but he also abetted the poem's fame, writing about it at length, for example, in *The Cow Jumped over the Moon: The Writing and Reading of Poetry* (1972). A narrative, allegorical poem, "David" was in most respects an anomaly. Birney was not primarily a singer of tales, a bard, but a manipulator or mechanic of language, of words and even of individual letters. To my mind, Higgins is correct in his characterization of Birney as "a maker of moving word-things" (199). To read *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* is to become immersed not only in the various locales of the poems of travel, the cities and states in Mexico most notably, but also in the poet's fascination with the estranging effects of the disruption of grammatical, syntactical, and typographical norms. A sense of playfulness attends the unquotable arrangements of "Appeal to a Lady with a Diaper" and "Njarít," poems that readers must take or leave; the games either appeal or they don't. Yet in some ways Birney's poems are formally conservative or, to put it more charitably, engaged in dialogue with conventions of English verse. An instance of late modernism, *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* is distinct from the so-called confessional poetry of Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, from the various manifestations of the New American Poetry, and, in Canada, from the *Tish* group and the emerging vernacular mode associated with Al Purdy. Its modern aspects were already passé, but in retrospect they can be appreciated, both on their own terms and as part of the hodgepodge of styles in use at the time. If Birney was out of step with (some) other poets, still in a transitional phase before his later embracing of more *au courant* experimentation, he was also part of a wider reckoning with the poetic past, the messiness of which can be obscured by the neat separation — a critical convenience — of postmodernism from modernism.

Birney's traditional musical sense is used effectively in "The Bear on the Delhi Road" (*Ice* 11), which employs a series of rhymes, arranged both within and at the ends of lines, to structure what appears on first glance to be a formally undistinguished display of free verse: "bear"/"air"/"bare"/"spare"/"wear," "flicks"/"stick," "hills"/"kill," "here"/"Kashmir," "galvanic"/"dance"/"tranced"/"prance"/"ants"/"dancing," "claws"/"paw"/"deodars." In fact, the poem insists upon these patterns of sound, evoking the very music to which the bear dances. The almost whimsical mood created by the rhyme and the marked alliteration — always in Birney's poetry tied to his scholarly training as a medievalist — stands at odds with the disturbing spectacle that is

the poem's primary subject, a bear trained by force to perform. (The poem is sympathetic to the captors, who depend on the bear for their livelihood, as well as to the animal itself.) The sonic qualities are also at variance with an unsettling proposition in the final stanza: "It is not easy to free / myth from reality" (11). This assertion signals certain primary themes of *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*: namely that people are trapped in cycles of exploitation and degradation, that travel involves disillusion as much as edification, and that the traveller's impulsive interpretations are likely to be mistaken. In the poem's first line, the bear is "Unreal, tall as a myth" — or tall as a tale, one might say. But soon Birney, attending to the bear's "shaggy body," allows reality to intrude.

Rhyme is also prominent in a cluster of other poems in *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*: "Aluroid," "Ellesmereland," "First Tree for Frost," "The Travelling Workers' Curse," "Wake Island," "Wind-Chimes in a Temple Ruin," "Pachucan Miners," "Six-Sided Square: Actopan," and "Conducted Ritual: San Juan de Ulúa."[18] It is used for satirical or comical effect in "Vitus Bering," "Can. Lit.," and "Answers to a Grade-School Biology Test." Even in 1962 Birney's commitment to poetic convention was strong, although in fairness the poems adapt or manipulate traditional elements instead of simply adopting them. The engagement of tradition is evident in "Oldster" (36), Hopkinsian in style and theme. Cameron suggests that the very term used for the title marked Birney as out of date (422). The subject of "Oldster" is an aged poplar or an old man-as-tree; "Binsey Poplars" is an obvious antecedent, and the proximity of "Binsey" to "Birney" might have appealed to the poet's sense of humour. Birney's "dappling" — "dappling somehow . . . / his olive hide with a pithy comment of scars" — inevitably brings Hopkins to mind. The word in its various forms was particularly resonant for Hopkins, as in the phrases "dapple-dawn-drawn" ("The Windhover"), "dappled things" ("Pied Beauty"), and "dappled with dew" ("Inversnaid") (30, 30, 51). Heavily accented phrases in "Oldster" mimic patterns of stress associated with the special prosody of the English poet: "the green sheen spent," "the bare air at a wren's puff," "wrung and flung from the root and fruit of him." (In "God's Grandeur," in contrast, "nature is never spent" [Hopkins 27].) It is reasonable to assume that Birney intended these echoes to be heard by readers reared on the English tradition, the poem signalling not indeterminate influence but rather the view that poetry is both created and understood in light of the canon. Moving from style to style restlessly, Birney was a skilled impersonator for whom

