

De Literary by PAMELA SEXSMITH

MILTON ACORN

'People's Poet'

Milton Acorn is a native poet of Prince Edward Island. Acorn was educated on the Island, became a carpenter by trade, and went to Toronto where he married writer Gwendolyn MacEwan. They were later divorced. He then went to Montreal and it was at this time, around 1956, that he pawned his carpentry tools and began to write seriously.

At his own expense he published a small book of poems entitled In Love and Anger. There followed The Brain's Target in 1960, Against a League of Liars in 1961, and in 1963, Jawbreakers.

In 1968 Acorn re-edited the four books and collected several poems from each, along with two short stories and some newer unpublished poetry, and created the volume I've Tasted My Blood, which was published the following year. In 1970 these selected poems won the "Canadian Poetry Award", an award granted by a group of Canadian Poets in opposition to the Governor General's Award. With this award, Acorn received the title, "The People's Poet". Ironically, in the same year the establishment's Governor General's award was won by poets George Bowering and Acorn's ex-wife Gwendolyn MacEwan.

Acorn's latest publication

is entitled More Poems For People and is a very fulling experience for those who have enjoyed his earlier work.

Milton Acorn is, according to his friend Al Purdy, the only communist poet in Canada. The label "communist" immediately conjures up an image of pages of radical hostile antagonistic poetic literature, yet Acorn's apolitical poetry tends to be rather subtle and based on an idealistic, rather than a philosophical or technical criteria. "Communism is somewhat of a religion to Acorn" to quote Al Purdy, from the

introduction of I've Tasted My Blood.

"He probably knows the Manifesto by heart, but I doubt that he would label the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia as anything other than a crime against humanity." In an earlier interview with the Cadre, Acorn classified himself as a Canadian Socialist. Acorn's involvement with any socialist organization is nil and he will not identify himself with any political party in Canada.

To Acorn, human involvement is of the utmost importance to his poetry. If he is writing a poem about an old barn and he is able to find a way to get an old man into that barn; Acorn is satisfied. To quote Dorothy Livesay: "Acorn's aim is to bring living objects, life

itself, back into perspective so that we may look at them freshly, not cynically. Obscurity and mystification are not a part of this method".

In this earthy-life-filled gusty-poetry, one finds vivid imagery, a strong rhythmic progression and most important of all, the ability to integrate form and content. Acorn says: "My favorite painter is Picasso. I love him because he is conscious of form, of the approach. Like him, I am deeply interested in various methods of presenting the content of my poetry. I find myself incapable of writing two poems with the same formal idea. Each poem is an experience in form to me".

Milton Acorn's poetry is an artistic extension of a working-class consciousness that hits out like an angry fist..... at poverty, inequality, hunger, want, dehumanization, and class-struggle in a capitalistic society.

His is the searing anger of a man who has "tasted my blood too much, to abide what I was born to".

Yet we find within some of his work the gentle workings of a sensitive and loving being. Acorn is 'with love' as a woman is 'with child'. Of Acorn one can say; that his poetry touches the universal as well as the particular; and while crying out for love, he cries out for Humanit

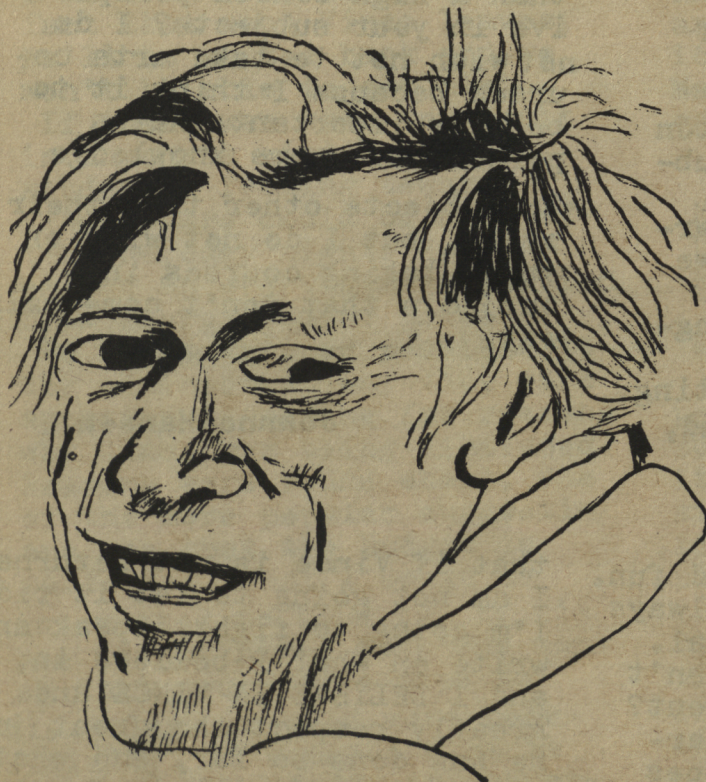
I'VE TASTED MY BLOOD

If this brain's over-tempered consider that the fire was want and the hammers were fists. I've tasted my blood too much to love what I was born to.

But my mother's look was a field of brown oats, soft-bearded; her voice rain and air rich with lilacs; and I loved her too much to like how she dragged her days like a sled over gravel.

Playmates? I remember where their skulls roll! One died hungry, gnawing grey perch-planks; one fell, and landed so hard he splashed; and many and many come up atom by atom in the worm-casts of Europe.

My deep prayer a curse. My deep prayer the promise that this won't be. My deep prayer my cunning, my love, my anger, and often even my forgiveness that this won't be and be. I've tasted my blood too much to abide what I was born to.



THE ISLAND

Since I'm Island-born home's as precise as if a mumbly old carpenter, shoulder-straps crossed wrong, laid it out, refigured to the last three-eighths of shingle.

Nowhere that plow-cut worms heal themselves in red loam; spruces squat, skirts in sand; or the stones of a river rattle its dark tunnel under the elms, is there a spot not measured by hands; no direction I couldn't walk to the wave-lined edge of home.

In the fanged jaws of the Gulf, a red tongue.

Indians say a musical God took up his brush and painted it; named it, in His own language, "The Island."