Working with George Woodcock

Mike Doyle

Abstract
George Woodcock’s contribution to Canadian and British Columbia culture was as a consummate man of letters. He created a substantial, wide-ranging body of work, including some pioneering thought on Canadian matters. As many do, he began as a poet and he became an accomplished one, but, as often happens, that aspect of his work was subsumed under the “man of letters” category. The founding editor of Canadian Literature, Woodcock played a formative role in scholarly thought about writing in this country, especially during the 1960s. University of Victoria Emeritus Professor Mike Doyle knew George Woodcock and reflects on their working relationship.

George Woodcock first conceived himself as a poet. This discovery began around 1925, when he was thirteen. Although born in Winnipeg, Canada, he then lived and went to school in England, thus naturally enough he became an English poet, influenced by the predominant Thirties group of W H Auden and his “McSpaunday” circle.1

Woodcock’s collection Notes on Visitations: Poems 1936–1975, a readable, modest 100-page collection from forty years’ work, has a salutary introduction of interest by one of Canada’s major poets, Woodcock’s friend Al Purdy. Purdy begins by pointing out, as of 1975, the range and versatility in the general body of Woodcock’s work, which included writing on Bakunin and the anarchists, Ghandi and India, the Doukhobors, Gabriel Dumont, and much more. “I’ve wondered occasionally how he does it”, says Purdy. “One big reason is Inge, his wife. She drives the Volks and he doesn’t. She also cooks and writes, so that they make a pair whose total is more than the parts.”2 Inge, a professional-level photographer, acted as secretary, publicist, and general factotum. In other words, Inge Woodcock was indispensably part of a joint operation.

For George’s part in it, Purdy says: “All I understand is that Woodcock is a great human being, protean and in some understated way, magnificent. He is largely responsible for the regeneration of a country’s literature.”

Another of Woodcock’s books, Taking It to the Letter,3 is a selection of his letters to other writers, mostly from 1972 to the date of the book’s publication. Starting from his long time friend and book collaborator Ivan Avakumic, correspondents range from P K

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Page through Margaret Atwood, Hugh McLennan, Irving Layton, Roderick Haig-Brown, Earle Birney, Margaret Laurence, and many others. Mine was a slighter friendship with George than were many of these people’s, but he includes two letters to me and one, to Irving Layton, about me. I should explain that, through the good offices of P K Page, I began corresponding with George and reviewing for Canadian Literature in 1970. This happy conjunction continued for sixteen years, so I have a file of over eighty letters from him.

My first review for Canadian Literature, a rather heavy-handed piece on George Jonas, was followed in 1972 by a substantial essay, “The Occasions of Irving Layton,”4 the trigger for Woodcock’s letter to Layton of January 17, 19735 Layton has apparently complained of my pigeonholing him as an “occasional” poet, which might seem to imply a lack of seriousness on his part. My actual sense of him and his work was far from that. As it happens, I saw (and still see) occasional poetry as an honourable activity, the sort of poetry which arises from its own occasion, as distinct from Creative Writing department poems which typically are brought forth as part of a program, contributions to a “themed” slim volume, etc. George placates Layton:

Doyle is indulging in a piece of New Zealand Scottish mist. I think what he really means is not so much that you are an occasional poet but that your poems are the occasions of your poetic personality — presumably something like the phases of the moon. . . . I don’t believe he’s shaken off the Victorian miasma of Christchurch, where they’re still all muscular Christians and the schools have beating prefects, which even the English have abandoned. He’s an amiable honest man, very pleasant to sit with over beer, he still believes that writing has to be ambiguous to be good, and that schizophrenia makes the whole world kin. If you care to write something on his piece, I’ll publish it.6

Layton, apparently, did not care to. This benign twaddle of George’s is largely a flight of fantasy, but typical of him in its generosity and in the kernel of understanding he offers. Having the greatest respect for the best of Layton’s poetry, I emphatically did not mean to suggest that he was a part-timer or hobbyist. I do believe ambiguity is one effective writing device: but “Schizophrenia makes the whole world kin.” I’d never have thought of that and don’t believe it for a nanosecond.

