

SCL Interviews: Fred Cogswell

David Galloway

This interview with Professor Fred Cogswell is the second in a series which is concerned particularly with those people who have helped to shape Canadian literary and intellectual life since the second world war. The first interview, with Professor Malcolm Ross, appeared in *SCL*, 9, No. 2 (1984).

Poet and scholar, Fred Cogswell, has been writing poetry and criticism for about fifty years. He was born at East Centreville, New Brunswick, on 8 November 1917. Before the war he attended the Provincial Normal School in Fredericton; after five years in the Canadian army during the war, he attended the Universities of New Brunswick and Edinburgh before he returned to the University of New Brunswick to teach English in 1952. For the most part, he has been at the University of New Brunswick ever since.

Dr. Cogswell has published fourteen books of poetry, of which his favourite is *The Stunted Strong* (1954), and five books of translations, of which the most important is *The Poetry of Modern Quebec* (1976). His poems have appeared in about one hundred magazines in Canada, the United States, Great Britain, Australia and India, and in numerous anthologies. From 1961 to 1981 he was sole publisher of *Fiddlehead Poetry Books*, during which time he published three hundred and seven volumes of verse.

He was a founding member and member of the Executive of the Independent Publishers Association (now the Association of Canadian Publishers), of which he is the only honorary life member, the Literary Press Group, and the Atlantic Publishers' Association.

Fred Cogswell holds honorary doctorates from Acadia and St. Francis Xavier universities and is a member of the Order of Canada.

INTERVIEW WITH FRED COGSWELL

conducted by David Galloway,
his friend and colleague of thirty seven years.

D.G.: Fred, I'm going to begin with a question which I should not ask most poets, because I should be afraid of getting a trite and pompous answer from some of them. Why do you write poetry?

F.C.: I think that one of the reasons why I write poetry is that I find prose very hard to write. The problem with prose is that when you want to make something out of your own experience—what you have felt, what you have done, what you have seen—there are so many different ways in which you can do it, that it's like trying to go off in some particular direction without a map or shape to indicate where you are to go; whereas, if you have a poem to write you have a definite form of some kind, so that the moment that you start to write the form helps you to put your experience into some kind of comparable shape. I know that this doesn't work for everybody, but for me it does. When I write something in verse I can put the essentials in—or what I think are the essentials. I can get them into a form where they seem to fit; but if I try to express the same kind of thing in prose there are a lot of non-essentials mixed in with the essentials—a lot of chaos which doesn't suit me as much as the result does when I try to do the same thing in poetry. I think it's because I'm too lazy to work hard enough at prose that I write poetry.

D.G.: I'd like to get to that question of form and concentration of effort in a little while. We've said to one another many times that, although we weren't exactly "nursed upon the self-same hill," we were nursed on much of the self-same literature—the novels of Dickens, Scott, Stevenson, Sir Gilbert Parker; King Arthur and his Knights; *The Boy's Own Paper*, and so on. Was reading a kind of escape for you to the wider regions down the river Saint John, and how has that early reading influenced your life and work?

F.C.: It was and was not an escape. In one sense it was an escape because the books that I read when I was in my teens were in many ways more real and more satisfactory to me than the social and other experiences which I was having in the settlement where I lived. So, consequently, I suppose, in that sense it was an escape, and, in another

sense it was not, because the values which were in that particular literature became a part of my values as well, and I tended to judge other people and to judge myself by them. To a certain degree, of course, that was asking for trouble, because I realize now what I did not realize then—that is that when I was a boy I was getting the ideal values of the people who were writing the novels and the ideal values of the society that they represented, and that people in their own lives and society in its own right were not nearly so noble as the writers led me to believe. But there was nobility in them and also in society; so, consequently, it led me ultimately to look for more of these things in our own society and in our own time. And you can find them there too.

D.G.: I think that I have some idea of what you mean. Now, after Centreville and school, there was the old Normal School in Fredericton, the war, and then U.N.B. to which you came with many other veterans. What was the climate of the university and the country at that time? What hopes and fears did the veterans have? How did they adapt themselves to academic life?