imitation was, however, no mere trick but instead a means of invigorating or even instigating his own poems. Thus the term "lethewards," appearing wholly out of context in the poem "Bangkok Boy" (*Ice* 29), is not simply an English professor's affectation — an unmistakable borrowing from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" — but another demonstration of the principle that the tradition in which Birney was educated and of which, as a teacher, he was an exponent was perpetually available to be ransacked and redeployed. Meanwhile, a shared vocabulary — "dancing," "dances," "paws," "Prance," "bare," "leap," "joy" (28, 29) — suggests that "Bangkok Boy" forms a pair with "The Bear on the Delhi Road." The word-hoard was for Birney a bottomless resource. At times, his command of the literary past is put to comical use, as in "Twenty-Third Flight," a parody of Psalm 23 that anticipates Purdy's "When I Sat Down to Play the Piano," from *North of Summer: Poems from Baffin Island* (1967), but as often as not pastiche and allusion are used for more serious purposes.

The presence in Birney's poetry of Hopkins, among others, matters for its own sake: it is part of the puzzle of understanding the chameleonic Birney's style. But the broader relevance lies in the matter of how poetic tradition, canonicity, and influence have been understood in the Canadian context. To answer with a historical perspective the questions "What is poetry in Canada?" and "How have poets in Canada conceptualized their art?" it helps, in some small measure, to remember that Birney at one point or another drew on certain models. The details add up, creating a basis for literary histories. As Birney's poems reveal their debt to the tradition, they also suggest connections to his earlier works. Such links constitute one of the best defences of *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*, the later poems illuminating historical and geographical interests on display in the poems on which his reputation was founded. Although in "Captain Cook" Birney does not refer to the Strait of Anian by name, the punning description of "that pike-straight giants' channel / cleaving the continent" (*Ice* 12) is of a piece with other references to the fictive geography of the West Coast, the most crucial of which occurs in "Pacific Door," another poem in which Cook appears:

> Here Spaniards and Vancouver's boatmen scrawled
> the problem that is ours and yours
> that there is no clear Strait of Anian
> to lead us easy back to Europe

that men are isled in ocean or in ice
and only joined by long endeavour to be joined[.] (*One* 57-58)

"Pacific Door" belongs to Birney's third volume of poems, *The Strait of Anian* (1948), the title of which confirms the importance in his imagination of the "channel" and its evocations. Another example of resemblance occurs in the last stanza of "State of Sonora," beautifully composed, which suggests a connection to "Vancouver Lights" and its "quilt of lamps" (*One* 40):

At dusk off Guaymas, where sharp-
winged and zinc-white pelicans
skim to the quick blaze of marlin
leaping from sapphire swells,
the fishermen turn backs gnarled
as turtles on the day sizzling
into the Sea of Cortez
and point home for the lights diamonding
in chalky huts on the timeless
cliffs, their stark boats slapping
over the flattening rollers that smack
and are bounced back
by the guano-glazed islands. (*Ice* 41)

Here Birney fancies that people can find their place in the vast world, a consoling notion distinct from the existential bleakness of poems such as "Ellesmereland" and "Captain Cook."

As this juxtaposition of poems implies, *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* is a book of the north and the south. Indeed, it suggests a contrast between the aridity of the extreme north and the vitality and culture of the south. In the poem of the same name, Ellesmereland is an Ultima Thule, an utterly inhospitable place — "No man is settled on that coast" (22) — without prospect of human occupation. The same can be said of the most extreme south: compare "the bonewhite icefalls" of Antarctica in "Captain Cook" (12) to the "ice / that grinds [the] meagre sands" of Ellesmereland (22). In "Vitus Bering," the north is similarly associated with "infinity," "a nothingness of fog and gull-cries" (17), not because Birney is ignorant of the existence of actual northern places — the poem, which names Kamchatka, Alaska, and the Aleutian Islands, takes as its subject the history of tsarist Russian expansion — but because the far north like the far west is conducive to a poetic consideration of

hubris and the limits of human knowledge and agency.[19] (In his own life, the far wests of Alberta and British Columbia were not for Birney mythical regions but places of actual residence.) These and other northern poems, including "First Tree for Frost" and "Snowscape from a Plane" (the second of the "Two Poems from the Chinese"), allow further comparison to Purdy's *North of Summer* (see Djwa, "Al Purdy" 52-53), while the Mexican poems in *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* are notable precedents for Purdy's numerous poems set in Mexico, as found in *Wild Grape Wine* (1968), a book dedicated to Birney, *The Stone Bird* (1981), *Piling Blood* (1984), and elsewhere.

