BOOK REVIEWS

MARGARET LAURENCE—AL PURDY: A FRIENDSHIP IN LETTERS

John Lennox, ed.. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993.

By Clara Thomas

John Lennox, a Professor at York, is particularly well-qualified to edit this volume of vivid, frank and writerly letter-exchanges. For many years a staunch friend and partisan of Margaret Laurence, he began his academic career in Canada's high nationalism years of the early seventies, an appropriate proving ground for his work on this volume.

The first encounter of Laurence and Purdy was originally through the agency of Jack McClelland, that inspired impresario of the 1960s Canadian literary scene, who in 1966 had sent a copy of *The Cariboo Horses* to Margaret at Elm Cottage, Buckinghamshire. Her life at that time in its outward circumstances was a picture of combined professionalism and domesticity, her children, Jocelyn and David, along with her writing, its centre, and on the periphery the manifold concerns of everyday living—"cats and roses," the phrase that she and Purdy came to use as a touchstone in their communications. The Purdy volume made her homesick and she agreed to return to Canada for a brief visit that summer, partly to promote the publication of *A Jest of God* and partly because as she wrote in her first letter to him, "you were the person I most wanted to meet....It was owing to a line from a poem in *The Cariboo Horses* that I went back to Canada at all last summer." They missed each other on that trip, but on her return to England their letter-friendship began and continued in remarkable intensity until her permanent return to Canada in 1973 and then, more sporadically, until her death in 1987.

By the time they met briefly, when she returned to Canada to receive the Governor-General's Award for *A Jest of God* in June of 1967, their friendship was well underway and the patterns that their letters were to follow through the years had already taken shape. First and always, they found each other knowledgeable, sympathetic and eagerly reciprocal in discussions of their primary concerns—their work first, then books in general, other writers, publishers and always, the difficulties they encountered. Writing for Margaret was often agonizingly difficult, sometimes, briefly, totally joyful, and always as necessary to her as breathing. She went through draft after draft of their novels, and on one occasion, in the throes of *The Fire-Dwellers*, began a letter gloomily and portentously with, "I am a firebug. I have just burned all the hundreds of pages I wrote on this novel three years ago...." Al, for his part, was bedevilled by the difficulties of piecing together any kind of living income from all the editing and free-lancing he undertook to fund the journeys he found so necessary for the genesis of his poems. From the beginning he copied out poems-in-progress that he sent to Margaret in his letters, both for her pleasure and for the generous and penetrating comments he found so valuable. Some of his "gift poems" penetrated deep into her imagination—it is impossible to read "Joe Barr," for instance, appended to a letter in the summer of 1967, and not see in "Old Joe...pushing the garbage with his stick/ grinning like a split orange/telling himself stories all day" the not-so-distant progenitor of Christie Logan.

On Margaret's side of the correspondence a friend and former student wrote the most pertinent comment I've seen.

> About Margaret's letters. I noticed at first that she was self-deprecating. She would state an opinion and then qualify it. How I recognize that tactic in women! By the end, though, you could see her confidence as a writer and a woman in the relationship. I enjoyed that view of growth. The most interesting part to me was the clear view of the difficulties encountered by a woman writer with the demands of husband, children, house, guests, cooking, making a living, etc. The daily living demands on her were so much greater than any demands on Purdy's time. This entanglement of females in daily living is a point that I have tried to make male professors see before and they just won't.

Margaret had separated from Jack Laurence and come to England from Vancouver with her children in 1962 and by 1967 had been living in her beloved Elm Cottage near Penn in Buckinghamshire for three years. She was fully committed to writing and embroiled in the early stages of the novel that was to become *The Fire-Dwellers*. The difficulties of combining the demands of the novel with the daily demands of home and children were enormous, but to Purdy she could admit them and be sure of understanding: "My kids hate it when I'm writing as I'm often rather absent in every way that matters...."

Moreover she was beginning to face the fact that her marriage was effectively over, though she and Jack had tried repeatedly to bridge their separation. Jack Laurence had been understanding and encouraging when her writing remained her avocation, but he could neither accept nor understand her total professional commitment to it and the inevitability of its demands. In Purdy she had found a friend who had himself made a total commitment to his work despite decades of poverty and a hand-to-mouth existence. He was a veteran of years of squeezing in poetry along with the heavy demands of manual labour, and was just beginning to enjoy a somewhat less precarious life, for his work was beginning to consistently command notice and respect, and the burgeoning nationalism of the sixties was producing numbers of freelance writing and editing project that he undertook.