F.C.: The climate of the university, when I enrolled in it in 1945, and, in fact, the then climate of Canada, was that of a determined and healthy optimism. Human energy, so long stagnated by the Depression, had been set into motion by the War and now was being turned into constructive channels. For the university professor and for the younger, routine student, the classes from 1945 to 1950 must have been particularly challenging. Not only were the veteran students older, but most of them were motivated by having families, and knowing precisely what their interests in life were. In addition, most of them had experiential reference against which to measure book learning that in many cases their younger fellow students, and even many of their professors, lacked. Moreover, exposure to European ideas had to a great degree ended, among the veterans, the kind of political naïveté which had previously characterized Canadian student life.

Because the veterans reacted so well to academic life, the universities during their time were among the most exciting places of learning to be found in all Canadian academic history.

D.G.: Those student years at U.N.B. saw the beginning of the *Fiddlehead*—with Alfred Bailey, Desmond Pacey, Elizabeth Brewster, Donald Gammon, Frances Firth and a number of other people, including yourself. How important were those early years of the *Fiddlehead* in your own poetic development?

F.C.: I think they were very important. For one thing, you had to write in order to be able to read poems at the meetings. You had also to write up to a certain level in order to avoid the kind of criticism that you received at those meetings, because there were only about ten people allowed in the organization when I first entered it, and they were in by votes of everybody. As the *Fiddlehead* was being put out at that time, none of your poems were in unless everybody approved of them. So, for the sake of shining at the meetings, and for the sake of getting one's poems published, one was on one's very best poetic behaviour and, consequently, if one had a hard time one's self, one tended to be equally hard on the other members when they read their poems or when their poems came up for consideration. It was not exactly a mutual admiration society.

D.G.: If everyone has to agree so democratically, aren't there dangers that . . .

F.C.: (interrupting) There are dangers. Elizabeth Brewster had poems rejected that ultimately appeared in *Poetry Chicago*. I had poems rejected that appeared later—I had one rejected that appeared in *The New Statesman and Nation*.

D.G.: Who were the most ferocious critics in those days? Or were you all ferocious?

F.C.: I think I was one of the most ferocious critics as a matter of fact. It was a form of showing off how clever one was. I wish now that I had not been quite so ferocious because sometimes people, I think, were rather unfairly hurt by my attempts to be clever at their expense.

D.G.: Yes. Once again, I think that I can say that I know what you mean.

F.C.: This happens when one is young.

D.G.: Later on, in the fifties—in 1952—you came back to U.N.B. and became editor of the *Fiddlehead*. There were other little magazines in Canada at that time and just afterwards—some of them rather short-lived. For example, there were *Northern Review*, *First Statement*, *CIV|n* and others. They all seemed to have 'causes.' The *Fiddlehead* didn't really have a 'cause,' or I wasn't aware of one. Do you think that the *Fiddlehead* has received its due among Canadian little magazines? How do you see the *Fiddlehead* over the past thirty or forty years?

F.C.: The *Fiddlehead* did have a cause, but the cause was not well perceived—the cause as I saw it, at least—and I gradually came to be more and more the sole editor. The first few years I used to take the poems, retype them, assign them a number, so that none of the other editors would know who wrote them, and then submit them to five editors, and a majority would agree to publication. You'd be surprised how many celebrated Canadian poets were rejected under this system, how many unknowns were published. But what happened was that gradually, out of default, because it takes a lot of energy to read, grade, and comment on the poems, I became pretty well the sole editor, and I did have a policy. The policy was eclecticism. What I attempted to do was to put into every issue representative poems of almost all the different types and schools of poetry which were then current, including the traditional one. I felt that if somebody reading the magazine who liked School A would see some good in schools B, C, and D, his taste would be broadened accordingly. But what actually happened was that somebody in School A would complain, "Why did you publish this poem in School D?" And somebody in School D would say, "Why in the world did you put in that chap in School A?" So, from that particular point of view, the whole eclectic policy which I did initiate was, I think, probably a failure, and the magazine did not receive as much recognition as it would have received had it had a relatively narrow, exclusive kind of policy of publishing only a particular kind of poem: and I would say, also, that my own conviction is that the editors, consciously, or unconsciously since me, have followed this eclectic policy in much the same way.