Not everything in *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* is a matter of intertextual relation or thematic complexity. "Wind-Chimes in a Temple Ruin" is a simple poem that describes "the birth of the possible / song in the rafter" (37) — that is, the sound of the titular chimes. Brief, delicate, pretty, it epitomizes the difficulty of writing about poetry, the heresy of paraphrase. Whereas "Sinaloa" with its accented English — "Si, señor, is halligators here, your guidebook say it" (42) — and "Njarít" with its formal eccentricity confirm Birney's linguistic ingenuity but are likely to be found quizzical or merely interesting, "Wind-Chimes in a Temple Ruin" is among the handful of poems in *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* that require no apology or explication, a lyric for the sake of lyric.[20]

Birney was multi-faceted. He was a poet, novelist, verse dramatist, memoirist, and critic; a late modernist and an early postmodernist; a political radical and an establishment figure; a traditionalist and a stylistic innovator; a luminary who at times believed himself to be peripheral (see Birney and Purdy 237-30). His writing opens on to a range of potentially fruitful critical concerns, topics that have not been exhausted despite, in some cases, their familiarity. They include, to name a few, the ever-present issue of the nation and nationalism vis-à-vis Canadian literary studies; portrayals of colonization, settlement, and the limits of the nation-state, especially in relation to the unceded territories occupied by the city of Vancouver (see McCall) and to the West more generally; the cosmopolitanism or transnationalism of Canadian writers and their works; genealogies of innovation and avant-gardism in Canadian poetry; Canadian authors, military service, and trauma; Canadian modernism in relation to modernism elsewhere and to other phases of Canadian literary history; the institutions of Canadian literature (journals, departments of English, the teaching of creative writing); and textual concerns related to editions and anthologies (see Irvine and Kamboureli;

on Birney's "Bushed," see McFarlane). Birney is pertinent in a variety of ways. And it is not as if he is utterly invisible, Dougal McNeill having proposed in 2018 "a way of reading Birney for our own interests now, of locating in his modernist nationalism the tools for its own critique" (42). But it is also the seeming irrelevance of *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* that I seek to assert and prize as a possible source of unanticipated ideas. The appropriate degree of interest in a writer's works can never be decreed from on high; neglect cannot be achieved by fiat. Instead, consensus emerges over time. Overlooked works await readers who will find in them unexpected items of interest, disrupting that consensus and redirecting the discourse of the present.

On reflection, I find *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* to be frustrating as well as rewarding, a book that, despite the satisfaction granted by poems such as "Wind-Chimes in a Temple Ruin," tends to hold readers at arm's length. Birney's experiments will never appeal to everyone. But that is beside the point with which I conclude, namely that the book and others like it oblige critics to recognize that Canadian literary studies are afflicted by forgetfulness. What should we do with a past that has faded from view and that may embarrass us if we recall it? *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* is a moderately old and largely forgotten book of exuberant poems that, despite my previous paragraph, have little immediate connection to contemporary politics. It would be a critical mistake, I believe, to value the poems only as biographical and historical documents, part of the textual record produced by a once-eminent author. As I have attempted to show, plenty remains to be said about the book and its poems in terms of style and theme as well as context. Yet I am less concerned to defend *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* from neglect than to resist the tyranny of the presentist perspective, the view that Canadian literature is essentially a contemporary phenomenon and the accompanying conviction that whatever history there may be is easily digested, even as it must be allowed that presentist outlooks often permit advances in scholarship. The simplification of literary-historical intricacies does a disservice not only to poets, whose careers are reduced to a handful of ostensibly representative works, but also to readers, who lose sight of the variety and vibrancy of any literary moment. No reader can hold in mind every book ever published, every poem ever written, but each literary work represents the possibility of meaningful critical exploration; books are full of potential, and critics might well turn to the unexamined for inspiration, to use an outmoded

term. In short, I am advocating a mode of reading that is at once historical and judicious, capacious and evaluative.

