

July 2016 – Monthly review

THE LADYSMITH PRESS

1968-1973

Seán Haldane

If you Google ‘Ladysmith Press’, you’ll find six entries about a large printing company in Ladysmith, British Columbia, then an entry for a List of *Canadian Poets 1960-73* which mentions Ladysmith Press, Québec. If you Google ‘Ladysmith Press Québec’ you will find a page of entries on Ladysmith publications, but by the following page you will be onto entries about ‘the 5.3 Magnitude Earthquake near Ladysmith Quebec’ of September 2013. Ladysmith is on a fault-line in the ‘Western Quebec Seismic Zone’. Not that there are many people at risk in the event of an earthquake: the village of Ladysmith is in the township of Thorne which consists of 65 square miles of hills and lakes with a population of around 300. It is 49 miles (78 km) NW of the capital of Canada, Ottawa. But if you Google ‘Ladysmith Ottawa distance’ the result is 13,372 km – the distance from Ladysmith in South Africa (site of a siege heroically resisted in the Boer War) after which various other Ladysmiths are named.)

The authors of the publications under Ladysmith Press, in order of appearance, on the first 4 pages of Google entries are: Kenneth Leslie, Bruce Woods, Seán Haldane, Carolyn Grasser, Philip Roberts, and Marnie Pomeroy. Other Ladysmith authors can be searched for but not necessarily found (the women’s names may have changed): Alan Shucard, Elizabeth Woods, Rosemarie Newcombe, Charles Pratt, Ian Adam, Meryl Read. The Ladysmith Press in its 5 years of existence published 22 books by 12 authors.

Several Google references name me as founder and editor of the Ladysmith Press. I think of Marnie Pomeroy as co-founder, but she modestly insists that she ‘just tagged along’. We both put in the work. From 1967 to 1976 we were back-to-the-landers on a farm I had bought near Ladysmith for a total of \$26,000. At the time, the Canadian dollar was low against European currencies, and \$2 could buy a new book. Pontiac County, Quebec, where Ladysmith is, was



gradually being abandoned by farmers who sold their land dirt-cheap to back-to-the-landers who were often American draft dodgers financed by their parents.

The farm was 555 acres including woods, a 300 foot high hill with a stand of maples among mixed woods along the slope, swamps, a 27 acre lake, and about 60 acres of cleared land, on 40 acres of which we ran beef cattle, and cut hay. (I had a tractor for mowing and snow-blowing). In our farmyard there were outbuildings and pens for chickens and ducks. In winter I felled trees with a neighbour on a frozen swamp and sawed them up into marketable 'cord wood' (a cord being a stack of logs 4 x 4 x 8 feet). In spring I tapped maples on the 'side hill' and lugged pails of sap down to our yard where we reduced it to syrup in a 'sugaring pan' over an outdoor fire of slab-wood. We had a garden where we grew sweet-corn, peppers, and squash in the brief but hot and humid summer between the frosts of May and late August. We always had several dogs. The land was inhabited by deer, moose, bears, beavers, raccoons, skunks, porcupines, foxes (often rabid – shot on sight and very carefully buried), and wolves. I did not hunt deer (the wolves and our neighbours did that), but I shot grouse which were plentiful and whose meat was particularly good in paté. On 20 acres of old farmland which were going back to scrub, I planted by hand over several years almost 20,000 conifers – thinking that in 40 years or so they would be worth a fortune. They are worth nothing: the lumber industry in most of Eastern Canada has collapsed, so there they stand, 20,000 monotonous and useless pines and firs whose shade kills everything beneath them. 21st century forestry favours leaving scrubland alone so that mixed forest can regenerate. I suppose the plantation is in its own way like the Ladysmith Press: begun in hope, and abandoned – not in despair, but because things change.

Some of Marnie's poems had been published in American periodicals, and her long poem *A Calendar for Dinah* had been published by an uncle of hers in an exquisite piece of small press printing that he had commissioned. I had published no poems, but with James Reeves I had edited *Homage to Trumbull Stickney* (London, 1968), a selection of Stickney's poems with an introduction by James and a brief biography by me. It was the poet Martin Seymour-Smith (who used to read to James who was partially blind) who had 'discovered' this American poet (1874-1904) who was unknown in England and neglected in America. Since 1964, on and off, I had been doing research for a biography of Stickney. I was earning some money as a 'sessional lecturer' at Carleton University in Ottawa, teaching 'English 101' (for 2 years) which luckily included only prose: I had sworn to myself I would never teach poetry.

Marnie and I had been brought together indirectly by James Reeves, and both of us knew Robert Graves, she much better than I, having lived in one of his houses in Deya, Mallorca, in the late 1950s. We had seen some of the books printed by Graves and Laura Riding at their Seizin Press in London and in Deya (1927 to 1937). These were beautiful, printed with a screw-down Albion press on laid paper (the kind of paper with a high cloth content and with a visible pattern of lines), with decorative cardboard bindings. Graves had given me one when I first met him at Oxford, Laura Riding's *Laura and Francesca*, with a cover by the New Zealand artist Len Lye. With Marnie's support I decided to found the Ladysmith Press, and to install an actual press in the 'Ficko House'.

