

Alden Nowlan As Regional Atavist

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The most considerable biographical essay on Alden Nowlan is "The Man from Desolation Creek," by Janice Tyrwhitt, which appeared in *Reader's Digest* (March 1984: 67-71).[†] The nearest thing to a full-length critical and thematic treatment of his work has been *Poet's Progress: The Development of Alden Nowlan's Poetry*, by Michael Brian Oliver (Fredericton: Fiddlehead, 1978), which I published. What I propose to do in this paper is to examine briefly the findings of Tyrwhitt and Oliver, and then indicate what I believe to be the deeper humanity which I feel that these authors missed. I shall support my findings by copious quotations from Nowlan's poems—poems which I know, regardless of my arguments, will shine in their own light. I hope that from this process a clearer picture of the man, his environment, his problems, and his achievements will emerge. I hope, too, that this paper will encourage the kind of further study a major writer like Nowlan deserves.

Tyrwhitt's "The Man from Desolation Creek" is brilliant journalism in that it gives the *facts* in a human, readable way but, at the same time, so glosses over their deeper implications that a casual reader's feelings or imagination need never be disturbed. Yet it is these very facts, working in Nowlan's feelings and imagination, that produced the wonderfully bitter-sweet texture of his work.

What are the facts? The salient ones are these:

Alden Nowlan was born on January 25, 1933, in Stanley, a Nova Scotia village so wretchedly poor that he called it Desolation Creek. That Depression winter his father was working for a lumberman for a dollar a day. His mother was 15, and she left when he was a few years old. In a house with no electricity, central heating or indoor plumbing, he was raised by his father and his grandmother, a redoubtable woman who step-

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danced, sang ribald folk songs, and cooked "for my own amazement." (68)

Contrast this statement, for example, with the poet's own imaginative re-creation of the circumstances of his birth:

From that they found most lovely, most abhorred,
My parents made me: I was born like sound
Stroked from the fiddle to become the ward
of tunes played on the bear-trap and the hound.

Not one but seven entrances they gave
each to the other, and he laid her down
the way the sun comes out. Oh, they were brave,
and then like looters in a burning town

Their mouths left bruises, starting with the kiss
and ending with the proverb, where they stayed,
never in making was there brighter bliss,
followed by darker shame. Thus was I made.¹

Tyrwhitt gives the picturesque details that she knows her readers will relish concerning Nowlan's youth and early manhood:

Shortsighted and clumsy, Alden was a brilliant misfit in a community where the only measure of a man was how he handled an ax, a drink, or a fight. He taught himself to read at 5, and by 14 he had worked his way three times through the Bible. Bigger boys taunted him with "Did you swallow a dictionary?"

He quit school in Grade 5 and shot straight into manhood. He cut pulp and pitprops, cleared bush, and worked as watchman in a sawmill for \$18 a week and the chance to spend most of the night reading. He discovered a library in Windsor, 32 kilometers west, and walked or hitchhiked there every Saturday for armloads of books—Dickens, Darwin, Dostoevski, and Tolstoy among others. Regarded as an overgrown half-wit by his workmates, he learned to conceal his intelligence and tenderness, and wrote in secret. His guidebook was a mail-order manual from which he laboriously taught himself to write each verse form from sonnet to villanelle. When he was 17 his first published poem appeared in a little magazine in Oregon.

¹ Alden Nowlan, *Early Poems* (Fredericton: Fiddlehead, 1983) 53.

On sawmill wages of \$24 a week he bought a \$50 mail-order typewriter and composed a job application that credited him with a high-school diploma and a year's reporting experience. *The Observer* in Hartland, N.B., hired him in March 1952, a lean, awkward 19-year-old in an ill-fitting suit.

When publisher Charles Allen first asked him to make a phone call, Nowlan couldn't admit he had never used a telephone. He dashed out and delivered the message in person, then watched his boss until he saw how the instrument worked. Soon he was adept at every job on a small-town weekly. Curiosity and compassion made him a good reporter. Working hard, earning little, he moonlighted at half a dozen jobs from conducting surveys to managing a country and western band. (68-69)

It is easier to write Tyrwhitt's account than it is to live it. Because they impressed him deeply enough to leave scars, Nowlan returned to the events of his childhood and young manhood obsessively throughout his life and writing. They form the bulk of the contents of *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien*, the curious novel that he wrote when—as desperate to leave Hartland as he had been to get there—he quit his job on *The Observer* and wrote and starved throughout the year 1961-62. They occur repeatedly in his prose essays, and they are the subject of the last two prose pieces he ever wrote, "By Celestial Omnibus to the Twilight Zone," in the June 1983 issue of *The Fiddlehead*, and the magnificent short story, "About Memorials," published posthumously in *The Fiddlehead* of October 1983.