D.G.: Yes, I think they have. In a sense, of course, your own reputation has mirrored that of the *Fiddlehead*. I remember people saying that you were too eclectic, too

traditional, and too concerned with the form. What do you think about all that?

F.C.: Well, my own feeling about it is that I know of no art that has not a certain amount of basic things in common, whether you look at art from a traditional point of view or whether you look at it by just looking at the modern. You can find aspects of traditional music in modern music. In other words, forms are not mutually exclusive, and the qualities that make good poetry can be found in traditional poetry. They can be found in some modern poetry. They can be found in prose poetry—prose that is erected on the basis of the paragraph rather than of the line. Consequently, I think that you can make a good cause for eclecticism. Also, the other point, and this is quite an important one, is that people, temperamentally in the way they think and the way their minds work, are often very different. And the person who could have written good poetry in School A might not be able to do anything in School D. So, consequently, if you have many different poems and types of work available, the person is more apt to find something that suits him or her, whereas if everybody is going overboard for just one kind of poetry, just one kind of sensibility, a lot of people are not going to write at all, or they are going to write very badly in another sensibility. In another form they might have written well.

D.G.: On this question of form: in *The Stunted Strong*, of course, the poems are in sonnet form and they do rhyme. I know it's one of your favourites; it's certainly one of mine. The poems do draw a kind of order out of the narrowness of country life. That's one of your forms. What other forms do you feel most comfortable working in? When I say 'comfortable,' of course, I don't necessarily mean 'easy,' I know it isn't easy.

F.C.: There are about four forms. *The Stunted Strong* was done in one of the most traditional of all—the sonnet—and what I used was the Miltonic, Wordsworthian, Petrarchan sonnet, or whatever you want to call it, rather than the Shakespearian, because my mind turns upon irony or the contrast between two things, question and answer, where it is rather classic and simple; whereas what you have to do in the Shakespearian is something three times, and then bring your irony in on the last two lines. I find that more difficult to do than the eight and six divisions. I

found that form good to write in. Then I moved into a form where I used the *haiku*—five, seven, and five syllable very short lines, both as a single poem and as a stanza form for verses. This form was Japanese; and here again the Japanese stanza tended to turn to the ironic contrast or the comparison of two things, two objects, two ideas. So that worked very well. At the moment what I am working in has been the *sestina*—a seven stanza affair which has six-line stanzas and a three-line conclusion. In this form you have to repeat six words in prescribed order seven different times. What I find this does, by having a very long thirty-nine line poem, is that you have to dig very deeply into the emotion and the situation that provokes the poem in order to fill the space to finish it. By having to repeat these words you have to stay on track. So, consequently, the form helped me to stay on track and helped me to think more and to feel more about the particular facet of experience I presented; whereas if I had just simply written a free verse poem, I should have put down a number of bright ideas on the subject, giving one unit of thought to each line unit and then, presto, I would have my poem, and that might have been just a bit too easy.

I think maybe if you try something hard you are apt to come up with something deeper and something more worth the reader's considering, rather than things which come first off the top of your mind, however clever.

- D.G.: Have you ever tried, or have you ever thought of trying, the *habbie* form, your being interested in Burns and Scottish literature?
- F.C.: I have thought of it. I haven't tried it yet. I may yet do that. Actually, the most interesting literature at the moment being produced in Scotland is being written in the Scottish dialect and very often borrowed from the forms which Burns did use. This dialect is a wonderful dialect for domestic situations, for moods, emotions, and for making real the immediate surroundings. What is lacking in it is abstract words that express philosophy. These are almost entirely anglicised.
- D.G.: Abstract words, certain themes, certain symbols, of course, have recurred in your own poetry. An obvious symbol is the cross. Do you find that it's now more diffi-

cult to communicate, using symbols such as that, than it was, say, thirty or forty years ago?