Our main house and most of the farm and woods was on one side of the river Quyon, a 'creek' winding down between fields in a valley bottom, but I had also bought a run-down farm of 20 acres or so on the other side of the river, where I eventually planted the trees. This farm had quite a large square house with electricity but no plumbing. This was the 'Ficko House' – named after its former owners. Our house was known as the Rickwald House for years after we moved in. Houses always kept the name of their previous owners. The names were German, and about 2/3 of the population of Thorne Township were descendants of 19th century Lutheran Germans, from Pomerania. (They still spoke German, or a mixture: 'Es war viel frost on de windshield dis morgen.') The other 1/3 were Ottawa Valley Irish – meaning Ulster Scots, retaining their accents intact over generations – and French Canadian. (Every 12th of July there was a Protestant Orange parade in the village, complete with a big drum, beaten by a Catholic French Canadian called Laframboise.)

Here is the Ficko House in winter:



The Quyon River is frozen and under snow between the lines of leafless alders. There was a little foot bridge across the creek to the left, and further downstream to the right a wide crumbling bridge of wooden logs with an old sign indicating danger in three languages: English, French, and Algonquian. (The previous photograph of the main house and outbuildings was taken from this bridge). One of our neighbours, Raeburn Gray, was ready to risk driving with his half-ton truck over the bridge, if we found a press.

I hunted through various advertisements and discovered that a newspaper in Cobourg, Ontario, about 200 miles and 4 hours drive South, was selling for \$200 a Chandler & Price platen press they had used for printing advertisements and announcements. My neighbour Raeburn drove me down in his half-ton truck and after heroic lifting and leverage with crowbars at each end, with

a precarious crossing of the log bridge in between, the press was installed in the Ficko House. It looked something like this one (from the Internet):



It could be driven by a foot treadle, but I linked its drive wheel to an electric motor. When running at speed, it would shake and judder and the floor would creak, and I feared that at any moment it would fall through to the cellar.

After long study of books and catalogues I had ordered a full set of Janson 11 point type, and the necessary paraphernalia of ‘chases’ (iron frames to clamp the type into), ‘quoins’ (to clamp the corners), ‘reglet’ (wooden strips to separate paragraphs of type), ‘galleys’ (trays to set the type on), and ‘composing sticks’ (small hand trays to set a few lines of type at a time).

The ultimate horror of hand typesetting, which we encountered frequently at first, is the ‘pie’. You have two pages set and clamped tightly in the chase, which is heavy as you lift it across to set it in the press, and something has gone wrong – perhaps there is a tiny missing ‘em’ space – to make the pressure less than perfect, and there is a crash as the type spills onto the floor in a heap with thousands of characters scattered in all directions. A pie can take hours to pick up: you have to return each character to its box in the font.

Although we ordered all this equipment by mail, we found ourselves visiting the Pontiac County newspaper, 14 miles away in a town called Shawville, where they used linotype and could sell or, mostly, give us odds and ends we needed. The paper was called the *Equity*. (It was founded in 1883 and is still going strong in 2016). It was then owned by David and Rosaleen Dickson, and we employed one of their teenage daughters, on her holidays from school, to help with typesetting. It turned out that Rosaleen was a daughter of the Canadian poet Kenneth Leslie, who lived in Nova Scotia. Before coming to Canada (from Portugal where we had lived for a year) I had read in the

British Library in Lisbon all the Canadian poetry I could. I liked almost none of it, but the Penguin Book of Canadian Verse included some impassioned love poems by Leslie, whom I had resolved to track down when I had the time. This sonnet in particular stayed with me:

The silver herring throbbled thick in my seine,
silver of life, life's silver sheen of glory;
my hands, cut with the cold, hurt with the pain
of hauling the net, pulled the heavy dory,
heavy with life, low in the water, deep
plunged to the gunwale's lips in the stress of rowing,
the pulse of rowing that puts the world to sleep,
world within world endlessly ebbing, flowing.
At length you stood on the landing and you cried,
with quick low cries you timed me stroke on stroke
as I steadily won my way with the fulling tide
and crossed the threshold where the last wave broke
and coasted over the step of water and threw
straight through the air my mooring line to you.

What a poem!

The first book published by the Ladysmith Press, in 1968, was by me, *The Coast and Inland*. The following year we published Marnie's *Soft Jobs and Miracles*, and Philip Roberts' *Just Passing Through*. We were also distributing Marnie's *A Calendar for Dinah*.

