

MILTON ACORN TALKS ABOUT POETRY, POLITICS AND MILTON ACORN

Milton Acorn is a poet, Charlottetown native, ex-carpenter, working-class intellectual, and cross-Canada traveller. His latest book of poems, an anthology called "I've Tasted My Blood," has been nominated for this year's Governor-General's Award for Poetry. The award is due to be given this month.

Acorn (who is well described by fellow poet Al Purdy in his introductions to "I've Tasted My Blood") likes sitting around talking—the discussion usually drifts between poetry and politics, with poetry dispensed with rather early in the conversation — through one of the large cigars to which he seems addicted.

He is not sure if the Louis Cormier referred to below is the correct name of a young man who once showed him some poems.

The following interview is a slightly edited version of a typically long and rambling conversation we had recently.

CADRE: Is there any particular poem or poems that you've written that you like especially?

Acorn: Oh, yeah, all of them. Wait a minute, I'll read you one, let me see. . .

Hear with the wind still, the grass still,
sharp and erect like animal ears,
its green darkened,
its air and its light dark green,
birds hidden in the just trembling
leaves, chirping hoarse wonder,
and one white butterfly dancing into shade,
the rustle of the rain coming on

CADRE: Do you find you still write many poems about the Island or are they mostly about other places, Toronto and what not?

Acorn: I've wandered over this country, you know, from shore to shining shore, as I think Woody Guthrie said, and the social situation everywhere is awful. The country is in a bad way. I've gone to northern towns where the chief occupation of the people seemed to be staggering around drunk, or drifting around stoned, and not just the Indians. As a matter of fact, I've been in places where the Indians were conspicuous examples of sobriety.

CADRE: What's your general opinion on the state of Canadian poetry?

Acorn: Oh, I think it's very high. The quality at least measures up to American poetry, and it is well ahead of British poetry, in spite of the difference in population.

CADRE: Who are some of the Canadian poets you like?



Acorn: Well, Bowering, MacEwan, "Red" Lane, — he died a few years ago — and Pat Lane, his brother, Bill Bissett, that's all I can think of right now. Oh yes, Lionel Kearns.

CADRE: How about Alden Nowlan?

Acorn: Oh yes, Alden Nowlan, he's a genius.

CADRE: How do you rate some of the poets who are better known, like Leonard Cohen and Purdy, some of these people.

Acorn: Well Leonard Cohen really belongs in the class of French poets at that. He's not with the modern thing at all. He writes in English but he is writing as you would expect a French poet to write.

As for Irving, the man has been insane for years.

CADRE: Who's this?

Acorn: Irving Layton . . . yeah, I mean he's spent the last 10 or 15 years plagiarizing himself.

Purdy, well, you know, Purdy is equally entitled to me to be called the poet of the working man, and he's very good, there's no doubt about that.

CADRE: This is sort of off the topic but have you ever heard of a poet by the name of Mark Strand?

Acorn: No, you see, when I was starting to write poetry, you could count the number of poets of any quality in the country on the fingers of two hands, today there's thousands of poets.

CADRE: Well the reason I asked you is because I was reading a book called The Young American Poets, leafing through it, and there's this guy Mark Strand, he's from Summerside and I haven't heard of him before. I picked up the New American Review the next day and he was in it, he's been published in the New York Review of Books and the New Yorker, he's got two books out, one by Atheneum, and it just sort of amazed me because nobody around here has heard of him or knows that he's from Summerside.

Acorn: Ah yes, and Ryerson Press also has two good poets, who are published in the New York Times, working in its print office.

CADRE: Are there any poets on the Island that you know of?

Acorn: Well I know Frank Turgeon, I think he's got a good deal of promise, and Louis Cormier the same way, I think he has promise.

CADRE: What happened with the League of Canadian Poets?

Acorn: Did anything happen to it?

CADRE: Well, why was it started and what is it doing?

Acorn: Blessed if I know. I meant when the League of Canadian Poets was started up I naturally thought it would be to improve conditions for poets, and the first thing I knew it was engaged in cutting down rates.

CADRE: You mean, cutting down the amount the poet would receive?

Acorn: Yeah. . .

CADRE: How hard is it to get a book published by any fairly major publisher in Canada?

Acorn: Not hard, if you're even half good. Or at least it was when I started, now there may be some good ones being overlooked.

CADRE: Have you read much of what's called the "Black Mountain" school in the States?



Acorn: Yeah.

CADRE: What do you think of Olson and Creeley?

Acorn: Well Olson has a projective idea of what I was doing. Olson on prosody, advanced prosody they call it prosody, but it's the science of poetry," that's a good book. But that's the best book I've read. he wrote it with his tongue in his cheek. I got to read it with a grain of salt.

CADRE: What happened with the Georgia Straight in Vancouver?

Acorn: Well I was in a political outfit that gave me the political idea. Such a thing requires a lot of time. It was a false start before they got it. It took about two years to get it. me and Pierre Poupee got it. Maoists had forgotten the task.

They started a policy of writing an article, they'd write an article.

Of course it didn't help. It was a calculation from the first was theirs.

CADRE: You were a Maoist. What political philosophy do you have?

Acorn: Oh I am a Communist.

CADRE: Do you follow any political lines, Lenin, Marx, Trotsky?

Acorn: I think this kind of socialism has been tried for long years. It is obviously not working. We have been forced into the CCF, NDP (the party every ten years, every time I came to the decision might realize, came to the decision to do it ourselves and then say, that after all three or four years the system of government is not working, amongst the Indians, be listening a lot more to the Indians. They've certainly studied the white man and the white man does.

CADRE: Are you part of any socialist group in Canada?

Acorn: No, I periodically write for "The Worker". And, you know, various unions. Outside that, no. I'm very much into Canadian activists of any kind about premature organization.

CADRE: Don't you think that various groups are going to have to go to be a force?

Acorn: No, I think there should be a unified socialist party. Even though that murdered name emptied the name. It's going to be national, and most of the present groups that are active are of that.