F.C.: It's now more difficult to communicate, period, than it was thirty or forty years ago. When you wrote poetry at the turn of the century, and certainly before that, you knew that most educated people had a background in the classics, had a background in the Bible, had a background in the values which are given to certain symbols which express patriotism, which express love and feeling in human relations, because literate society was fairly homogeneous and not fragmented as it is now. What has happened with speedy communication and with urbanization and with mass media is that most of the things which people held in common are no longer held in common, except for surface sensationalism. So, basically speaking, when you try to communicate now you haven't got the same kind of solid symbols with the weight behind them that you once had. You have to make up your own and you very often have, somehow or other, to arrange them so as to load the situation in such a way that other people, as they read, develop the sense that you get immediately when you see the symbol yourself. And this is very, very hard, and it leads to much of the obscurity in modern poetry because, in a fragmented audience and with a fragmented poet, what you've got to do is to find an audience whose fragments fit your fragments; it's not very easy.

D.G.: And, of course, you're not able, I suppose, to concentrate your thoughts so well when you have to be conscious of that.

F.C.: No, you're not. It used to be that you could just simply say what you thought in the way that was habitual to you, as in the time of Beowulf, if you like, and all the warriors would respond. It isn't like that anymore.

D.G.: Do you think the the so-called revolutions of the sixties speeded up this process of fragmentation. What effect did the sixties have on you and on your generation? More specifically, what effect did they have on literature?

F.C.: The 'protest' movements during the 1960s had an extremely strong effect on university life. In its many manifestations, the 'protest' was essentially a rejection of

conventional and traditional material values, and an attempt to find somewhere else a positive, idealistic substitute. Although, in the long run, all the ideologies of the social revolution of the sixties failed, in the short run their consequence was tremendous in the moral power, the questioning of values, the greater democratization, and the greater imaginative possibilities for human relations, and human living that they unleashed upon the Canadian community. The whole spirit of Canadian literature is the richer for the last of the factors enumerated above. Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending upon the point of view—the kind of built-in ‘honesty’ which was a part of all the movements of the 1960s ultimately destroyed the faith in every hero and every movement produced by the period. The result is that the modern student is tamer, more conservative, and not nearly so creative or so moral in the sense of sacrificing for principle as were his predecessors. The same change in development, it seems to me, has also happened to literature and to literary criticism which, during the past decade and a half, has become increasingly “alexandrine.”

D.G.: You have been concerned, as many poets have, with love, death, birth, mutability, evil, good, transient moments of beauty, and so on.

F.C.: Yes.

D.G.: The reality of death has been brought very close to you in the last two or three years. Is there more for you to say? Will you be able to transmute your experiences into emotion recollected in tranquility?

F.C.: Why, I most certainly shall. Immediately after the event it is difficult because you are too close to it to see it in perspective. But, as time passes, the sharpness of sorrow or grief diminishes—I don't think it ever quite gradually disappears. As this happens you see where it does fit into the scheme of things. And, just as another object by contrast will give an individual object more value, so it seems to me the growing fact—and it becomes the growing fact to you—of death gives more keenness, more meaning, to life. One's appreciation of life becomes much more than it was when one was young and death was something that one didn't even dream of or, if it happened, it happened to somebody else. A close acquaintance with death, in fact, makes life much more

appreciable than it had been in the time when one took it so very much for granted.

D.G.: Let's talk about your own achievements. What poems or books of poems are the ones which you value most? Are there any—apart possibly from "The Professor in the Potato Patch"—that you wish you hadn't written. As you look at your own work what do you think are your strengths and weaknesses?

F.C.: Well, I don't spend time reading my own poems over again, or anything like that. I'm not really ashamed of anything that I've written. I don't think there's anything there that one can be terribly proud of. There are certain translations and certain passages in translations where I think I have done as well or better than the originals. Unfortunately, they aren't necessarily of the best poems by the people concerned, but I have been proud of the way in which I have sometimes caught a poem by nuance from one language and transcribed it into another. Now, my own poems in my own language are equally translations, because what they are is a translation of experience, or many experiences, which have been translated and syncopated into one. Well, sometimes that seems to me to work pretty well and I'm quite happy; but at the same time I'm not always happy when I read it. A peculiar thing happens when you write poems. You finish your poem and you feel absolutely glorious, and then you leave it aside for awhile and then it becomes completely separate from you and, as you look at it, you wonder why in the world that sort of thing was ever put together. Then, later on, in another mood, you look at it and it's good. Now, I've had exactly the same kind of result when I read the poems of other people. Very much of one's response depends on whether one's own mood and experience is in key with what one reads at the time when one reads it.