When I first met Nowlan in 1956, he was, as Tyrwhitt notes, "a handsome man who stood six-foot-three," but the years of amphibious living—at once apart from and yet dependent upon what, to him, was an alien, inferior form of society—had taken their toll. I have seldom met a man with so little confidence and so much fear in areas of life that most men normally take for granted. He was afraid of saying the wrong things to me whom he wished to have as a friend. He was afraid the restaurant—the best in Hartland—which he had chosen for the evening meal would not be up to my standard. He was afraid to drive a car, and his actual driving showed why. Only after the meal, when we had parked in a deserted school yard in Lower Brighton and were drinking rum together, did he relax and become himself. But, even when we talked freely, the conversation was about his lack of confidence with respect to women, reading poetry in public, meeting strangers at a literary gathering. Of two things he was

neither afraid nor diffident. One was the people among whom he lived and worked. These he knew and liked, but somehow despised at the same time. The other was his love for literature and his hope of one day writing something that would give others the same kind of pleasure that he had himself received from his own reading. It was no accident that of all the characters in the Bible, his choice in boyhood fantasies was always King David, the true harper before the Lord.

In 1963, penniless, unemployed, and discouraged by publishers' rejection of his manuscript novel, Nowlan received an offer to join the staff of the *Telegraph Journal* in Saint John, N.B. He accepted, and, with the help of a gift from a friend, married Claudine Orser, a typesetter on his former paper, *The Observer*, and moved to Saint John with her and her son, John, whom he legally adopted. There, as Tyrwhitt puts it, he

. . . rose rapidly from reporter to night editor. Working from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. left his days free to write poetry. Filtered through his imagination, incidents from home, newsroom and the streets became poems that startled readers into awareness of what he called "the mystery of the ordinary." To achieve his apparently simple, conversational style he would rework a poem up to 30 times. (69)

By 1966, Nowlan had already published three chapbooks and two longish books of poetry; he was in the process of having a sixth book accepted by a publisher when tragedy struck from an unexpected source:

Nowlan had never had a day's illness. For months he dismissed Claudine's worry over a small lump in his neck. In March 1966 she insisted he visit a doctor. The diagnosis was carcinoma of the thyroid gland, and the remedy was surgery—three major operations in six weeks.

The operations were successful, but their unavoidable side-effects were horrendous. Because the doctors had removed his jugular veins and all the lymph glands in his neck, his appearance was permanently changed. His swollen face was so numb that he could no longer shave and had to grow a beard. But he told Claudine, in a voice now gruff and gravelly, "It's a hell of a lot better than dying."

He lived the rest of his life with a shadow over his shoulder, and it changed him. His bulk,

his beard and his mane of curly brown hair lent him an almost patriarchal presence, and he no longer felt constrained to hide the depth of his mind and feelings. His poetry became subtler and more philosophical. (69)

One result of Nowlan's illness was fortunate. As a writer, it freed him from the obligation to earn a living. Sandy Ives, Professor of Folklore at the University of Maine, and I immediately recommended him for a Guggenheim Fellowship. I persuaded A.J.M. Smith to join with me in an application for a Canada Council Fellowship. Nowlan received both, and in the following year received the Governor General's Award for *Bread, Wine, and Salt*. With these credentials, it was relatively easy for Desmond Pacey, Head of the Department of English at the University of New Brunswick, to persuade the Canada Council to accept Nowlan as that university's writer-in-residence. When the Council's term of assistance expired, the university approached Richard Hatfield, premier of the province of New Brunswick, who agreed to have the province sponsor Nowlan as permanent writer-in-residence. The income was modest, but living quarters were included, and Nowlan, free from financial worries, was able to devote himself fully to writing.

Janice Tyrwhitt writes of Nowlan as writer-in-residence:

He opened his house to students who dropped in, day or night, and he took them seriously. "Poetry is all about people, and to hell with literature," he told them. Novelist David Adams Richards says, "Alden told me 'Write about what you know.' We never got mixed up in pedantic talk. For me, his way was the only way I would have accepted then, and ultimately it was much more fruitful." (69-70)

Of the promising young writers—Al Pitman, Terry Crawford, Bernell MacDonald, Louis Cormier, Eddie Clinton, James Stewart—who frequented Nowlan's house, none has fulfilled, in my own opinion, his poetic promise, and I think that in this Nowlan was inadvertently at fault. Having discovered Nowlan's superficial voice without his depth, they never tried—nor did he suggest that they try—to explore further possibilities of development. In the case of David Adams Richards, whose genius rivals Nowlan's, the latter's influence was supplemented by Richards' rich association with other writers on the campus and by his own omnivorous reading.