Robert Graves wrote generously that he was impressed by my book and complimented us on the quality of the print and how it reminded him of the Seizin Press. But it was not in the same league as the Seizin books. At best, the first three Ladysmith books do look and feel good when you open them and see – or feel with your fingers – the printed texts of the poems. There is nothing to beat the crispness and texture of letterpress printing with handset type, and Jansen is clear and elegant. But the covers were plain-coloured and drab, and the binding, although its stitching was covered by linen tape, was crude. (We had a small machine for the stitching, with linen thread).

In 1969 we had slip-covers printed for all three books, with photos of the authors on the back. From the beginning we had used an icon (it would now be called a logo) for the press. Although Marnie was an artist, and I can hardly draw, I sketched the icon (off the cuff, with my fountain pen), representing the Ficko House and the Quyon. It can be seen at the bottom of the slip cover in these photos of the first Ladysmith book:



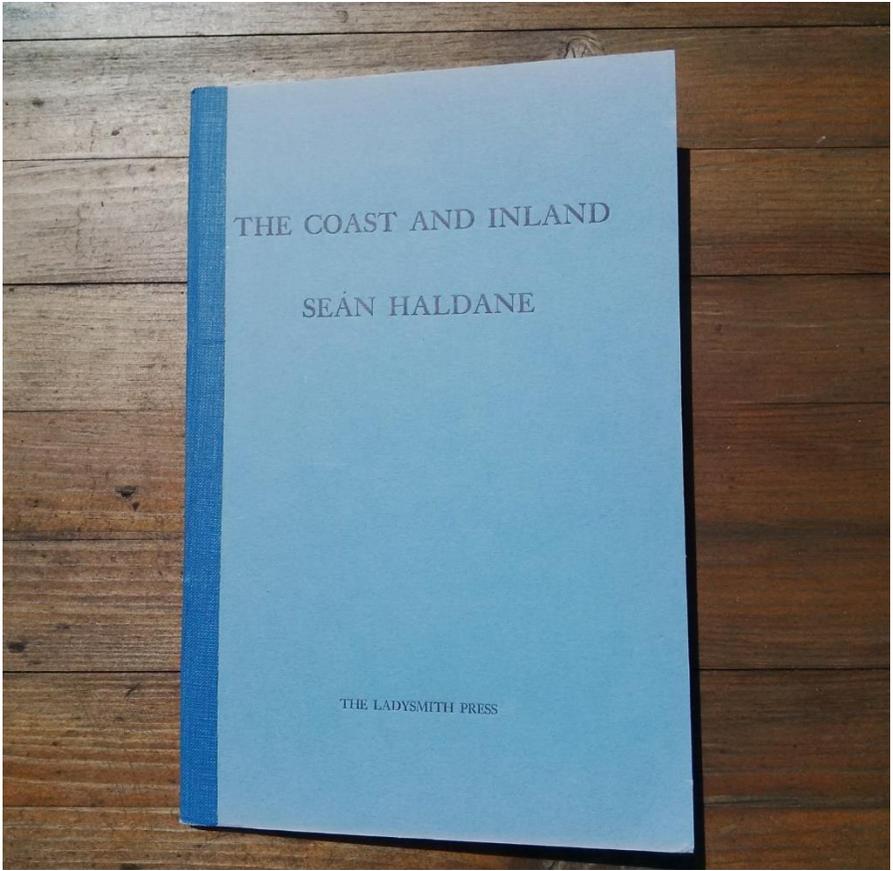
THE COAST AND INLAND

SEÁN HALDANE

THE LADYSMITH PRESS



LADYSMITH, QUEBEC



THE COAST AND INLAND

SEÁN HALDANE

THE LADYSMITH PRESS

Monserrate

The grandiose pseudo-Moorish house he built
is empty — rats and mice have left their droppings
on its cold floors; last year a forest fire
ravaged the mountain tops and changed the view:
burnt trees stand gallows-like against the sky.

Though in the inferno thirty soldiers died,
the fire was stopped before it reached his garden —
his single work of art — where palms and pines,
Australian freaks and English roses flourish,
the lake kept clean by workers, where tourists come
and breathe the scent of juniper and flowers.
Only the house seems dead; the garden lives.

Time helped him make this garden, then he died —
perhaps his bones are moss-grown like the trees.
Others may now find pleasure here and peace,
but they'll die too. This could be Paradise,
but we bring questions with us and our fear:
Is time the friend or enemy of man?
Must thoughts of death oppress us even here?

Uma rosa caída

An ageing heavy woman shawled in black,
the dim light not kind to her ugly face,
she stood, she sang; guitars which had been listless
for previous singers, now vibrated loud;
she sang of a fallen rose, 'Ah no' she cried,
'I'll not be jealous though he's left my side —
call me a fallen rose, but I am proud,
I know my own mind, I can well survive —
don't call me jealous, I'm happy and alive'.
Defiantly she sang, her voice so deep
we shivered and held back tears.

Then afterwards she smiled and sat to drink
her usual too much whisky with her friend,
the fire of her words there perhaps the same
as when, a rose not fallen, young and slim
she suffered for a better man than him.