D.G.: You've talked a lot about translations in recent years, which is perhaps only natural as you've done them in comparatively recent years. Is there something in doing a translation which satisfies your own desire to look at the past? If you translate someone like Nelligan, as you have done, or when one thinks of Rosseti translating Villon, do you feel that you are satisfying a nostalgia for past ages?

F.C.: I have always been interested in history, and I've always been interested in looking back at my own past and at the history and past of other writers, because this is a matter of perspective, I suppose. One of the ways in which human beings differ from most animals is that the human beings have spectroscopic vision instead of the flat vision that an animal like a dog has. This means that they see the universe in a depth which most other animals can't grasp, and because of that they have an edge over the other animals. Well, in the same way it seems to me, if a human being looks at humanity, not just in the here and now but humanity as it once was, or even projects his imagination into how, ultimately, it may get to be—if he does that, he has a kind of edge which he can bring to bear on any one particular facet of experience beyond what other people have brought to bear on it, just as when you get into a kind of emergency it helps to realize that you have read somewhere about somebody who has been in the same emergency, and that you are not alone in your suffering, or in your situation—that we are all going through the same kind of drill as a kind of safety, or feeling of safety, that comes about through numbers. Other people have been through this before; they have survived it; therefore, I ought to survive it.

D.G.: You didn't actually say, when I asked you, which of your books you do value most.

F.C.: Of what I've written? I think probably *The Stunted Strong*, because what I was doing there was writing out, rather consciously, what was my unconscious feeling about the atmosphere in which I grew up. So that meant a great deal to me. A book which I published, I think, in 1968, *Star People*, meant a great deal to me because it represented, I suppose, my response to something of the freedom and the chaos that came with the 1960s. So that meant quite a lot. So, it seems to me, is the book which I wrote after my daughter's death from cancer, *Pearls*.

D.G.: Does criticism bother you very much?

F.C.: Well, it bothered me very much until I came to realize the state of criticism in Canada and the equipment which most reviewers have to give to their reviews. Since then it has ceased to bother me very much.

D.G.: I'd like to quote a few lines from your poem, "Sestina, the Core." "They call me amenable and I am./ It is not difficult for me to go/ And come obedient to another's will." You've helped people through the years with counsel, with money, by publishing their poetry, by listening to them talk. Some people may not be worth helping; most of them I am sure were. Many of these people have succeeded in life; some of them have come to very sad ends. I know that you value these relationships very much and I know that perhaps I am asking a false question when I ask you about their value and the value of your poetry. But I should like you to say something about them and their relationship with your poetry.

F.C.: Perhaps it's conscience money. What I mean by this is: there was a man named Nicodemus, I think, who came to Jesus by night and was almost persuaded to be a Christian. Nicodemus, I believe, furnished money for the tomb. Now, in a sense, if one looks at William Blake's notion that poetry is a religious vocation, one can see that it occupied most of his working moments and a great many of his dreams as well, and that he suffered penury and, to a great degree, lack of recognition, because of the very devotion which he gave to his particular art. Now, I have not suffered in that way. I have compromised. I have taught, and enjoyed a reasonably good living. Many other people with whom I have come into contact have chosen to take this other road. That is why they have been poor and needed help, and they have been more out-and-out poets than I have ever pretended to be, and because they are such, I have valued and respected very much the kind of thing they were doing, very often even though it was not terribly fashionable, nor terribly appreciated and sometimes not even terribly good. What I respected most of all, I think, is somebody who is capable of giving in a big sense, rather than a small sense, to that which he or she believes is worth giving to.

D.G.: It's a bit of a burden when people always expect you to behave as a gentleman. Yet I take it you've tried. Have you ever looked back and regretted *The Boys' Own Paper* and perhaps thought that you might have had more fun if you had never read it?

F.C.: Sometimes, yes. I imbued a great degree of chivalry in my youth which more or less, mainly more, I have kept ever

since, and because of that one loses opportunities which one might call sexual, or which one might call chances of making money, and things of this particular kind, because it was contrary to what one believed as a boy. The thing is, however, later on, if you meet some of the people who might have influenced you had you not been that way, twenty or thirty years later in life, and you look at them then you realize that you weren't such a damn fool after all.

D.G.: Well, that's consoling anyway, Fred.