In a section entitled "Nowlan's Levee," Janice Tyrwhitt paints an engaging picture of Nowlan as a gracious host presiding at evening soirées over an assembly of people drawn from various walks of life, having little in common with one another, but with each of whom Nowlan himself had a special bond. Since later in this paper I shall try to qualify this impression somewhat, I shall let it pass unchallenged at this point and go on to her succinct account of the circumstances leading to Nowlan's death:

Nowlan dreaded his annual medical tests, but as years passed without a recurrence of cancer he hoped for a long life. "I'll be *great* as an old man," he once said, and sprang up to demonstrate by hobbling lovably across the room. But last spring he began to have difficulty breathing, and on June 11 he woke so short of breath that he took a bath to inhale the steam. At 7.30 he called Claudine. Twenty minutes later he was in an ambulance, unconscious. (71)

Nowlan never regained consciousness. On June 27, 1983, he died of respiratory failure from pneumonia. He had, however, left detailed instructions relating to his burial—instructions which his family carried out to the letter. On the night before the funeral, John dressed him in his kilt, pinned the Queen's Medal on his breast, and sealed up the coffin. The funeral three days later, was described in the following sestina, which I wrote shortly after:

Beyond the chapel door two pipers played
A coronach whose sobbing grace-notes filled
The air with feelings deeper than mere words
Could plumb. Although your bier was still outside,
You yet were with us. Inside our minds, deep in,
All thoughts revolved around your central sun.

Inside, your wife, Claudine, and John, your son,
Sat on a front pew where the sunlight played
Strange patterns on each grief-drawn face; and in
The seats behind, all places, too, were filled
By friends who felt the self you were inside
Meant more to them than any of your words.

Your coffin then arrived and afterwards,
All, standing, bowed in silent orison.
The premier and the playwright friend, beside,
In turn pronounced a eulogy and played
Upon our feelings' strings with praise heart-filled
That echoed all the griefs we kept held in.

James Stewart last, a boon companion in
 The spending of good drink and better words,
 Played one last dirge upon his flute and filled
 The chapel with a final benison,
 Then snapped it off against his knee and laid
 It silent on the bier, close by your side.

Beside the river on a low hill's side
 There lay the grave we put your coffin in;
 Poured Irish, Scottish soil, libations; laid
 Still more well-meaning wreaths of flowered words,
 And took our turn with shovels until your son
 Pronounced your burial wishes all fulfilled.

The tiny house you lived in was quite filled
 With guests of all degrees, crammed side by side,
 As food and drink flowed free as air and sun,
 And all about the place, outside and in,
 The dam of silence broke and guests found words
 For your own worth and worth your work displayed.

With fit rites and words in season, we filled
 Through you our own death-wish and left your fireside,
 Remembering all the times you'd let us in.²

Tyrwhitt's article, designed for a popular audience, emphasized such graphic details as would interest a non-literate public and ignored Nowlan's writing—the work without which only a very few friends and relatives would have cared whether or not the man had existed at all. Michael Brian Oliver's study, *Poet's Progress*, although it does on occasion use pertinent biographical details, is resolutely academic and literary. It is essentially thematic and, like almost all such studies in Canadian literature, it attempts to fit its subject into an already widely accepted thesis in current Canadian literary criticism.

Oliver begins his introductory chapter on Nowlan's work by accepting Robert Bly's classification of Nowlan as being in "the tradition of Dostoevski and Lawrence because of his 'psychic bravery' in skating along the edges of fear in his poetry" (5). Oliver believes that Nowlan, in his early work, is too frightened to reveal directly the sources of his fear and hence externalizes this inner truth by telling the truth about his neighbours. This truth forces him to "de-mythologize" the ideal landscape of his predecessors, Roberts and Carman, and "remythologize" it, making it "typically Canadian, that is, harsh and non-human, and therefore frightening and alienating" (8). He evinces "Atlantic Coast: Summer" as a case in point:

² Fred Cogswell, *Meditations* (Charlottetown: Ragweed, 1986) 36.