Laurence and Purdy each found in the other's voice and interests exactly the tonic necessary at that time and for long after. In Margaret, Purdy found a close and sensitive poetry reader, one whom he came to acknowledge as the best reader he had, far and away above the critics he was used to; in Al, Margaret found a supportive male voice, as widely read as herself, at least as indefatigable a traveler and, most important, a stubbornly "grass-roots and proud of it" fellow Canadian. Ever since *The Stone Angel* she had been firmly committed to writing of her own place and had known that Manawaka contained at least three more novels. As for Al, through lean years and good ones, he was stubbornly the same, restlessly traveling to where, for him, the poems waited to be sensed and brought forth, but always returning to Ameliasburgh, Ontario, his home. From the very beginning they wrote to each other as if they had been friends for a lifetime. Purdy is a superb, naturally gifted letter-writer, and Margaret, her quick empathy fully in play, matched him from the first.

It would not be an exaggeration to subtitle this book "The Repatriating of Margaret Laurence." After Africa she had lived in Vancouver for five years but she had increasingly felt out of place there, and since moving to England she had become somewhat anglicized, speaking with a noticeably English diction and inflection and, as evidenced in the CBC interview with Barry Callaghan used briefly in the "First Lady of Manawaka" film, with more than a trace of an English accent. She loved and idealized Elm Cottage with its spacious country surroundings, overgrown garden and many rooms and so did her children who were flourishing in English schools. True, she had not found in London the lively literary society she had imagined would await her there, but she did have good friends, and more and more, her home was becoming a focus for Canadians of all ages. When she began the correspondence with Al, the thought of returning to Canada permanently was hardly on her horizon at all, though she recognized that because she would henceforth be writing about Manawaka the matter of a Canadian "voice" was of essential importance to her work. As she often said, she felt that she had reclaimed her grandparents' voices and idioms in *The Stone Angel* and she knew very well that her ability to inscribe a uniquely Canadian voice in her fiction was her most crucial asset.

For his part, Al's voice and idiom in poetry as in his letters was uncompromisingly and earthily Canadian. His terms of reference were the same as Margaret's, their senses of humour were the same, and from the beginning, Al promoted her return to Canada. Particularly after he and Eurithe, his wife, visited Margaret at Elmcot in the spring of 1968, the England-Canada decision was a recurrent theme, and Al teased her unremittingly about returning home, even calling England a "desert" without seriously disturbing the easy flow of their communication. From being a decision a long way into the future, her move to Canada came closer and closer—without Purdy's fairly constant needling, it might well have been put off much longer.

We are quite unlikely to be presented with a more engagingly candid friendship than these Laurence-Purdy letters show forth—the illusion of hearing their voices in the next room is very strong. Together, their letters create for their readers, as they did for their writers, an enclosed little world where they found in each other sounding-boards for moods from deepest gloom to highest hilarity, and where the immediacy of their responses to each other energizes every page of this handsome and impeccably edited collection.

SALVAGE

Daphne Marlatt. Red Deer: Red Deer College Press, 1991.

THE WAY TO COME HOME

Caroline Smart. London, ON: Brick Books, 1992.

POEMS FOR MEN WHO DREAM OF LOLITA

Kim Morrissey. Regina: Coteau Books, 1992.

By Deborah Jurdjevic

So much of women's poetry, Richard Howard said at a poetry conference here several years ago, seems to be about their bodies and the weather. At first glance Howard's descriptive summary appears reductive and incomplete. One thinks of the line running through Bishop and Moore and back to Dickinson, the three poets writing a poetry in which landscape is the exponent of human emotion and the body is transparent. At second glance, however, we recognize with Howard that the weather, the body, and nature are interrelated, and that nature has ever offered an alternative to a man-made culture.

Contemporary women's poetry may indeed write the body as text, and in exploring the relationship between the female body and the natural world, poets may discover a space for poems which is independent of tradition. This seems to be Daphne Marlatt's intention in *Salvage*, her recent book of poems. She returns to poems written twenty years ago to rewrite them in the light of her experience with feminism and feminist literary theory. Her central metaphor links water with language, and the majority of her poems explore the elemental nature of one or the other of these two forces.

Her exploration is not without risks. The endless play of language which yields the joke, the pun, the deliberately misplaced modifier, the stream-of-consciousness monologue where thought and image appear to reflect upon one another at random,