With the slip covers we were already stepping away from what we could do ourselves. And our daughter Maeve had been born in 1968, so Marnie had two girls (the other being her first daughter Claire) to look after.

I had met Philip Roberts at Oxford, at a party given by Graves where people were invited to sing songs. I sang a folk song in Irish, *Seán Buídhe – Yellow Haired Seán*, which Graves liked, but the English inhabitants of Oxford made no particular sense of it. There was a great Scottish traditional singer there, Isla Cameron. But Philip, who was Canadian, stole the show by singing, accompanying himself on a guitar, a bar-room ballad called *The Winnipeg Whore*. He had published a few poems in *The Observer* which I liked. He was now teaching in Sydney, Australia.

I sent him my book and invited him to send us poems we might publish. He sent the poems, and visited us in Ladysmith while on a trip to Canada late in 1968. When we published his poems in 1969 he was back in Sydney and starting up his own publishing house, Island Press.

In a memoir he wrote some decades later, he muddles details and introduces a non-existent coincidence, but I enjoy his description:

Finally, in 1969 my first book of poems, *Just Passing Through*, had been handset and printed by a young couple of poets in Canada, Sean Haldane and Marnie Pomeroy. Their Ladysmith Press was on their farm in Ladysmith, Quebec, near Ottawa. Their interest in printing was entirely coincidental, but it was a boost to my own—redoubled when I discovered in later correspondence from Canada that both Sean and Marnie had known Robert well. This led to a lively exchange of correspondence between Ladysmith, Sydney, and Deya, the main topic of which was printing.

I had been working on the biography of Trumbull Stickney, but the epoch had begun, at least in North America, when literary biographies and studies could not find a publisher unless they were by tenured academics. I decided to publish the biography myself, along with a book of essays, *What Poetry Is*. Again, I had not got enough status to find a publisher for this, and did not even try.

Neither of these could be printed on a platen press, so I had them printed in Northern Ireland (the exchange rate had turned good for the dollar), and they were published by Ladysmith Press in 1970.

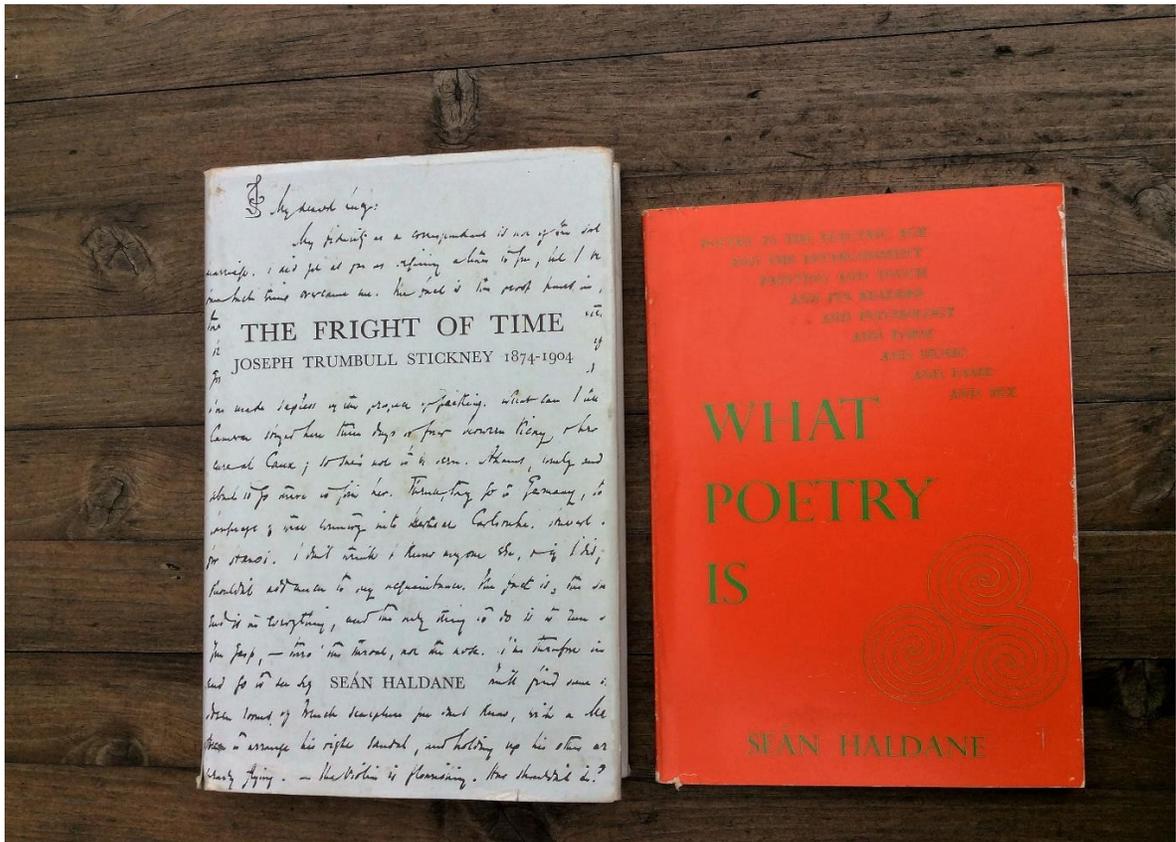
That year we also published my second book of poems, *The Ocean Everywhere*, Marnie's book *For Us Living*, and *The Gorgon Bag* by Alan Shucard, an American who was a Lecturer at the University of British Columbia. We also printed a second edition of Philip's *Just Passing Through*, with a new cover.