It's summer yet but still the cold
 coils through these fields at dusk, the gray Atlantic
 haunting the hollows and a black bitch barking
 between a rockpile and a broken fence
 out on the hill a mile from town where maybe
 a she-bear, groggy with blueberries, listens
 and the colt, lonesome, runs in crooked circles. (8)

Oliver finds in Nowlan's isolation a division between Nowlan the social being and Nowlan the poet: "No. Never until I was 25 years old and met Fred Cogswell. Wouldn't have dreamed of telling any one I wrote in all that time" (6). This division between social being and poet establishes a link with D.G. Jones' thesis in *Butterfly on Rock*. Nowlan "represents a sense of exile, of being estranged from the land and divided within himself," and concludes that his early poems "depict a harsh landscape and a crazed population who can hope for little more than survival within it"(8). Since this notion of survival is a link with Margaret Atwood's book of the same name, Oliver goes further to suggest that Nowlan's poems are imbued with "a feeling of paranoid schizophrenia"(8), which he considers a trait that Atwood characterizes as a hall-mark of Canadian consciousness.

Having thus ingeniously rescued Nowlan from the clutches of the regionalists and identified him with the kind of writer that such prestigious critics as Frye, Jones, and Atwood ought to love to have in their camp, Oliver then proceeds to treat Nowlan's early poetry in terms of a struggle between two worlds—one light, the other dark:

What I do wish to emphasize here is the split consciousness of the Nowlan world. To put it simply, an incessantly raging Puritanism has divided life for Nowlan's rural Maritimers into the two traditional realms of light and darkness, the world of light occupying the upper levels of consciousness and representing individual passion. . . . A surface, usually water, but, in Nowlan's case, ice, separates the world of light from the world of darkness. All the people in Nowlan's early poems may be imagined in ranging heights or depths of consciousness in this scheme.

Instead of using water to symbolize the surface or boundary between the realms of light and darkness, as in the various baptism or regeneration myths, Nowlan—with an imaginative stroke—uses ice as the source. This hardens the reality of the divorce and seems to suggest an abandonment of heaven and hell to make these

people *whole* again, in the Biblical sense of being healthy or peaceful. (9)

The remainder of the chapter consists of instances and examinations of various early poems in which this attitude seems to prevail.

In Chapter 2, "Dread of the Self," Oliver uses, regardless of chronology, works from the sixties and the earlier works to support his thesis that the poet has deliberately refrained from self-reference at the beginning of his career because

Though he had been an unusually perceptive and intelligent boy in rural Nova Scotia he nonetheless had inherited the Puritanical duality of mind commonly represented by the forces of light and the forces of darkness, each of which has its own established roles and conventions. . . . Early in his career—early in his life for that matter—Nowlan realized that he possessed both light and darkness within himself and as long as these forces battled each other he would have no sense of identity, no peace . . . the deepest reason Alden Nowlan's early poems do not describe himself as a young man is the simple fact that he was not sure who the *real* Alden Nowlan was. . . . Escape or reconciliation was needed to find out who he was, and for this reason these two themes figure largely in the poetry he wrote during the '60s, the years when he was coming to terms with his inherent dread of realizing himself completely. (15)

After a wide-ranging discussion, examining the earlier books with respect to Nowlan's attitudes toward love, uncertainty, and death, Oliver concludes that "at last the integrated self is realized, for the poet accepts everything—past, present and future—until the sense of time disappears":

How long have I lain here?
Well, it is still summer. But is it the same
Summer I came?
I must remember
not to ask myself questions.
I am naked. Trees sing. The grass walks.
Nothing is happening. (27)

Oliver concludes that "this stance aligns Nowlan exactly with what D.G. Jones finds to be the typical attitude of most modern Canadian poets and novelists" and quotes Jones as follows:

Again and again these writers dramatize the difficulty of affirming life in a world constantly threatened by absurdity, suffering, and death. Again and again they end by emphasizing the necessity of affirming life despite these threats. Particularly they emphasize the necessity of courage, not the courage to deny but the courage to affirm, to love and celebrate a world that sooner or later demands of them the sacrifice of their lives. (27)

Oliver's Chapter 3, "Host and Stranger," deals with Nowlan's poetry in *between tears and laughter* and *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*. He regards both volumes as "mature, philosophical works":

Nowlan had fully realized his identity when he composed most of the poems in these books. No longer do we hear the voice of a man haunted by the past, or the later, equally tormented voice of a man uncertain about the future; instead we are compelled by the voice of a man alive, here and now. And if we probe—as we should—the obvious honesty of the speaker, we will be rewarded with new riches. (30)

Before telling us what these new riches are, Oliver does concede that a change has taken place, that there is a certain loss of immediacy:

The change is startling. In these books Nowlan is still concerned with the comedy and tragedy of the mind and the body, but the tone is now relaxed because the perspective has shifted. Most of the poems in these volumes *discuss* people, places, ideas, even himself, instead of *discovering* them. (30)

To compensate for any direct, kinetic loss, Oliver reassures us that the new voice "is now assured and, in the truest sense, wise" and that the reader is compensated by the substitution of a voice "both honest and emotional . . . that . . . avoids the extremes of both cynicism and sentimentality, yet . . . fuses both . . . into a unique tone, a tone containing tears and laughter"(30).