I have in common with George Woodcock that we each grew up in England, though neither actually belonged there, and we both started out from meagre circumstances. As another poet friend, Peter Bland, put it back then: “I taste the damp recurring thought / of being bred to expect so little.” From the age of seventeen, for eleven years, George worked as a Great Western Railways clerk in the well-named city of Slough, west of London. As in my case, George’s poetry proved to be his ticket out of a straitened way of

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4 Canadian Literature 54 (1972), 70–83.
5 Taking it to the Letter, 40–41.
6 Ibid.
life. His work began to be accepted by little magazines and he found a literary
environment in the pubs around Victoria Station, an environment that included the
solicitor-poet Roy Fuller, the mystery writer and critic Julian Symons, and poet-
educationist-art critic Herbert Read. Thus he formed a background in British writing and
culture which enabled him to write cogently about a range of figures including George
Orwell (in a good book, *The Crystal Spirit*), Aldous Huxley, Oscar Wilde, the political
philosopher William Godwin, and the Amazon traveler and botanist, Henry Walter Bates.

A major aspect of Woodcock’s writing back then derived from his concern with social
problems and a political perspective which was to prove key in marking out his identity
as a writer, and this takes focus in one of his best known books, *Anarchism: A History of
Libertarian Ideas and Movements*. Long before this he had edited *The State* by Peter
Kropotkin, an anarchist figure who crops up many times in Woodcock’s oeuvre,
including his introduction to an edition of Kropotkin’s most famous work, *Mutual Aid*
(1989). Other Woodcock titles in this area are *The Basis of Communal Living*, *The
Writer and Politics*, a biography of the French anarchist Pierre Joseph Proudhon, then, jumping over some titles, *Evolution and Environment*. When George Fetherling’s
biography appeared in 1998, it was titled *The Gentle Anarchist: A Life of George
Woodcock*.

Simply put, Woodcock’s contribution to Canadian and British Columbia culture rests in
the fact that he was a consummate man of letters, with a substantial, wide-ranging body
of work, including some pioneering work on Canadian matters. As a good many of us do,
he began as a poet and he became an accomplished one whose *Collected Poems* were
published in 1983. But, as often happens, that aspect of his work was subsumed under the
“man of letters” category.

The aim in this essay is to look at his direct contribution to British Columbia culture,
though as foregoing details have shown, he contributed a great deal indirectly in the sense
that his was excellent work coming from a BC-based writer: for example, *Walls of India*
with paintings by Toni Onley; a biography of Gandhi; *Faces of India: A Travel

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13 Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre.  
14 Victoria, BC: Sono Nis Press, 1983.  
Narrative, with photos by Ingeborg Woodcock, The Greeks in India and Kerala: A Portrait of the Malabar Coast and Dry Wells of India.

Toni Onley’s readable “as told to” memoir, Flying Colours, contains an amusing chapter on the travel adventure that resulted in Walls of India. Onley, who developed a lasting friendship with the Woodcocks, portrays his travel partner as a rumpled but buttoned-down sahib. The following little anecdote was preceded some months earlier by a Hotel Vancouver meeting in support of the Canadian Indian Village Aid society:

Despite the heat, George sported the same jacket and black tie he had worn to the CIVA dinner months earlier. I shook my head.

“I don’t think anyone is going to take offence if you take off your jacket and tie, George. You’d be a lot more comfortable.”

He rested his pencil, then he loosened his tie. “I’ll think about it.”

Following this, Onley provides an interesting account of Woodcock’s writing methods while “on the road.” Equally interesting is the brief story of how Walls of India got its name. Onley explains: “I never place people in my pictures,” inferring that a good deal of architecture appears in his paintings for this book. Woodcock, for his part, could build on this, observing that: “India is a country full of invisible walls. . .There are walls of language, walls of caste, walls of religion, and a high wall between the rich and the poor.” Flying Colours also includes a touching portrayal the Woodcocks’ visits to Onley’s ground floor studio, in the years before George’s death in 1995, a frail Woodcock now crippled by arthritis, aided by walking stick.