The covers for all four of these books were of stiff matt paper and included colour plates and photographs. We still did our own typesetting and printing of the texts, but we now had a 'perfect binding' machine which enabled us to square the books off and bind them with glue (like any normal paperback). And we had the covers printed professionally, in Ottawa. The books looked like real books! But they still had the quality given by hand-typesetting and letterpress printing – meaning that the inked type is pressed against the paper (in this case under the massive pressure of the platen press), not sprayed on, as in industrial printing.

The Ocean Everywhere also had black-and-white photographs (on a commercially printed page 'tipped in') of sculptures by John Matthews, a young Canadian who had studied in England with Henry Moore (and who was married to Jennifer Dickson, one of Rosaleen and David's daughters). John liked my poems and I liked his sculptures, but the combination in a small book does not quite work.

The six books of hand-typeset poems, from 1968 to 1970, were printed in runs of 260, and marketed by word of mouth and by visits to bookshops, most of which were independent in those days. I made occasional sales trips to Montreal and Toronto, and in 1970 we visited the Atlantic

Provinces. The books actually sold. In independent publishing, where the publishers put in hundreds of hours of unpaid work, it is hard to estimate costs. But we did break even, in that our sales covered the costs of materials, machinery, travel, and 10% royalties to authors. In 1970 *What Poetry Is* received a few notices and an especially good newspaper review. (Admittedly this was by Michael Thompson, an old friend of mine from school in N Ireland and from Oxford, who was now a university lecturer in Ottawa). This, and possibly the Stickney biography (strictly speaking a 'Life and Letters'), *The Fright of Time*, helped draw attention to the poetry books.

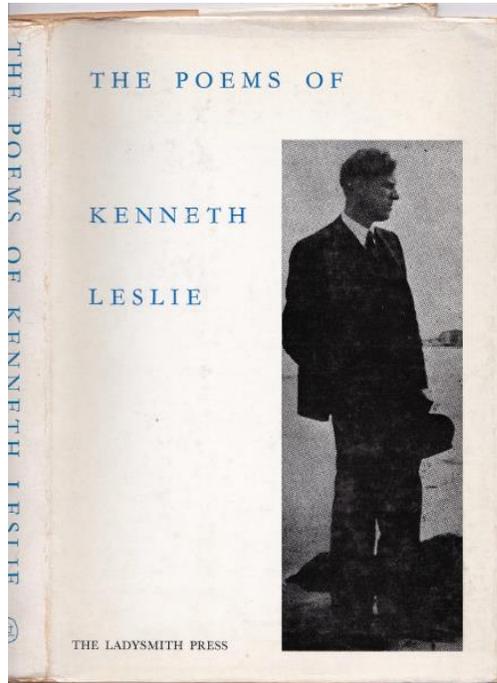


I had begun corresponding with Kenneth Leslie who lived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, with his fourth wife Nora. He was now relatively unknown, although his volume *By Stubborn Stars* had won him the Governor General's Award (Canada's major literary prize) for poetry in 1938. He had been born in 1892, was a Protestant preacher, then a Christian Socialist, then a Communist, but he had married a series of rich women, and at times lived extravagantly without having to take formal jobs, and at times in poverty. Now, in 1970, he was aged 78 and earned his living by driving a taxi. When I wrote that we would like to publish his poems, he got into his taxi and drove the 1500 km (900 miles) from Halifax to Shawville to stay with his daughter Rosaleen. (In the 1930s she and her sisters had gone with their father on radio shows in Canada and the US, singing folksongs in Scottish Gaelic – which was still spoken in Leslie's part of Nova Scotia when he was a boy).

When we met, we enjoyed each other's company greatly, and he had brought for me a first edition of the *Collected Poems of Robert Frost* inscribed 'To Kenneth Leslie from his friend and

fellow in the art, Robert Frost, Amherst Mass USA, May 24 1935.’ He also brought old books of his poems and some newer poems in manuscript. He had not been able to find a publisher for his poems for decades. They were considered old fashioned – too metrical in the age of free verse. He gave me, or I understood him to give me, carte blanche to publish a Collection. I left out some poems because, as I put it in the Introduction, ‘they were light verse, or political verse, which fulfilled a temporal need.’