What Oliver finds present in these two books is the quest for "the iconotropic instant"—the "mysteriously emotional moment that seems to identify some one or something" (31). In this quest, Nowlan uses two themes in these volumes—two approaches to life, embodied in the persona of the host and that of

the stranger. He does not, however, take sides: "The same tone of candid confession reveals both Nowlan the host and Nowlan the stranger, and by suggestion, hosts and strangers everywhere" (31).

As a result, Nowlan's poems become domestic allegories. "The Night of the Party" is an example:

Here in my living room
are the twenty most remarkable
persons in all the world.

And me, the one fool,
who must dance
although too heavy
on his feet, sing
although his vocal chords
are out of tune.

But that is the price
I pay for such companionship.

My friends
I do not get drunk for myself.
I get drunk for you. (31)

At the end of this chapter, Oliver again yields to the temptation to enroll his poet among the "modernists" rather than the "regionalists." In Chapter 1, he had made Nowlan "modern" because of "fear" and because of his "alienation" from society. In Chapter 2, Nowlan is "modern" because of the schism in himself that coincides with the schism in nature and society. Surely, after having integrated himself and having arrived at philosophical calm, Nowlan might have been thought to have transcended the limits of modernity. But no, Oliver once more claims modernity for his hero at the end of Chapter 3 on the grounds that he has discovered the ultimate "alienation" of all, that of "being a stranger in your own mind" (35).

In Chapter 4, "Full Circle," Oliver concludes that *Smoked Glass*, Nowlan's tenth book of poetry, just off the press, is his best to date because it contains within itself all the three stages that he, Oliver, has so acutely discerned. Oliver concludes his study by showing how neatly various poems of this volume fit into the pattern Oliver has constructed before it had been written by Nowlan.

Biography and literary studies constitute a kind of cartography or mapmaking designed to make it easier for travelers to find their ways into and around the territories concerned, which

are the writer's milieu and the writer's works. Cartographies are often designed for different audiences and for different purposes. It is too much to expect early pioneering maps to be altogether accurate and comprehensive, but all future mapmakers must take these initial findings into account—in other words, must correct their biases and fill them in in order that a more detailed, accurate, and comprehensive pattern may emerge.

It is apparent that, useful as it is, Tyrwhitt's account presents only the sensational and unusual facts of Nowlan's life as a human interest story for readers whom it hurts to think; yet Tyrwhitt's facts do constitute an essential skeleton of Nowlan that has, as it were, to be fleshed out. It is equally evident that Oliver's study of Nowlan's poetry was concerned with elevating the poet in the eyes of Canadian scholars from the relatively minor position of "regionalist" to the then more highly regarded one of "modernist." At the same time, it is evident that Oliver's study contains shrewd insights, many of which must be reckoned with by all subsequent thematic critics of the poet's work.

Tyrwhitt gives us the legend—the current version of Nowlan's life as his friends perceive, and would have us perceive, it. But what of the man behind the legend? And what of the reliability of the testimony of those friends? Here a reading of Nowlan's last short story, "About Memorials," is very pertinent. Nowlan was acute enough to see why it was his friends had come to lie about their earlier relationships with him and why it was they had come later to believe those lies:

Life had given these people so little that it was important to them to believe they were each of them a part—not of me, but of a person to whom a plaque could be erected. Because I had made this possible, they loved me.¹

What is signally missing in Oliver's study is a discussion of the development of Nowlan's prosody—in particular, the effect upon the nature and texture of his verse when, after *Under the Ice*, he abandoned patterned verse in favour of free verse modelled after the poems of Raymond Souster. It would be easy to predict what the findings of such a study would be. The difficulty with creating thought and form simultaneously in the earlier poems gave rise to metaphors which would not normally have occurred to a poet working only in a simple, undemanding medium. After *Under the Ice*, Nowlan's poetry loses much of its metaphorical richness and becomes more abstract. This defect,

¹ *The Fiddlehead* 137 (1983): 28.

if it is one, is correspondingly balanced by the naturalness of speech rhythm without sacrifice to euphony which characterizes Nowlan's later work. The success of Nowlan's poetry in free verse—a combination of line length, word order, and word choice—demands much more careful scrutiny than it has yet been given.

