

**Sid HOLT and George W. LYON (eds.), *A Toast to Baldy Red: Back Porch Ballads and Parlour Poems* (Edmonton, NeWest, 1991, 164 p. ISBN 0-0220897-94-0)**

**Michael TAFT, *The Bard of Edam: Walter Farewell, Homesteader Poet* (North Battleford, Turner Warwick, 1992, xx + 166 p., ISBN 0-919899-29-3)**

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When is a poem not poetry? The question seems esoteric and perhaps effete, but it is worth asking in a context where one is meant to evaluate the publication of verse ranging from very satisfying to what can only be described as genuinely a waste of paper. The meanest dirty limerick is a poem of sorts, but if it is poetry, then poetry has no meaning. Yet there is a grey area in which might fall the very clever limerick, for example, or the skipping chants of children, the lyrics of popular songs, the nonsense rhymes and bantering rhythms of the language at play in legion halls and idlers' journals, the anguished confessions of adolescents in diaries and yearbooks. Not all poetry is great or even very good.

When the worth of a poem is entirely extrinsic, then surely it is not poetry. When the interest it generates is completely outside the text, when it is an artifact of everyday life, not vital vernacular but trivial verse, devoid of meaning or significance in itself, providing no pleasure but what the reader brings to reading it, then I would argue it is not poetry. So what? Good question. If nothing else, bad writing generates good argument.

It is necessary to distinguish between bad poetry and non-poetry in assessing Michael Taft's book on Walter Farewell, the "bard" of Edam, Saskatchewan. Walter failed as a homesteader; he was a drunk, a bootlegger, an enterprising and disreputable town character and, thirty-seven years after his death, is a published poet. His three recovered scribbles of occasional, contemplative, heroic, elegiac, comic, and ironic poems provide the skeletal structure of his biography and remnants of its soul, though he is still, at the book's end, a rather odoriferous corpse. Without the poems, there would be no story. Walter would long ago have been buried and all but forgotten. As it is, even the worst of his writings document the sensibility of a wastrel secretly and awkwardly engaged with the world around him, and the best give access to readers he could never have dreamed of having — to someone not unlike the rest of us, except in the particulars.

Between the covert and deliberate lines of his poems, Michael Taft writes a man's life. Were it not for the poems it would not be much worth reading; as it is, it is fascinating. Seldom does one get the chance to see so deeply into an intensely ordinary mind. Taft allows Walter to speak for himself wherever

possible and only interposes with his own words to explicate and speculate on coincident events in Walter's life or the life of the community. If Walter writes doggerel, reading it illuminates his world; when he writes well, it illuminates ours.

Walter Farewell was a poet; a failed poet perhaps, and certainly a silenced poet, but he wrote poetry as surely as ever a poet has written. The same cannot be said about many of the poetasters whose work is represented in *A Toast to Baldy Red*. That, perhaps, is the point. Few of the authors gathered in this book would have wanted to be known as poets (or would want, in the present tense, since some are still apparently very much alive). These "back porch ballads and parlour poems", as Sid Holt and George W. Lyon have called them, range from ingenuously inept to unpretentiously derivative, with one or two real gems among the dross. They are meant to charm, to amuse, and some of them do. They have been brought together, it seems, in a sort of celebration of the vernacular, the rural voice of an Alberta that has slipped into the past — last-year country. Their authors are people, hidden behind words, not poets revealed by them.

My auto, 'tis of thee,  
 Short Road to poverty,  
           Of thee I chant.  
 I blew a pile of dough  
 On you two years ago;  
 Now you refuse to go,  
           Or Won't or can't.

(From "My Auto, 'Tis of Thee!" Anonymous)

I don't much care if it's poetry or not; I know just what anonymous is talking about! But this hardly articulates the Alberta experience. Well, maybe it does; but that's not just Alberta speaking. There is nothing of place, no specificity of detail, nor local idiom, nor flavour.

At another extreme, consider the following excerpt from a poem by Agnes Copithorne:

Out of the twilight  
 came a thousand crows  
 with wings and voices like  
 a vast black shattering of glass.  
 Then as by an order they wheel,  
 coming to roost in the poplars,  
 claws hooked on branches  
 heads buried under wings,  
 silent as ancient sins.

Now that is poetry! But what on earth is the work of a genuine poet like Agnes Copithorne doing in a book like this, nestled uneasily among songs of Social Credit, laments for a past that never was, comic ballads and documentary ditties. The endnotes tell us that Copithorne lives in Jumping Pound, overlooking the Trans-Canada Highway, with a view of the Rockies in her living-room window. She is included, it seems, because of what she is not — a member of the urban academic literati. There is something very patronizing about sticking her in with poems about not peeing in warm water and the maudlin account of a stay in the san.

Holt and Lyon claim to have made their selection from over two thousand pieces. But why? Their criteria are obscure, at best; unless the purpose of the book is simply to be random and eclectic, a sampler to whet the appetite, a bathroom treasury. Contrary to their introductory notes, few of these poems are in the vernacular — the voices are mostly a generalized sudsy greeting-card idiom — and few of them document Alberta's heritage — they tend to trivialize the genuine past and substitute a simplistic saccharine alternative. It seems likely their selections are based simply on personal preference, or perhaps as representative of the materials they happened to have gathered. The reader is unsure.