The Poems of Kenneth Leslie came out in 1971. I had it printed in N Ireland, which meant shipping expenses, but Bairds did good work. It was in both paperback and in hard-back with a blue linen cover and a paper dustjacket with a photograph of Leslie standing tall as a young man.



I had printed all of Ken’s poems – as I saw it. Meaning that I had included the published ones and the others he had given me, of varying intensity. However:

In 1971, Sean Haldane published *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Leslie* in Ladysmith, Quebec. But Haldane omitted from his edition “The Shanachie Man” and a number of the political poems, which so infuriated Leslie that he published his own collected edition in 1972, *O’Malley to the Reds and Other Poems*.⁸⁷

This is from an excellent ‘Biographical Introduction’ to Leslie by a Professor in Halifax, Burreis Devanney. <http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/cpjrn/vol05/devanney1.htm>

I forget what Ken and I wrote to each other at the time, but I think we only exchanged one letter each and stopped. I shrugged my shoulders and did my best to sell the books. But Ken was indeed furious, and as Devanney notes, he published his own edition, which was, as he saw it, complete. The Ladysmith edition, although of much higher quality as a book, has taken its place

in 'Canlit' (as Canadian Literature in English is often known) as 'incomplete'. I would say it was complete if it is a question of poems, and that what was left out was political verse, some of it doggerel. I could never have published 'Praise the Vietcong!' or 'Remember Lumumba' which as I recall had the recurring line 'Remember Lumumba, the drums of the Congo'.

So if it had come to an argument I would have decided not to publish, and I would have regretted it. But I should have known more about the Scots Gaelic tradition of labour activism in Nova Scotia, and been more sensitive. I do wince when I read my rather patronising comment in my Introduction about poems 'fulfilling a temporary need.' Leslie was aged 78, I was 29! And at the time I had not read the great Sorley MacLean's poems in Gaelic, which move me more than most poems of the 20th century. MacLean was for decades a Communist sympathiser. On the other hand, MacLean would not have written anything so awful as 'Lumumba'.

As for 'The Shanachie Man' it seemed to me Celtic Twilight whimsy, well beneath Ken's true level. But I could have published it.

I was moved by Ken's one man drive across Canada to give me his poems and the book of Robert Frost. I still go back to his poems. And I know our Ladysmith hardback is in most Canadian university libraries – although possibly with the paperback *O'Malley to the Reds* beside it.

All Ladysmith books from 1971 on were printed by Les Éditions Marquis, in Montmagny, 300 miles further East in Quebec, on the St Lawrence River. They were perfect-bound and had tipped-in coloured flyleaves. We designed the books ourselves, with me concentrating on the text, and Marnie on the covers. Since our second round of books in 1970, she had drawn or painted the art work for most of the covers. Here are some she did:



That year, 1971, we also published two more slim volumes of poems, *Dear John*, by Rosemarie Newcombe and *Day Hunt*, by Charles Pratt.

In 1972 we published volumes of our own poems, my *Skindiving* and Marnie's *The Speck*. These were both collections of new poems and poems from our previous Ladysmith volumes which had mainly sold out. And we published another book by Alan Shucard, *The Louse on the Head of a Yawning Lord*. Then two more slim volumes, *Food* by Bruce Woods, and *Gone* by Elizabeth Woods (no relation).

In the last year of the Ladysmith Press, 1973, we published *The Great Getting Away* by Carolyn Grasser, and co-published with Island Press Philip's *Crux* (dedicated 'To Sean and Marnie'). We also published a slim volume *Encounter*, by Ian Adam. And finally an unusual illustrated book of children's poems edited by Marilyn Read called *What is the Pretzel Doing in the Bathroom? / Que fait le pretzel dans la salle de bain?* This followed a Canadian government sponsored project to stimulate children (both English-speaking and French-speaking) to write and share poems.

More books, with covers by different artists:



Ladysmith Press had come a long way. So why did we stop?

I don't much like numbering things, but sometimes it helps distinguish points:

- 1) On the personal side: Marnie had some family funds, I had run out of most of mine (they had paid for the house and land). I was no longer a sessional lecturer at Carleton University, in Ottawa: the work was underpaid compared to that of full time lecturers, and although I was asked to apply to permanent posts, I did not want to. But I had to pull my finger out and make money. In 1973 I turned 30, and I decided to change direction and to study psychology and psychotherapy along the unorthodox lines developed by Wilhelm Reich. I started doing a training analysis in Montreal, and a Masters programme in Boston, heading towards doing a doctorate. Something was going wrong in my partnership with Marnie, but we did not separate until 1976. In 1973, when we stopped the Ladysmith Press, it was a joint decision. On her side, she was becoming more and more interested in being a painter. Both of us were writing poems less often. For myself, I've never been able to make poems happen. They began to peter out. (They came back again, some years later, when my whole life had changed).
- 2) Since we had arrived in Canada in 1967, an already increasing nationalism had been becoming more fashionable, especially on the academic and publishing scenes. In a

