

The third of Acorn's great honours came in 1977, when the Island's university elected him to the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*. John Smith presented him on 15 May 1977 to UPEI's convocation as

Milton James Acorn, a man militant, gentle, and generous, a poet, an Islander, a patriot, a lover, a revolutionary... His poems are poems of faith in the common people. Poems of wit, and of how wit has enabled the people to survive, and will enable them to prevail. Poems for the liberation of men and women from all forms of oppression. Poems of a tough and tender love. When Milton Acorn writes of the things of this world – of the patchwork

country side of this Island, of manhandled, seabattered lobster traps, of a trout pond or a hummingbird or a man's bristly head – those things seem to become more

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-from *In Love and Anger*

concrete, more material, and also more alive to us. He seems to find the words-rough textured and resilient – that the things themselves would be if natural things could be words. (Citation)

John Smith was in charge of Acorn for this event, and remembers that Acorn went shopping for clothes and “invested fairly heavily in a new rig for this occasion.” He wore orange canvas sneakers,

which stuck out beneath his grand doctoral gown. Mary Hooper thinks “they had somebody watching Milton all the time to make sure he didn't get up and make a speech.” His most memorable

remark on the occasion was an aside to Mary about one of the other recipients of an honorary doctorate that day: “Milton and I were sitting

together and he looks over. ‘Diefenbaker,’ he says, ‘Diefenbaker. In a hundred years time they will be saying, “Oh yeah, that’s the fellow that got his doctorate the same time as Milton Acorn.””

Smith had to take Acorn to the airport afterward, and arrived at the Charlottetown Hotel with an empty suitcase for Milton. Piled on an antique table in the hotel lobby was a “mountain of wrinkled clothes and other

belongings. On the way to the airport he seemed to be quite terrified that we were going to have an accident. I don't know whether earlier in life he'd had a fright or whether he distrusted professors to be on time to the airport.” Smith phoned him later that day at the Waverly Hotel to see if he'd arrived all right: “The desk clerk replied, ‘Dr. Acorn is busy right now and can't come to the phone.’”



Arrived with his Honorary Doctorate, “Milton made it quite clear to me,” says Smith, “that he would accept a post as writer-in-residence at the university. I didn't

encourage him with that hope, because even Reshard Gool argued that Milton wouldn't be the best choice for our first writer-in-residence. He did talk about how hard up he was, and made some of us feel guilty about taking the easy way out and not giving him the means to make a living as a poet.”

Now that Acorn had awards and acclaim, some friends thought there was irony in an anti-

such a gesture, even in 1968, and it added to his mystique. Acorn needed to accept and treasure these honours on his own behalf as an example of artistic and proletarian struggle, and on behalf of the “People” to whom his life and art were dedicated. “This things about Milton and praise,” says Woolnough. “Most people don't realize that Milton was very shy. He would go on a mile a minute, so much that everybody would move away from the table. But underneath that it was all terribly shy. There was the thing he'd done with Cedric Smith, *The Road to Charlottetown*. We met him outside [the Mackenzie Theatre] and he didn't even want to come in and he stayed way in the back shadows.. He was nervous and sort of proud.”

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