Birney's poetry is not a lively topic in Canadian literary studies — that much is apparent. A cursory look at recent issues of *Canadian Literature* and *Studies in Canadian Literature*, the leading journals in the field, suggests, in addition to an impressive breadth of authors examined, a clear bias toward contemporary writing and a less pronounced preference for genres other than poetry.[21] My aim is not for attention to be drawn away from any writer but for the circle of critical interest to be widened. Birney's poetry will probably remain the province of true specialists. In itself, this is no extraordinary injustice: such is the fate of virtually all authors over time. Canadian writers, furthermore, rarely command attention outside the country. But there is cause for alarm if even experts in Canadian literature consign Birney to oblivion. *Someone* needs to remember him; every poet needs a champion or, better, a company of enthusiasts. I returned *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* to its place on the shelf, enlivened by revisiting it and newly hopeful that other commentators will be compelled to pick it up. And I remain hopeful too that others will explore the far reaches of their own shelves. We who forget the past so quickly can scarcely say what pleasures and ideas browsing will prompt, what glimpses of the complexity of our literary past rereading will provide.

Author's Note

I am grateful to the journal's anonymous reviewers, whose perceptive comments helped me to clarify aspects of this essay.

Notes

[1] The cover, half-title, and title-page spread are illustrated with repeating images — icons, perhaps — of the four titular elements (see Higgins 198).

[2] The preceding volume of poems was *Trial of a City and Other Verse* (1952). A similar strategy was employed with Birney's *Fall by Fury and Other Makings* (1978), described on the back cover as his "first collection of new poems in five years," and the author as "A man whose name is synonymous with poetry, a writer whose popularity cuts across generations and geographical boundaries." The publisher in both cases was McClelland and Stewart.

[3] Birney's first two books of poetry, *David and Other Poems* (1942) and *Now Is Time*

(1945), each won the Governor General's Award. The fallow period was "the seven-year dry spell between *Down the Long Table* (1955) [a novel] and *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*" (Ferres 109).

[4] Sam Solecki's estimation of Birney's lasting poems is illustrative and not altogether idiosyncratic: "[T]here is no doubt that it ['David'] forms the cornerstone of Birney's reputation. . . . By its side I would place the following poems: 'Anglosaxon street,' 'The road to Nijmegen,' 'Mappemounde' (a Purdy favourite), 'Canada: case history: 1945,' 'Bushed,' 'Ellesmereland I,' 'A walk in Kyoto,' 'The bear on the Delhi road,' 'El Greco: *Espolio*,' 'November walk near False Creek mouth,' and 'For Wailan'" (12). Of this dozen, four poems are from *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*.

[5] *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* should have appeared in 1960 but was delayed until 1962, first by McClelland and Stewart and then by a piqued Birney (Cameron 419); it collects poems written largely in the period 1958-60 (see Cameron 392-93, 405-09). It is consequently instructive to compare *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* with noteworthy books that precede it by a few years, such as Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* and Gary Snyder's *Riprap*, both published in 1959 (see Cameron 410). The acknowledgements page in *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* lists, in accordance with convention, "journals in which some of the verses . . . first appeared" (57). Many of them were prominent and prestigious venues, such as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Massachusetts Review*, *New Yorker* (all in the United States), *London Magazine*, *New Statesman* (United Kingdom), *Canadian Forum*, *Queen's Quarterly*, and *Tamarack Review* (Canada). Birney's CV was not to be trifled with.