word: it was anti-American. And it was vaguely anti-British too. Marnie was American, I was British (and Irish, but I seemed British). I remember some friends who taught at Carleton coming to Ladysmith to help me plant trees. One was British, two were American (one of them my long-standing friend the writer and publisher Tom Henighan). They all felt under the gun, having to rush to become nationalised Canadians. (I became nationalised myself, cheerfully enough, in 1972). Ladysmith Press published, apart from ourselves, books of poems by eight people. Three were Canadian, three were American. One was British (originally), one was German (originally). From about 1970 on, when I visited bookshops to sell Ladysmith books I would get comments like: ‘Ladysmith Press! You’re the people who publish Americans!’

- 3) As part of the government-supported rise of Canlit, and to keep American influences out, publishers were encouraged to form an organisation. This turned out to be the Independent Publishers Association (IPA), at the beginning of 1971. Ladysmith Press was a founding member. ‘Independent’ meant, in reality, ‘not foreign owned’, which meant, in reality, ‘not American owned.’ It also meant that the publisher was small to medium sized and no doubt strapped for money. (Publishers almost always are: in 2016, only the ‘big five’ are probably not). And being strapped for money in 1971, they would need government grants. These were administered by the Canada Council. On principle I refuse to either ask for or accept any form of grant to write or publish poetry (or anything else). At an early meeting of the IPA, in Toronto, I suggested we should lobby the government for writers not to pay income tax on book earnings, as in Ireland. I was laughed down. The name of the game was grants. At a later meeting, in Ottawa, a government big gun, in the form of Pierre Trudeau’s friend Gérard Pelletier, came to announce a programme of grants to Canadian publishers, via the Canada Council, then he went back to Parliament. The head of the Canada Council, Naim Kattan, then gave a speech in which he announced that \$9 million had been made available for grants to publishing. At least I remember it as \$9 million – it may have been more, or less. What I do remember clearly is a publisher whom I knew had gone bankrupt then had started again under a new name, standing up and shouting: ‘It’s not enough, Naim! It’s not enough!’

- 4) Grants to ‘independent’ publishers (what a laugh! – they were soon entirely dependent on grants) created a flood of new books, especially slim volumes of ‘poetry’. In a recent (2016) article in the Canadian magazine, *The Walrus*, Michael Lista writes about the period in which ‘granting agencies started disbursing tax payer dollars to Canadian writers and publishers to make up for lost time. It suddenly became easier to publish a book of poems here than anywhere else in the world.’

This reached the point where the American-Canadian writer and journalist Doug Fetherling made the notorious quip: ‘Because of the glut in grain markets, the government are thinking of paying prairie farmers not to grow wheat. Why not pay Canadian publishers not to publish books?’

In 1972, one bookseller pointed at a wall of packed bookshelves and said to me, ‘I can’t sell that stuff, so why should I sell yours?’

So Ladysmith Press came to an end in 1973. Marnie Pomeroy reminds me in an email that we sold the press itself to Carleton University, in Ottawa, for the sum of \$1, and ‘it was installed in their library for use in teaching students about book-making. (Or it was in the library the last time I saw it, all cleaned up and shiny, every tiny and huge part. I forget who the student was who did this as a labor of great love.)’

In 1979 on a humid and hot day I cleared out the barn where I had stored the remaining books. I had sold the farm. (Some years later the new owner rented the Ficko House to ‘hippy’ tenants who started a fire by mistake and burned the house to the ground.) There were a dozen or so boxes which I would take to book dealers to sell. I remember cursing at the swarms of mosquitoes and blackflies as they bit me. I ran with the last box to the car and sped off. Had it been worth it? The books were just a bloody nuisance.

Now, in 2016, I would say that it was definitely worth it for *me*. I learned about book-publishing from A to Z – from typesetting and making books, to marketing them. And I published my early poems under my own control (although the publishers of my poems since then, Blackstaff in Belfast, and Greenwich Exchange in London, have allowed me to keep this control). I started up Rún Press and Parmenides Books in 2013, with my wife Ghislaine whom I have been with since 1976, and although I have had to catch up with new times, I know publishing and its risks – which are even greater now.

What about the others, the poets Ladysmith Press published? Where are they? I do know where Marnie is (see my review of her *Blue Moon* in February under this Monthly Review series). But where are the others? The one I know most about is Philip Roberts, who occasionally visits London. He is still alive and kicking, in the town of Annapolis, in Nova Scotia, of which until recently he was the Mayor. He has not published poems for a long time, and has dedicated himself to music.

Kenneth Leslie died in 1974, aged 82, but there has been a Canadian TV documentary about him (2008) amusingly called *God’s Red Poet*, and a selection of his poems, *The Essential Kenneth Leslie* (I believe without ‘Lumumba’ or the Vietcong), came out in 2010.