The faults in *A Toast to Baldy Red* lie more with the editors than the works anthologized. You cannot "blame" a poem for being bad, and sometimes you can enjoy its exuberance or folksy wit or engaging banality:

Old Gene got up one morning, his eyes were blurred from sleep,  
 His mouth was dry and tasted, like droppings from a sheep.  
 With trembling hands he held his head, and cursed the demon wine,  
 Then swore that if he lived through this one, there'd not be another time.  
 (From Ray Anderson: "The Butchers")

Or:

There are many funny monickers  
 Upon the dotted line,  
 For horses on the race track  
 And ships upon the brine.  
 We get a smile from labels  
 On soda pop and fizz.  
 But it stumps our comprehension  
 Just what Social Credit is.  
 (From Ferguson James: "What Is It?")

Or:

The world aroond seems dull and drear,  
 Whirling in Stygian gloom, accursed,  
 For me, there's to one ray of cheer.  
 My bagpipe's bursted.  
 (From A. W. "Sandy" Durham: "Lament for the Burstied Bag")

Enough? Whatever it is we get from bad poems is soon satisfied. The cowboy songs, the farm songs, the threnodies of disaster are better. "Death in the Blizzard's Wake" by Helen Standing, "Dune MacRae on the Harvest Excursion" by F. J. Cameron, and "The Coalhurst Mine Explosion" by Anna T. Burchak are all entertaining, though none of them is enthralling or especially memorable.

The one piece that might truly be called a folk poem, Sara E. Johnson's celebration of the nuptials of Ricky Laboucane and his bride Julie, "Ricky's Wedding Day," shows just how intimate and authentic bad poetry can be. Bad poetry; good poem:

Then off we went to celebrate  
Down at the Coachman's Inn;  
To drink our way to dinner  
And watch the guests come in.

...

The blood of all those Irishmen  
In each McMurray vein,  
Was matched by Indian warrior blood  
In every Laboucane.

...

And I who was your wedding guest,  
When summer turns to fall,  
Will think of your gay wedding day,  
The finest one of all.

Holt and Lyon are more interested in mawkish "frontier" ballads that tend to echo or anticipate country lyrics set loose without the music. Fine. It is a worthwhile project, but might have been better, more the collection it intends to be, if there were more wedding songs and the like, private stories set to public verse.

*The Bard of Edam* is another story. It is the privacy of Walter Farewell's poetry or, rather, of his life, that makes Michael Taft's poetic biography so attractive to the reader. There is an ambivalence about the text that is haunting, deeply disturbing, and ultimately very satisfying. Here is a man, an emotional and social recluse, who in his secret world wrote poetry. And his poems are not the personal musings of a wasted life, the jottings of a ne'er-do-well. There are carefully crafted, meant for public appreciation. They are the treasure hidden in the mattress of the derelict, the founding's papers, showing him a king.

Farewell's poems are sometimes tortured renderings of outmoded texts. You can hear in the archaic language, the poetical conceits, the forced rigid metrics, a schoolboy's lifelong fascination with the poetry he was taught in childhood. His poems begin with accounts from growing up near Colborne, Ontario, just east of Toronto, followed by declamations in response to the Boer

War, and then poems of homesteading, bootlegging, and finally of Edam, itself, from a lifelong outsider's perspective.

Sometimes his poems are whimsical:  
 My right foot's little toe is froze,  
 And it is sore enough God knows  
 'Twas fifty six degrees below  
 The day I froze my little toe  
 ("On Freezing My Toe," Jan., 1907)

Sometimes folksy and confessional:

But on his homeward trip that night beneath the blinking stars  
 His head was high as any man's, he felt as bold as Mars;  
 He challenged Fate to do his worst, he would no favours ask;  
 He waved his hat and cried, "Hurrah!" and shook his whisky flask.  
 (From "He Thought He'd Take One Little Drink," 1911)

And sometimes bitter, unnerving, raw and sophisticated at the same time:

Oh holy Edam! wond'rous gem!  
 Thou little New Jerusalem!  
 All sorts of grafting crooks abound,  
 There's much that's rotten, little sound  
 The men are worse than bulls or boars,  
 The women — most of them are whores;  
 And truth, no more by cunning mastered,  
 Would prove near every child a bastard.  
 ("Edam," Feb. 1915)

There are certainly awkwardness in this (auto)biography. Occasionally I thought I had stumbled into another work by Paul Heibert. But Taft and his subject, Walter Farewell, collaborate for the most part with affection and energy to convey authentic experience in the world. Together they tell an important story, articulating the sensibility of the inarticulate, speaking from the seamy centre of the community we share. The poetry of Walter Farewell, the good and bad of it, is a testament as much to us, to where we have come from and who we are, as to a strange small man we hardly knew.

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