A different case may be made from that suggested by Oliver with respect to the "telling" rather than the "discovering" which he finds in *between tears and laughter* and *I'm a Stranger Here Myself* as compared to Nowlan's earlier work. He attributes the change to Nowlan's having attained "the philosophical mind." I am inclined to put it down to the effect of his long exile from his roots when, after his cancer operations, he withdrew from the community at large to the ivory tower of his house just outside the campus of the University of New Brunswick, thereby depriving himself of the immediacy of daily contact with the kind of people, anecdotes, and situations best fitted to bring out the sharpness and originality that had been so much a part of his earlier work.

This brings me to the main point of my paper. William Blake wrote in "The Everlasting Gospel": "Your Christ has a hooked nose like you, / Mine has a snub nose like me. / Your Christ is mine's greatest enemy." Oliver's Nowlan and mine are cases in point. Oliver's Nowlan was conceived in the image of an Oliver who, as student and as teacher, wished to submerge his own identity as a Maritimer in the larger community of those who desired not to belong to a special place but rather to a special time; in other words, to be "with it." It is not surprising, therefore, that Oliver constructed his Nowlan in that image. I have always considered such a change both undesirable and impossible. The concluding sonnet of my first poetry pamphlet, *The Stunted Strong*, entitled "New Brunswick," written in 1953, expresses what I still believe to be true:

Before it takes the air in greener shoots
 a seed is nurtured by surrounding soil
 And patterned by whatever streams can coil
 Where worms and borers worked their slow pursuits;
 And though it wills to grow a crown that fruits
 In skies where lightnings break and thunders clap,
 It can't escape the source that feeds its sap.
 No tree belies its soil, outgrows its roots.

Not soft the soil where we took root together;
 It grew not giants but the stunted strong,
 Toughened by suns and bleak wintry weather
 To grow up slow and to endure for long.

We have not gained to any breadth or length,
And all our beauty is our stubborn strength.²

Since I grew up in a world similar to Nowlan's and inhabited it at an earlier age, and since I knew Nowlan, whose work has some affinities with my own, I shall create a Nowlan in my own image as a regionalist and rest my case simply on what I regard—despite Oliver's arguments—to be the the poet's basically unchanging Maritime attitudes to two very important aspects of that region: women and outsiders. In doing so, I shall have occasion to quote several Nowlan poems. We mapmakers too often forget the real excuse for all maps—the objects to which those maps lead.

The rural world of the Maritime Provinces exacted different roles from the sexes; it enforced those differences by public opinion and by a considerable degree of sexual segregation. Since women were either mothers or mothers to be, their role as virgins before marriage was enforced by cruel sanctions, often self-imposed. In one instance, during my childhood, one mother of an illegitimate child in our community was not seen for years. Whenever company called, she ran to her room, shut the door, and did not leave till it had gone. She spared the neighbours the contamination of her presence, and herself an enhanced sense of shame. Although less fuss was made over male virginity, men were even more cruelly emotionally deprived than females by the social restrictions placed upon them. For men to express what were regarded as feminine characteristics was regarded as reprehensible. To give way to tears, to show fright, to display undue emotion, even to be considerate and polite—these actions were "soft," a woman's prerogative. Girls could hug and kiss one another when they felt like it. Men could not. The principal outlet for boys was games; needless to say, the feelings that these aroused were harsh and competitive. The result of these restrictions, enforced from childhood, was a basic dichotomy between the sexes that was never more than partly bridged, even by marriage. The period of adolescence was crucial, and men were the chief sufferers since they were provided with fewer normal outlets for feelings which, during that time, were particularly strong. Fearful of giving way to the weakness of feeling, boys often so suppressed it that they were ever after incapable of behaving normally towards the objects of feeling.

² Fred Cogswell, *The Stunted Strong* (Fredericton: Fiddlehead, 1953) 16.

Nowlan indicated the fatal consequences of the male's giving way to emotion in a moving poem "Shouting His Love to Strangers":

Shouting his love to strangers,
 rumpling the hair of deformed children,
 shaking the grimy hands of beggars,
 whistling at the ugliest of girls
 and stopping an evil old woman
 to admire her eyes . . .
 . . . this was the madness of my brother.