F.C.: Yes, it's very consoling.

D.G.: Fred, when I came to Canada in 1948, the poets I heard about were Earle Birney and A.J.M. Smith, Frank Scott and P.K. Page, and the young Irving Layton, and Canada seemed to be in search of something called a 'Canadian Identity' . . .

F.C.: (interrupting) Yes.

D.G.: . . . which persisted, I think, for many years. How do you see the situation now compared with then? You were at U.N.B. at that time as a student.

F.C.: At that point there weren't many people who were published poets and, as a matter of fact, it was very easy to buy all the poems and all the novels by Canadians as they came out year after year; you could put them on the fingers of both hands. Irving Layton is perhaps an exception because he published his own work, but Frank Scott and A.J.M. Smith had to wait until they were in their forties before they had any publications at all, and those were only very thin books. They did put out an anthology in the 1930s, but it sold only twenty-seven copies. You were supposed to sell modern poetry to the Canadian populace, but the Canadian populace wasn't buying any. So, basically, Canadian publishers in those days were jobbers for American publishing, and gave only token service to Canada and Canadian writers. The situation now is quite different. You cannot, unless you are very wealthy indeed, buy all the books of poetry and books of fiction that come out from the very large number of presses in Canada today. Every year there's a flood of them. Several things contributed to the changes. One, of course,

is revolution—offset printing and the computerized printing which made it possible, economically, for a smaller company to operate better than ever before. Another is subsidies from the Government through the Canada Council to the publishers, to the writers and to advertise the books to the writers and readers as well. The result has been almost a cultural revolution.

D.G.: How will those poets we mentioned, Smith, etc., stand the test of time? Have people matured now? Are they writing better poetry? Has the first fine careless rapture gone? What do you think the assessment in the future will be?

F.C.: Poets like Smith and Scott and A.M. Klein were the first generation of modernist poets in Canada. That is to say, they modelled their standards and their forms of poetry to some degree on mainly British poets of the generation before them in Great Britain—people like Yeats and Eliot and, after Yeats and Eliot, Auden and Spender and Day Lewis. And, in order to get an audience in Canada, they and the magazines that backed them denigrated the previous generations of Canadian poets, more or less trying to put forward the myth that the first real quality Canadian poetry came with them. What has happened, of course, is that new generations have come along and that the new generations who have come along are in the process now of denigrating them, so that the usual thing happens. Ultimately, there will be a certain amount of their work that will last, I think, but it will be much smaller than they imagined it would be. Also, too, of the lot, the ones who are most apt to survive, it seems to me, are A.M. Klein and Earle Birney.

D.G.: And how will Carman and Roberts stand up do you think?

F.C.: I think Carman and Roberts are definitely as good poets as Klein and Birney in terms of what they were attempting to express.

D.G.: What is the great need in Canadian Literature now? Turning to the scholarly aspect, do we need better criticism, better-edited editions?

F.C.: The great need in Canadian Literature, it seems to me, is a higher and wider standard of literary criticism and evaluation of the whole process. We have had, I think,

three phases, which one could call 'colonial', 'national', and 'Alexandrian'. The colonial phase was when Canadian Literature was taught by people who were either born in Great Britain or the United States or who got their education there. And so, when they approached Canadian Literature what they tried to find were echoes of and parallels with American and British literature. So the whole first phase of Canadian literary criticism was a tracing of British and American influences and how well these influences were absorbed. This is an interesting and useful exercise, but what it does not do is place the writers in the context of their own environment. The second stage, what I shall call national, is what happened after the 1960s. This was a quest for the Canadian identity. Various critics would get into their heads certain qualities which they thought were peculiarly Canadian. Then they would look over the scene and deal with all those writers and works that seemed to them to represent those particular qualities, to the detriment of people who did not seem to have these kinds of desirable qualities. What they failed to consider was that the qualities which they thought were Canadian were also to be found in the works of almost every literature in the world. And the third phase, which is going on at the moment, and which I call Alexandrian, is an attempt in criticism not to bother about nationalism, not to bother about sources, but to bother, if you like, about how things were put together. It's quibbling over words and things of this particular kind. What is really needed, of course, is the whole procedure of establishing texts and of clearing up ambiguities, of having lives of writers, of having social history, so that one can fix the author in his or her own particular time, show what it is he or she was up against, what the author was trying to do, how far he or she succeeded, and what he or she may contribute to the changing course of Canadian history. It seems to me that those would be better things to do than what is currently being done.