[6] "David," first published in *Canadian Forum* in December 1941, became the title poem of *David and Other Poems*. It appears in various contemporary anthologies, including Robert Lecker's *Open Country: Canadian Poetry in English* (2008) and Brian Trehearne's *Canadian Poetry 1920 to 1960* (2010). The other poems by Birney in *Open Country* are "Anglosaxon Street," "Vancouver Lights," "Bushed," "The Bear on the Delhi Road," "Can. Lit.," "El Greco: *Espolio*," and "November Walk near False Creek Mouth" (see Lecker 163-83). The other poems by Birney in *Canadian Poetry* are "Slug in Woods," "Anglosaxon Street," "Vancouver Lights," "The Road to Nijmegen," "Bushed," "The Bear on the Delhi Road," and "El Greco: *Espolio*" (see Trehearne 114-32). Somewhat surprisingly, however, "David" is not reprinted in any edition of the standard anthology edited by Donna Bennett and Russell Brown. The first volume of *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (1982; see Brown and Bennett 397-413) prints a generous selection of Birney's poems: "Vancouver Lights," "Anglosaxon Street," "Mappemounde," "The Ebb Begins from Dream," "Pacific Door," "Bushed," "Can. Lit.," "A Walk in Kyoto," "The Bear on the Delhi Road," "El Greco: *Espolio*," "Buildings 2," "She Is," "Fall by Fury," and "My Love Is Young." *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (1990; see Brown et al. 290-300) includes "Vancouver Lights," "Anglosaxon Street," "The Ebb Begins from Dream," "Bushed," "Can. Lit.," "A Walk in Kyoto," "The Bear on the Delhi Road," and "El Greco: *Espolio*." *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (2002; see Bennett and Brown 378-87) contains "Vancouver Lights," "Anglosaxon Street," "The Ebb Begins from Dream," "Pacific Door," "Bushed," "Can. Lit.," and "El Greco: *Espolio*." In *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (2010; see Bennett and Brown 439-49), the same seven poems appear, accompanied by "Newfoundland." The most recent edition (2019; see Bennett and Brown 358-68) includes "Vancouver Lights," "Mappemounde," "The Ebb Begins from Dream," "Pacific Door," "Bushed," "Can. Lit.," "El Greco: *Espolio*," and "Buildings 2." The following poems appear in *Canadian Literature in English: Texts and Contexts* (2009; see Moss and Sugars 112-25): "Anglosaxon Street," "Canada: Case History: 1945," "Can. Lit.," "Bushed," "The Bear on the Delhi Road," "UP HER CAN NADA," "i accuse us," and "Canada: Case History: 1973." The *Broadview Introduction to Literature* (2015; see Chalykoff et al. 657-59) includes "Vancouver Lights" and "The Bear on the Delhi Road" but not "David." On the

ubiquity and limitations of Bennett and Brown, see Martin (80-82). On the anthologies of Lecker and of Moss and Sugars, see Martin (82-83).

[7] On this point, I concur with Paul Martin: "[I]n English Canada we have not done enough to combat the isolation that develops while we teach in our own institutions, focus on our own research, and devote much of our attention to our own students" (xxi). COVID-19 did not help matters.

[8] "Bushed": "And now he could only / bar himself in and wait / for the great flint to come singing into his heart" (*One* 67). "Captain Cook": "he felt the spear leap through his back" (*Ice* 13).

[9] Complimented: Birney "deserves reading not because he is a Canadian poet, but because he is a poet who is publishing some of the first-rate poems of our time" (Guy 433). Praised: "*Ice Cold* [sic] *Bell or Stone* marks a tremendous access of vision and technique, and proves that the lack of ghosts is, properly speaking, immaterial to a poet as good as this" (West 14).

[10] Iain Higgins deemed *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* Birney's "finest single book" but noted that it "was not especially well received . . . and [was] loudly panned by Robin Skelton, amongst others" (197; on Skelton's reviews, see Cameron 422-23, 447-49). Elspeth Cameron likewise notes its "lukewarm" reception (422). Some critics have been kinder. According to Paul West, it is "Birney's finest . . . achievement" (7). In my view, it would be preferable to revive this disagreement rather than to have a lack of interest settle the matter.

[11] See, for example, Colombo (59); Ferres (109); Getz (85-87); Thomas (104).

[12] Recent: see Bradley ("Al Purdy's" 197); Bradley ("Introduction" 11); Djwa ("Al Purdy" 52); Panofsky (119). In several instances, *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* is mentioned only or primarily as the source of the poem "Can. Lit." (Hillger 92-93, 254; McGill 20, 254n47, 285; Mount, *Arrival* 293, 345; Weingarten 47, 48, 259n11, 259n12, 281). This list is not exhaustive; my aim is only to illustrate a tendency and to note that "Can. Lit." is neither the only poem in *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* nor an apposite metonym for the entire volume.

[13] On Canadian literary criticism and its discontents, see Fee; Moss; "60th."

[14] What Birney would have thought of the decapitation in 2021 of a statue of Cook in Victoria can only be imagined, but I propose that as a poet he would have been captivated by the image and etymological irony of a headless captain.

[15] Mount reiterates the essential point elsewhere in the essay. For instance: "on the evidence of their books and interviews, Canadian writers are . . . doing something they did infrequently before this century: learning from, acknowledging, and, yes, responding to earlier Canadian writers" ("Tradition" 257).

[16] As Martin observes passim, the substitution of "Canadian literature in English" for "Canadian literature" occurs far more often than the equation of "Canadian literature in French" with "Canadian literature" *tout court*.