I was not surprised when they came for him,
 pinioning his arms in canvas . . .
 . . . rebuking the gay gush of his laughter
 with the terrible sanity of their faces.³

To Nowlan, the effects of playing a social game can be fatal, as witness "Georgie and Fenwick":

Georgie and Fenwick Granston
 in their thirties and unmarried,
 Hainsville calls them old bachelors,
 live with their parents on a potato farm,
 six miles north of girls.

Saturday nights
 in front of the Farmer's Store
 some of the girls,
 their little posteriors
 gift-wrapped in Christmas-coloured
 short pants, always stop
 to tease them.

Cecilia Cameron, pressing
 so close to Fenwick his overalls
 scratch her bare legs, whispers,
 Fenwick, do you still love me?

When she backs away
 her breasts ripple
 under her striped blouse,
 she puts her fists in her pockets,
 tightening her pants,
 tugging them up her thighs,
 she says, Georgie
 do you want to take me home tonight?

And everybody laughs,
 except Georgie and Fenwick,

³ Nowlan, *Early Poems* 21.

who say nothing,
 their mouths open,
 their eyes half-shut,
 blushing, rocking back and forth
 in their gum rubbers. They look
 like rabbits frozen
 with fear of the gun. (21)

Not even marriage, in such a society, could bridge the gap between the sexes and lead to spontaneous and natural behaviour. The conclusion of Nowlan's "All Down the Morning" indicates the consequences of any public display of wedded bliss:

All down the morning, women sprinkled crumbs
 Of musty laughter, watching Janice Smith
 In brazen languor smear her husband's lips
 With public kisses, while he glared or blushed.

And when the Sunday village itched in church,
 They thought of Janice, hot as Babylon,
 Who lured her Jimmie to the porch and bared
 His people's blanket-buried secrets.

Or dancing to the snarl of feline strings,
 Each Friday at the school, they leered at jokes
 That made obscenities of her taut breasts
 Against her startled husband's sweating shirt.

For she was city-bred and unaware
 That love was bordered by the rumpled quilts
 And children bred from duty as the soil
 Was ploughed to hide the seed and not for joy.

So taunted by harsh laughter, half-ashamed,
 Enraged with rum and manhood late one night,
 And shouting like betrayal, Jim came home
 To bruise his knuckles on her shameless face. (16)

The fear of woman felt by the thirty-year old Prior brothers in Nowlan's poem is one aspect of what I felt when I was seventeen, and, when I first met him, what Alden Nowlan felt at twenty-five. To relieve that fear, both Nowlan and I, however, possessed the one sexual notion sanctioned by the novels and fairytales of our society. It was the romantic quest for a holy grail, in our cases, the one woman. Nowlan's poem "Looking for Nancy" is a beautiful embodiment of that fantasy:

Looking for Nancy,
 everywhere, I've stopped
 girls in trenchcoats
 and blue dresses,

said
 Nancy, I've looked
 all over
 hell for you,
 Nancy, I've been afraid
 that I'd die
 before I found you.

But there's always
 been some mistake:

a broken streetlight,
 too much rum or merely
 my wanting too much
 for it to be her. (97)

Nowlan's Nancy, as it turned out, was to be Claudine Orser. In her case, it was partly hero-worship and partly a response to an unaccustomed gentleness in a Maritime male. In his case, it was, I think, simply a chance to relive the male romantic quest in a chivalrous manner. When I asked him why he was getting married, he replied simply, "I love her and I feel sorry for her and Johnny. I want to look after them."

Events, most notably the cancer operations and their aftermath, were to reverse dependencies and to prove that she was, in fact, stronger, more mature emotionally, than he, and that her feeling for him was unselfish, unshakeable, and deep. Throughout the years afterward, her support was incredibly patient and constant. Outwardly, it made no difference in the structural pattern of the marriage. Apart from his wife, Nowlan took little interest in women—in fact, he often reacted rudely to the more aggressively educated ones. He surrounded himself with men, dictated the topics of conversation, retained untidy habits, worked, drank, and slept at hours of his convenience, and reserved the most outspoken of all his love poems for Claudine's son, Johnny. In the few poems in which she appears, the conclusion is usually a wry comment on their differences. I am certain that, in his own way, he loved her, but it was a love that manifested itself in typical regional ways. It was Johnny and not she who was entrusted with the carrying out of his burial arrangements. Presumably, women were too soft for such a task.

