The Al Purdy A-Frame Anthology
Edited by Paul Vermeersch, with an introduction by Dennis Lee

Reviewed by Ronald Charles Epstein

The nineteenth-century journalist Sara Jeannette Duncan referred to her English-language peers as “An Eminently Unliterary People.” This negative attitude towards culture hurt male poets because poetry was dismissed as an irrelevant, effete genre that was beneath a man’s dignity. Alfred Wellington (Al) Purdy, a former factory worker from Loyalist eastern Ontario, became a living refutation of that assertion. He enriched Canadian literature with masculine “regular guy verse,” best exemplified by his popular poem “At the Quinte Hotel.” Eventually, he became one of this country’s literary icons. His A-frame cottage near Roblin Lake, Ontario, outside the locality of Ameliasburgh, was an “inn” for his contemporaries.

After Al Purdy died in 2000, his widow Eurithe, English professor Jean Baird, and others acted to restore his home for future generations of Canadian writers. This led to the creation of an anthology that combines the poet’s writings with his peers’ recollections, in order to raise money to achieve this goal.

On one level, this book is a useful fund-raising tool. On another, it recalls the story of how a struggling poet and his wife built their home, using magazine plans, salvaged materials and donated labour.

The literary scholar may be interested in this book because it posits the idea that the house-building process turned a mediocre poet, uprooted by stints in the RCAF, Vancouver and Montreal, into an acknowledged master who found his true voice when he reclaimed his roots.

Children’s poet Dennis Lee presents the proof in his introductory article. He contrasts the simple style of Purdy’s early poem “Rattlesnake” with the evocation from his excerpt “The Country North of Belleville.” The former describes the reptile as “A sliver of Satan annoyed by the din” (14). The contrast between this stilted description and the subtlety of “Old fences drift vaguely among the trees/ a pile of moss-covered stones” (14) supports Lee’s point.
Such development can be easily misinterpreted. Purdy’s first book was published in 1944, years before he began his project. It might be safer to state that he was not transformed into a poet, but that he rose “to the next level.”

Inevitably, a mission to preserve a vital aspect of Prince Edward County’s cultural history will lead readers to examine the crucial relationship between the poet and the land that he loved.

In “Ontario,” the poet proves to be its best interpreter. For example, he notes that “People around there have voted Conservative since the last shot was fired in the American Revolution” (36).

Purdy offers wry observations, but the reader must ferret out the dynamics of his relationship to his region. His verse displays a keen awareness of the fact that its farms did not support all its settlers. This led him to assume that opportunity lay elsewhere, especially in Montreal, which was Canada’s largest city in the 1950s. Unfortunately, he discovered that “I was a failure at writing plays/ a failure at anything in Montreal/ poems plays prose and just being a human being” (84). His destiny was contrarian – he failed where other people succeeded and succeeded in a land that did not offer abundant opportunities for success.

Other authors enrich this work by adding stories, insights, and perspectives. The biggest disappointment is “A-Frame 60s Scene,” Margaret Atwood’s lamely whimsical cartoon. Fortunately, Michael Ondaatje’s recollection, “Because We Were Poets,” refers to their relationship by citing Atwood’s book’s dedication “To Awful Al from Perfect Peggy” (142) as an amusing confrontation between the feminist and the macho.

David W. McFadden’s excerpt from A Trip Around Lake Ontario is more substantial, but also more problematic. He calls Purdy “Chesley Yarn” (117), which suggests a fictionalized memoir, but a reference to colleague Irving Layton confuses the issue.

“This Inn Is Free” is poet F.R. Scott’s more successful tribute to the poet and his property. It amuses savvy readers with capitalized references to their literary works, acknowledging a subtle rivalry beneath the obvious tribute.

The text is supplemented by vintage photographs, cartoons, and even some architectural drawings. All were included to recreate his rough, rural homestead. Although the members of the Al Purdy A-Frame Trust would appreciate support from any quarter, including the floor plans may not appeal to builders. The project was
inspired by magazine articles, which does not make that house a vital part of our architectural heritage.

This book may successfully serve its purpose, but it already contributes useful information about one of Canada’s great poets. Al Purdy is now honoured by his peers, in one way or another.

Ronald Charles Epstein met Al Purdy at Ontario poetry readings.

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