D.G.: Do you think that *The Literary History of Canada* was the beginning of this process?

F.C.: *The Literary History of Canada* was a fairly good beginning. What has happened since then is that critics throughout the world have embarked on the same kind of road in literature that philosophers a generation ago

did when they embarked on logical positivism. Criticism has become almost completely ahistorical.

D.G.: You have been at the university, apart from a few years away here and there, for forty years. How do you see the changes?

F.C.: Changes in the university?

D.G.: Yes. What part of your period here, if you could choose, do you think was the most rewarding?

F.C.: I think that the late fifties and the early sixties were my most rewarding times, apart from the time when I was an undergraduate and the veterans were here, which was a good time as well. What has happened since has been mainly negative. One thing that happened was the rapid growth of the university. The rapid growth led to greater specialization, more de-personalization in the treatment of students, and instead of everybody knowing everybody and being in education together and respecting all different facets of the university, it got so that you didn't even know the members of your own department, or what was going on in fields and areas other than your own. This growth of the university made technical scholarship easier, but made humanity and epistemology or an attempt to put things together very, very difficult. The result is that there is a greater impersonality and it is more difficult now for a student to get what I would call a good education, from the point of view of humanism anyway. It's all very technical. The quality has improved. There's no question about the writing and the scholarship of a good student today. It is very fine. What I regret, to some degree, is the absence of the human factors that seemed to me to be operating better twenty or thirty years ago than they are now. The other thing, of course, is the present stagnation within the university, where there is very little movement of faculty from one university to another, and where probably all the very fine graduates that my generation has produced have no work or part-time work and are driven from pillar to post before they can find full employment. This is very, very bad for the future of them and for the future of the universities.

D.G.: You have been involved in various ways over the past thirty years or so with publishing in Canada—especially with the publishing of poetry. How does the present political and economic climate affect publishing? What, for example, are the dangers, of which we hear so much, of our culture's being swamped by that of the United States?

F.C.: The publishing in Canada of worthwhile books of scholarly interest, prose fiction, and poetry, has been created by government through the Canada Council and the SSHRC programmes—programmes that have, quite literally, brought Canadian literature and Canadian scholarship into being. At the same time as this has happened, however, the commercial market for popular fiction, popular drama, etc., has been monopolized by the United States of America and international publishing firms. The result is a very bad dichotomy in which 'literature' to the masses is the largely non-Canadian paperbacks on mass-market sale, and 'literature' to the elitist is the product of small literary presses, sold only in certain bookstores, and bought only by a small audience.

In the visual arts, such as the film industry, the imbalance is even greater. So strong is the political lobby of U.S. film companies that Canada does not even have either a box-office levy or a quota on films to support the local industry, as has nearly every other film-producing country in the world. Because it has always been elitist and its writing has always been of minority interest, poetry has tended to benefit by the present system of publishing in Canada. The great victims have been fiction, films, and drama.

D.G.: Have you felt stultified in your poetry and your other work by being at the university?

F.C.: Not in the least. No. As a matter of fact, I don't know where anybody who is interested in ideas or interested in experience can get a more exciting vehicle in which to operate than in the university. It is quite true that some of one's colleagues become blasé and, after a while, somewhat dejected but, at the same time there are always students, and the best students always have inquiring minds, are always young and eager, and if they can't keep you young, nothing else can.

D.G.: And, of course, you've always kept in touch with a lot of your students. You've met them all over the place.

F.C.: Yes, I've kept in touch with the most of my very good students most of my life.

D.G.: So the university has really provided you with a base, a vehicle for getting to know people of interest, whereas with some of our colleagues it seems to provide them with a base from which to disappear and not get to know people.

F.C.: That is true. But I think you get out of things what you tend to bring to them and, if you really want to be part of something and you're willing to spend the time and you're willing to spend the energy and be to some degree grateful even for the small things, you very often wind up experiencing things which are much greater than you had ever dreamed of.

University of New Brunswick