In a piece titled “Fragments from a Tenth-Hour Journal,” Woodcock says,

From the first day of my working life at sixteen. . .I began to save money, calculating that at forty. . .I might have a basic income of two pounds a week, on which. . .I could live in the country and devote myself to writing. Travel then came second. Actually, by heeding the knock of opportunity, by taking

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22 Ibid., 286.
23 Ibid., 295.
calculated risks, I freed myself from nine-to-five servitude by twenty-eight, found the means to travel as well as to dedicate myself to writing...\textsuperscript{25}

Fetherling, in his Introduction to this work, notes that by then Woodcock had published fifty or so books. He also makes a salutary point, that his seemingly eclectic work (Woodcock’s oeuvre) in fact has “unity and single mindedness.” As Fetherling observes, “The common thread, simply, has been the way man-made institutions pose a threat to human dignity and freedom.”\textsuperscript{26} He was among those who believed, first and foremost, in the integrity of the individual.

Among other contributions on what might be called “travel subjects,” Woodcock wrote on China, \textit{Caves in the Desert} (1995); on Peru, \textit{Incas and Other Men} (1959); on Asia, \textit{Gods and Cities} (1966); on Tibet, \textit{Into Tibet: The Early British Explorers} (1971); on Mexico, \textit{To the City of the Dead} (1957) and \textit{South Sea Journey} (1976).

When it comes to direct contributions to Canadian culture, a rough count reveals fifteen titles, including the well-known biography of \textit{Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and His Lost World} (1978) — a work still respected amongst Canada’s Métis community — and his 1968 book \textit{The Doukhobors} on which he collaborated with longtime friend Ivan Avakumovic. He also translated a vast work by Marcel Giraud, \textit{Métis in the Canadian West} (1985). At least ten more Woodcock titles focus on Canadian literature, including \textit{The World of Canadian Writing: Interviews and Recollections} (1980), which appeared not long after his “liberation” from being editor of \textit{Canadian Literature}, and from being a salaried university lecturer (for whom was created the unique retirement status of “lecturer emeritus”). His anthology, \textit{The Anarchist Reader}, published just at “liberation” time (1977) was, he contends, “the last of my books to originate in England.”\textsuperscript{27}

What followed was \textit{Peoples of the Coast}, an important contribution mingling history and ethnology, a subject which had immediately interested Woodcock from his first arrival in Victoria in 1949 when he “found the chaotic little museum, stuffed with strange and impressive artifacts, which at that time was crammed into a few basement rooms in the Legislative Building.”\textsuperscript{28} (An interesting sidelight here is that, at the very same moment, in the new and, so to speak, embryonic Art Gallery, worked Assia Wevill, wife of Canadian poet David Wevill, eventually to become a tragic figure in the saga of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes.)\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Walking Through the Valley} (Toronto: ECW Press, 1994).
\textsuperscript{28} Edmonton, AB: Hurtig, 1977.
\textsuperscript{29} SeeYehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, \textit{Lover of Unreason: Assia Wevill} (Carroll & Graf, 2006). After Plath’s suicide, Wevill married Hughes. She gassed herself in the same manner as Plath.
Both Peter Hughes and W H New write positively about Woodcock’s eighteen-year editorship of *Canadian Literature*, which New sees as “instrumental both in encouraging informed critical commentary and in bringing critic and writer together to reflect, and to partake in, the Canadian social milieu.”

