**Birney, (Alfred) Earle (1904-1995)**

Earle Birney was a Canadian poet, novelist, dramatist, and professor of the twentieth century. He was born in Calgary and spent his childhood in rural Alberta and British Columbia. His adult life was spent in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and in global travel. He died in Toronto. Birney’s poetics were shaped by his training in Old English and Middle English as well as avant-garde experimentation with typography, orthography, dialect, and sound media. Following training at the University of British Columbia, the University of Toronto, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of London, he accepted a professorship in the Department of English at the University of British Columbia in 1946. His teaching led to the founding of the Department of Creative Writing at University of British Columbia in 1965; in the same year, he departed to the University of Toronto to serve as the first writer in residence. In the following decades, he served as a writer in residence at many institutions.

Birney’s poetry was given the Governor General Award twice, for *David and Other Poems* (1942) and for *Now is Time* (1946). He received the Order of Canada in 1970. Much of his work concerns revolutionary politics and travel experiences, but some of his best-known poems concern western North America. These poems focus on regionally-specific places such as the Canadian Rockies and the city of Vancouver to explore larger issues such as individual freedoms and responsibilities, the nature of Canadian literature, and environmental degradation.

His manifesto, “Living art, like anything else, stays alive only by changing” (*The Creative Writer* 1966), both affirms and modifies the break with tradition prevalent in modern poetics of the twentieth century. Revision was, for Birney, an important way to keep his poems alive. Throughout his life, he changed many of his poems by replacing punctuation with blank space. See Birney’s Preface to *Ghost in the Wheels: Selected Poems* (1977) for his explanation of creative memory and revision; see *The Collected Poems of Earle Birney* (1975) for the final forms of many of his poems.

“David” (*David and Other Poems* 1942), one of Birney’s most anthologised poems, combines his mountaineering experience in the Canadian Rockies with a dual meditation on the value of wilderness and the dilemma of euthanasia. Read an annotated version of the poem here <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/david>. [Poem copyright of the Estate of Earle Birney; *RPO: Representative Poetry Online* website copyright of the Editors and the University of Toronto.]

“Vancouver Lights” (*David and Other Poems* 1942) presents a mountaineer’s perspective upon the city of Vancouver. The poet, looking down from the mountainside, turns from the “night moonless” that “wimples the mountains,” to the “city throbbing below” that “webs the sable peninsula,” to a vision of atomic disaster, the “fathomless heat of our dwarfdom,” the “Plutonian descendant or beast in the stretching night.” Read the full poem here <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/birney/poem1.htm>. [Poem copyright of the Estate of Earle Birney; *Canadian Poetry Online* website copyright of the University of Toronto and the University of Toronto Libraries, 2000.] This poem demonstrates Birney’s alignment with modern environmental poets such as Robinson Jeffers (cf. Jeffers’s 1937 poem, “The Purse-Seine”).

In 1982, Birney read his poems accompanied by Toronto-based experimental percussion group Nexus in a three-volume collaboration. These recordings are out of print (although available at libraries), but recordings of Birney reading his poetry are available here <http://www.tru.ca/arts/e\_birney/english/multimed/elaloud.htm>. [The *Earle Birney Website: El Greco – Aloud!* copyright of the University College of the Caribou, 1996.]

References and Further Reading:

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*The Collected Poems of Earle Birney*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975.

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Further Reading and Works Cited:

Cameron, Elspeth. *Earle Birney: A Life*. Toronto: Viking, 1994. (Comprehensive biography of Birney’s life and work.)

Jeffers, Robinson. *Such Counsels You Gave to Me: And Other Poems*. New York: Random House, 1937.