

# *In Love and Anger* by Dr. Richard Lemm

Excerpts from the recently released biography of PEI's "People's Poet," Milton Acorn

On 7 October 1969, Acorn again packed the house for a poetry reading. This time, however, he was back in Charlottetown to give his first public reading on PEI. He had previously read only privately, to individuals such as Frank Ledwell or Adrien Arsenault. Now, the maverick whose mind had been more fixed on poetry than construction, who had once been ridiculed and beaten up for being "dreamy" and "different," and who had left the Island in the early 1950s because there was virtually no community receptive to a serious writer, especially one concerned about the working classes and critical of the establishment—now, he was back as a

distinguished citizen, a prominent Canadian writer. Not yet the People's Poet, a Governor-General's medallist, or Dr. Acorn, he was well on his way to those distinctions. Moreover,

a receptive community existed, which turned out in force to hear Milton Acorn, who was in the process of becoming *the Island Poet*, author of several important books, including the recently published *I've Tasted*

The reading was sponsored by the new University of Prince Edward Island and the Canada Council, and was held in Montgomery Hall, part of the old Prince of Wales College

campus in downtown Charlottetown. (The year before, Prince of Wales College had sponsored a reading series through The Canada Council with Al Purdy, F.R. Scott, and Alden Nowlan.) As a

Edward Island" ("Native Poet"). A newspaper photo shows Acorn in a suit and tie, with well-groomed hair, looking positively professorial, while Professor Robert Campbell, a Cape Bretoner, looks over

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One popular and indisputable story about Acorn is that he wore running shoes both to the Governor General's ceremony and, the next year, to receive his Honorary Doctorate from UPEI. Some people have assumed this was

another rebellious or iconoclastic gesture, years before this attire became a trendy fashion statement. "They made a big deal out of those sneakers," says Mary Hooper, "and they always claimed they were the same pair. I've got a trunk load of them upstairs. He bought more sneakers than

anybody I ever knew. It wasn't that he wanted to be rough or anything. It was a matter of comfort. He couldn't get his feet to be comfortable in anything else." She also notes that, before the Governor-General's ceremony, Acorn practiced walking up to receive his medal: "He wanted to do that right."

local paper noted, he had "spent recent weeks with his family in Charlottetown, during which time he has spoken on Canadian literature to classes at the University of Prince

the poet's shoulder at *I've Tasted My Blood*. Hilda Woolnough, who had recently moved to PEI with her husband, remembers that night as the first time she saw and met Acorn: "The place was

absolutely packed and this extraordinary-looking guy finally arrived, went up the middle of the aisle, and took his place. We couldn't believe how fascinating his face was. He had this gargoyle face. When he started reading, he dedicated it to his mother, and every time he shouted his mother would respond, "Yeah Milton!"

designated host. Milton and family arrived a little late, and Bob was quite nervous about their arrival. And when they got there, his mother was in her cups, and Milton himself was flying fairly high. Bob was really nervous and asked me, 'Will you look after the family, and I'll take Milton up to the front.' There was still a little space at the back, so I invited them to sit with me."

John Smith, poet and English professor at UPEI, remembers Helen Cheering Milton on, and yelling at him to Read "I Shout Love." Ledwell recalls, "She was shouting, 'Read the one about your father, Milton.' and he'd wave with his hand like a giant bear clawing the air, trying to dissuade her from interrupting. But she was not to be discouraged. That was one of the highlights of the night. It would've been an embarrassment in many circles, but it was so much a part of Island culture that the mother was giving voice to her cultural pride."

Frank Ledwell explains that "This hall would have held 250 people, and Milton's reading was a full house, which was really quite something. Bob Campbell was teaching Canadian literature at that time, and he was the