The rural and small-town world of the Maritimes was essentially a world at bay. It was always threatened by forces from outside and representatives of the same forces within its circle. From outside, the government imposed taxes, enforced the statute of labour upon the inhabitants, promulgated laws, and punished those who broke them. Forces outside the community fixed the prices of whatever was bought and sold—these forces were

rightly thought to belong to the cities. Within the community, outsiders like preachers attempted to tell the community what its members ought to do, and doctors and lawyers took away hard-earned money at every chance they had. As a result, the community behaved in one way towards its own insiders and in another way towards its outsiders. Nearly every house possessed a parlour, usually unoccupied and scrupulously dusted every week. Neighbours were asked to the kitchen; outsiders, to the parlour. Crimes against the government were not regarded as immoral, but offences directly against one's neighbours were never condoned.

Since most townsmen, government representatives, and professional people were better educated than members of the community, education in itself was morally suspect, and the manners and dress of the educated class were not to be trusted. Basically decent people prided themselves on their hard work, their self control, and their rude independence of the refinements of life: what was good enough for most was good enough for all.

The community—in this sense rightly—assumed there was a basic injustice at work in their universe. They saw others, relatively idle in terms of physical labour, prosper because they possessed “the gift of the gab.” They saw lawyers subvert the course of justice through technicalities. They saw doctors and lawyers often amass the lion's share of the community's work-won resources, and, insofar as they thought at all, they considered themselves powerless in a world that, no matter what happened, was a world in which they always became victims of either outside forces or forces beyond their comprehension. The classic statement of this community position is Alden Nowlan's brilliant phantasy, “The Execution”:

On the night of the execution
a man at the door
mistook me for the coroner,
“Press,” I said.

But he didn't understand. He led me
into the wrong room
where the sheriff greeted me:
“You're late, Padre.”

“You're wrong,” I told him. “I'm Press.”
“Yes, of couse, Reverend Press.”
We went down a stairway.

“Ah, Mr. Ellis,” said the Deputy.
“Press!” I shouted. But he shoved me

through a black curtain.
 The lights were so bright
 I couldn't see the faces
 Of the men sitting
 opposite. But, thank God, I thought,
 they can see me!

"Look!" I cried. "Look at my face!
 Doesn't anybody know me?"

Then a hood covered my head.
 "Don't make it harder for us," the hangman whispered.
 (142).

Nowlan disliked and distrusted the entire academic establishment as such and was usually on his worst behaviour when confronted with a representative of it—unless that representative was one of his peers as a writer. Only the more hardy of professors lasted more than a few visits. These usually proved to be not pillars of the establishment but rather eccentrics like Dr. Leo Ferrarri, the expert on Saint Augustine, who founded the Flat Earth Society. In fact, far from being on the side of modernity, Nowlan favoured causes which had been lost ages ago and institutions which, in the world today, are anachronisms. A list of his enthusiasms is significant: the Flat Earth Society, Dr. Johnson, the Jacobites, the Stuarts, the IRA, the Orange Lodge, the Monarchy, the Army.

Likewise in his attitude to innovation, Nowlan remained a regionalist. He distrusted it, and, in matters of frivolity, dress, food, or music, would have no truck with novelty. The plain diet and the country and western songs he grew up with were good enough for him until the day he died. He refused the blandishments of fancy food, ballet, opera, and classical music.

In two poems, he deals specifically with the question of "us"—regional Maritimers—versus "them"—outsiders. The first, "A Mug's Game," speaks for itself:

At the party that followed the poetry reading,
 one girl kept telling me how thrilled she was to meet
 someone who hadn't gone to university, and another said
 I reminded her so much of whoever it was who played
 in *Bus Stop* she kept expecting Marilyn to walk in, and
 the hostess
 extending three bite-size salami sandwiches
 and a glass of warm whiskey and ginger ale
 smiled at me like Li'l Abner's Aunt Bessie
 welcoming her nephew to Toronto.

The man from the CBC, who said: "Of course, you're
staying
at the YMCA" and thought he was humouring me
by acting impressed when he found out I wasn't,

explained: "The purpose of such readings is to give
writers
from unlikely places like Hartland, New Brunswick,
the chance to communicate
with others
of their own kind." (Oliver 6)

The acme of Nowlan's inverted snobbishness directed toward outsiders is to be found in his poem "The Unhappy People." Here his peasant narrator cites as proof of superiority over effete academics and city-dwellers, the physicality of the rural male: "Professor, I don't suppose you'd care to armwrestle?" (40) Although I cannot agree with him intellectually, emotionally I cannot help but sympathize.

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