As a small part of this scene in its last eight years or so, I can attest to this. As both critic and writer, I had a positive sense of the combination. My fifteen-year letter friendship with George was entirely beneficial for me; I liked working for him and he gave the opportunity to work on writers and themes that mattered to oneself. In writing full-length essays about Irving Layton and Al Purdy, and intending to do others, I was simultaneously attempting to immerse myself in Canadian writing. It was part of my re-education, and George was sympathetic to that. He was enthusiastic about the work I did for him, so I was happy to keep on doing it, the more so as he kept high standards while avoiding turning *Canadian Literature* into an academic journal. I want to elaborate here on one aspect of my collaboration with him, as otherwise his editorship, widely respected as it is, needs no endorsement from me.

Locally, the concept of Pacific Rim writing has come to the forefront recently, as witness the establishment of *Pacific Rim Review of Books*. Back in December 1970, I put to George the idea of making an anthology of Pacific Rim poets. He suggested I send a proposal to a Mr. Blicq at the newly emerging UBC press, but thought I should shift the concept a little sideways and propose an anthology of Commonwealth poets living in Canada. This was a project which came to nothing, but I enjoyed working on it and I think George did, too. On January 23, 1977, he wrote: “I’ve decided to bow out of *Canadian Literature* after 18 years. . . I shall be handing over to whoever the university chooses (and they haven’t chosen yet) at the end of June. . . I like your idea of the anthology *The Other Poets in Canada*. . . Why don’t you try it?” This is not the place to go into details, but George said, “I do feel it is an important and timely idea.” We soon talked of collaboration and exchanged lists of names of immigrant poets, coming up with thirty or more, with the idea of presenting another “dimension” in Canadian poetry. The project eventually foundered when neither of us could interest a publisher, though in that respect George had a far stronger arm than I did. Both of us took it seriously, George at one point involving Robin Skelton in the discussions; Skelton, however, decided to do an issue of *Malahat Review* on “the West Coast Renaissance” (I suppose he did it; I don’t recall.) This interesting correspondence on the anthology went on over two years and demonstrates well George’s professionalism, literary energy and commitment.

I am impressed by what sense I have of George Woodcock’s overall achievement as a professional man of letters. So far I have not had the pleasure of reading George Fetherling’s biography, but I look forward to it. I am very touched when I read Donald Stephens’ “Man as Pattern,” a joint portrait of George and Inge Woodcock, chiefly in their home, recollected from the times Stephens went there to work on the quarterly paste-ups for *Canadian Literature*. In the fifteen years or so of my closest contact with George, I was engaged in helping to bring up a family of four children in Victoria, so my

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contact was almost entirely by letter; I was not able to establish closer encounters, such as meeting regularly “over a beer.” I regret that. Then, of course, after George achieved his “liberation,” and I was therefore no longer one of his contributors, we had less to write to each other about. In the mid-1980s I was involved, with a group of UVic political scientists in publication of two books on BC politics, *The New Reality* (1984) and *After Bennett* (1986). George would have been a distinguished contributor to either of these, though the impulse behind them was essentially Marxist and might not have been a fit. However, he made some moves to contribute to *After Bennett* only to be put off by the project’s “house rules.”

Rather than dwell on that, I’ll take refuge in Stephens’ account of their last afternoon at McLeery Street, working on the paste-up, a ritual, which had gone on for twenty years. Writing in 1978, Stephens says: “If today we no longer worry about whether we have a Canadian Literature, this is in large part because of George Woodcock, who gave us the pattern we needed to acknowledge our literature as a living presence.”

From the first, Stephens noticed the details of that working space, among them a largish, primitive terra cotta statue of a South American church.

The last afternoon “was much the same as all the other afternoons had been”, Stephens writes. “For the first time in some years,” he happened to mention the terra cotta church. “As I was leaving about 5.30. . .Inge said that Don should have the church, and should have it now, today. As I left the house clutching the church, I was inarticulate.” He had his talisman, in an example of Woodcock’s “selflessness” he had mentioned earlier. I envy Don Stephens the grace of such an exit. What I have are written recollections of working with and for a remarkable man, of many writing talents, a human amalgam of diffidence and magnanimity, not only an important facilitator at the “naissance” of Canadian literature, but in his own fashion a gift to that literature.

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31 Ibid.