

A Poet and a Legend

by Northrop Frye
Vic Report 7. 3 (1979): 6–7.

Everybody who knew Ned Pratt misses him greatly now he is gone, and it is natural to feel that his passing is the end of an era. But there was no era: there was only Ned: a kind of force of nature that could have existed at any time, though it can only exist once. Everybody knew, or thought he knew, who Ned was: a genial, rather simple soul who loved giving parties, who was incompetent at all practical affairs, from car-driving to committee-sitting, who was as absent-minded as poets and professors are supposed to be, who never failed to respond to a bum with a hard-luck story, who had an endless appetite for good stories and wrote a good many poems that were good stories too.

Well, he was like this in some ways, but one could describe him very differently and still be accurate. He was a scholar who had reached an impressive level of competence in three disciplines: theology, psychology and English literature. He wrote a book on St. Paul which included an exhaustive analysis of Paul's language; he was a demonstrator in psychology who brought Wundtian and Jamesian conceptions into his poetry (one of the many things to regret about the recent sudden death of Professor Irving was that he never completed an illuminating essay that he had in his mind on Pratt's use of psychological conceptions). He was an erudite student of literature, and literary echoes and allusions came effortlessly from him. Each of his major poems was also a work of scholarship, carefully documented by research both theoretical and practical. His themes and moods, too, were often lonely, brooding, bitter ones, full of the pointless cruelty of both man and nature, of man's capacity for suffering and endurance, of the agonized questionings that shatter the comfortable words of religion, of the great achievements of man that vanish into the past with no trace left of them.

How does one put these two Pratts together? Yeats has a theory that poets adopt a "mask," and write poetry that is as different from their ordinary personalities as it can be. And to some extent there was, in Ned's life at Victoria College, a dramatic reversal of his earlier life in Newfoundland, where his poetic imagination had taken shape. In the fishing villages of Newfoundland men fought for their food at the risk of their lives; they spent winters eating monotonously and not enough; anything in the way of gracious living was a prohibitive luxury. I am unlikely to forget the moment when, in the first year of our marriage, Ned encountered my wife and me on the street and said, with his blue eyes gleaming: "I'm going to buy you a great big steak!" Nobody but Ned, with a background of Newfoundland life and many years of living on very little to get through college, would have expressed so much affection so directly in terms of food. Ned dramatized, for all his friends and for the whole university, the conception of the symposium, the intimate party where food and drink served the interests of jokes and good stories, and where, much more important, jokes and good stories served the interests of the lively but serious talk, the flow of ideas, which was what he really wanted from his parties. In Newfoundland he was filled with the sense of the purposelessness of nature: the sea endlessly beating and wearing down the rocks, the great icebergs floating down from the Arctic and melting into the water, the storms that destroyed human life without either malice or pity. Something of this gave him the capacity to live in a pure present moment: to meet him, however casually, was to be accepted completely for that moment. His eyes never strayed over one's shoulder to look for someone else more interesting or important; and his occasional absent-mindedness was the result of the fact that his mind, unlike most of ours, was not continually revolving around his watch.

There were some contrivances in Ned's life, perhaps. I think he was willing to caricature himself, to give people the impression that he was much more simple-minded than he actually was, in order to carry on his own work undisturbed. One has to resort to such devices, in a modern university, if one is to concentrate on the primary work of teaching and writing, avoiding the mazes and meanders that practical sense is apt to wander in. In the year of his retirement he turned up unexpectedly at a meeting

A Poet and a Legend

Published on E.J. Pratt Library (<https://library.vicu.utoronto.ca>)

of the Graduate Department of English (he hated graduate teaching), sat through three hours and a half of petitions and what not, and then, under “further business,” announced that this was undoubtedly his last meeting of the Graduate Department, and therefore—at which point he produced a bottle of rye. It was a typical gesture, but he was also reminding us of a certain sense of proportion. Of course no one can maintain such an attitude consistently without having it become a part of oneself. Ned’s innocence was as genuine as anything could be, and he was the most uncalculating of men, yet a hidden and deeply calculating wisdom inside him deliberately chose that innocence. I suppose I am saying only that he could have been a great many other things if he had wanted to be.

There was a mask, then: there was a poet and there was a personality, and they were a contrast. But there was only one man, a man of such complete and obvious integrity that it never occurred to anybody to ask why the author of *The Witches’ Brew* should have spent his entire career teaching in a Methodist college. The point at which the personality turned into the poet was the point at which the sincerity of his kindness and good will suddenly became sincerity of craftsmanship. Nobody ever confused him about the difference: that is, nobody ever took a bad poem to Ned and got it called a good poem because he like the poet. Ned himself had been discovered by Pelham Edgar, who, if somewhat aloof in his social manner, was constantly looking for and helping out impoverished literary talent. Ned would help, but he was not a discoverer of others’ talents: he set a standard, and others came to him. I remember him almost pleading with an undergraduate: “But can’t you see what awful drivel this is?” Well, he couldn’t, but if he had he might have understood how the two halves of Ned fitted together. Ned Pratt is the only figure in Canadian literature, so far, great enough to establish a personal legend. And the legend was unique, because it had the poet behind it. There have been, on this campus and elsewhere, many genial hosts and absent-minded and lovable professors, but only one in whom the light of that kind of genius shone through.

Last updated: March 25, 2015

Source URL:

https://library.vicu.utoronto.ca/collections/special_collections/f20_edwin_john_pratt/frye_on_pratt_1979