[17] Martin's survey of courses in Canadian literature offered at Canadian universities in the academic year 1997-98 indicates that Birney's *Ghost in the Wheels: Selected Poems* (1977) was taught twice (236). No other book by Birney appears on Martin's list, although it is virtually impossible to know how often poems in anthologies are taught. There is modest evidence that Birney is taught in some form on some occasions (123, 152).

[18] As noted by Sandra Djwa, the predecessor of "Aluroid" is E.J. Pratt's "The Prize Cat" ("Pratt's" 78n12). Djwa astutely emphasizes the presence of Pratt in Birney (72-73), and it is undeniably true that Birney's *The Strait of Anian* (1948) was dedicated to Pratt, as was the relatively late poem "Newfoundland," from *Rag and Bone Shop* (1971), when it appeared in *The Collected Poems of Earle Birney* (1975). Letters between Birney and Al Purdy suggest that, although both poets came to view Pratt as a writer of limited powers, Birney retained an unfashionable regard for the senior figure: "I happen to think Pratt, for all his shortcomings, was our best till you on the score of *language*," he wrote to Purdy late in 1973 (Birney

and Purdy 293). The comparison to Pratt, intended as a compliment, had to be preceded by a disclaimer: "[N]o, I'm not insulting you" (293).

[19] "David" is relevant here ("heedless // Of handhold"), although the catastrophic fall in that poem, precipitated by a "crumbled . . . foothold," is arguably caused by misfortune rather than human error (*One* 37); the Rockies are notorious among climbers for loose rock.

[20] D.G. Jones defends the "typographical peculiarities" of "Njarít": "Partly a matter of imitative form, partly a kind of formal architecture, they provide an added aesthetic dimension for eye, ear, and mind. Sceptical at first, I have found it one of the most intriguing and satisfying poems in the book" (468).

[21] The issues that I consulted are *Canadian Literature* nos. 237-39, 2019; nos. 240-43, 2020; and nos. 244-47, 2021-22, and *Studies in Canadian Literature* vol. 44, nos. 1-2, 2019; vol. 45, nos. 1-2, 2020; and vol. 46, nos. 1-2, 2021. I list only English-language authors here. Special issues have a distorting effect; I intend this list to be illustrative rather than definitive. Asterisks indicate that an author was the subject of more than one article.

Authors examined in *Canadian Literature* include Jordan Abel, Nathan Adler, Anita Rau Badami, Will R. Bird, Maria Campbell, Warren Cariou, Anne Carson, David Chariandy, Kevin Chong, Peter Christensen, Stephen Collis, Jeff Derksen, Cherie Dimaline, Omar El Akkad, Mathew Henderson, Lawrence Hill, Nalo Hopkinson, Philip Huynh, Frances Itani, Kevin Kerr, Thomas King, Roy Kiyooka, Robert Kroetsch, Sarah Leavitt, Jen Sookfong Lee, Roy Miki, L.M. Montgomery, Erin Moure, Alice Munro*, Cecily Nicholson, Louise Penny, David Alexander Robertson, John K. Samson, Charles R. Saunders, Stephen Scobie, Donna Smyth, Fred Stenson, Souvankham Thammavongsa, Madeleine Thien, Miriam Toews, Katherena Vermette*, Fred Wah, Rita Wong*, Catriona Wright, and Rachel Zolf. In addition, special sections were devoted to Thammavongsa, Canisia Lubrin, and Hoa Nguyen.

Authors examined in *Studies in Canadian Literature* include Margaret Atwood*, Lesley Belleau, Christian Bök, Maria Campbell, Anne Carson*, Wayson Choy, Cherie Dimaline, Farzana Doctor, David Eastham, Marian Engel, Sylvia Fraser, Sue Goyette, Sylvia D. Hamilton, Pauline Johnson, Thomas King, Helen Knott, Larissa Lai*, Margaret Laurence, SKY Lee, Jeff Lemire, Tracey Lindberg*, Ann-Marie MacDonald*, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Alastair MacLeod, Lee Maracle*, Daphne Marlatt, Karen McBride, Rohinton Mistry, Shani Mootoo, Pamela Mordecai, Erin Moure*, Alice Munro, Heather O'Neill, M. NourbeSe Philip, Nikki Reimer, Gregory Scofield*, Leanne Simpson, Aritha van Herk, Joshua Whitehead, Kathleen Winter, Michael Winter, Adele Wiseman, and Rita Wong*.

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