But where are the other Ladysmith poets? They seem to have disappeared. And what do I think of their poems now? What follows is a brief overview.

1970

Alan Shucard (b.1935) was the first poet we published whom we did not know. Soon after we first published, we were receiving several dozen submissions a year – nothing like the hundreds publishers get now. I was prejudiced against academic teachers of English, and Shucard was a New Yorker who had studied at St Andrews, in Scotland, and was now teaching at the University of British Columbia. But we were impressed by his love poems, and liked how he explained his short collection, *The Gorgon Bag* (1970): ‘I have met a surprising number of gorgons and my poems are my way of learning how to deal with them.’ His poems were not over-formal but they had strong rhythms and assonances as well as occasional rhymes:

Before you, love came wrapped in plain brown cover,

its desperate myth making the real seem plain
soiled, recited by a plaintive lover;
no gardens then, no taste, no scent, no feeling
but her sobbing, 'I feel so guilty, so guilty,'
and shadows of branches in streetlight clawing the ceiling
in the darkened room; when she read her guilt to me,
I was a buzzard there, perched in shadow tree,
waiting for your kiss to change me in your lovely story.

The other poems in this collection of 21 sustain this level of precisely described emotion, and I still think it was a terrific book. We were glad to publish a larger collection, *The Louse on the Head of a Yawning Lord*, in 1972. This contained 31 new poems and the 21 from *The Gorgon Bag*, which had sold out. Some of the new poems had the same intensity, but there was more self-consciousness and intellectual display, and mannerisms. There were no more gorgons, just various characters. The rhymes and assonances had fallen off too, and some of the poems might as well have been clever prose. In the early 1970s many poets were slipping into free verse, and not all of them got away with it. After all, it was emotion that often forced rhythm and rhyme or assonance into a poem. In old fashioned terms, it seemed that Alan's 'inspiration' was failing him and he was substituting intellectualism – brilliant, but catching the head rather than the ear (and the heart).

We lost touch, and of course in 1973 the Press closed. We knew Alan had moved to teach in Wisconsin, and he had a full academic career there, writing two histories of American Poetry. I can't find any later published poems. I hope there are some around, published or not, because he was a real poet.

1971

Our new discoveries for 1971 were **Rosemarie Newcombe** and **Charles Pratt** (b.1947).

Rosemarie was originally German, divorced, bringing up four children in Ottawa. We found her poems in *Dear John* original, fresh, and precise, many of them about a chaotic love life in which she got hurt but which she could take humorously. She was a 'naïve poet' – bright, but writing from the heart, not for art. She was not interested in making a career of poetry. Her poems were one-offs. They did not rhyme or have definite forms, but they flowed naturally, and were never without feeling.

IN A VW

Placing his warm palms onto my temples,
 lifting my face to his eyes,
usually calm hands visibly trembling,
possessively grasping a bundle of hair
and holding me.

The wind rustles a scrap of paper along the street,
stirs leaves, wakens the clouds.
We listen and hope with the wind.

With the leaves and the dry pavement
we ache for the rain.

Awed by the thunder
and the whispering, laughing rain,
pouring itself in abandon
onto our tin temple of worship,
we surrender,
cupped in the palm of the storm.

I like that transformation of the cliché ‘the calm of the storm’ into ‘the palm...’ This seems to have been a one-off book of one-off poems, and I believe Rosemarie’s life calmed down and the poems stopped. But I’m glad we published them. I see that on Amazon.com, a copy of *Dear John* is for sale at \$32.63, and on Amazon.co.uk there is one for £79.50! Is it because of the title? I cannot find her on the Net.

Charles Pratt was from Arkansas, and as I wrote in the cover-note for his volume *Day Hunt*, ‘these poems... move confidently between the world of romantic love and the day to day world of a North American life perceived in sharp detail.’ The title poem begins:

Sullen overhangings of night are dark moss on the fence watching
as she has to flush morning like a fox
from the overdrawn garden –
the hounds leaping every fence,
moss flying in strips from their claws.

And another begins:

I am living in July,
but my blood is in October.
The red, the scarlet blood of murdered leaves,
strawberries wild and crimson circling my bones.
My body melts; my blood lives in a future season.
July has cut me in half, splitting
the two seasons of my soul,
and leaving me nowhere at all.

I can see why we liked this energetic and original description, but re-reading the book it leaves me ‘nowhere at all’ – which I don’t mean unkindly. I mean the poems don’t end in a different place from where they started. At almost any point in the volume one can read such vivid passages. Yes, they describe a world – but one without an end (in both senses of the word). And the verse is not distinguishable, apart from its chopped lines, from prose. I actually remember a discussion in which Marnie and I wondered about whether this was good enough as poetry, but we agreed we liked its energy. Undoubtedly Pratt had promise. And there is a case for giving promise a chance.

I cannot find any reference on the Net to Charles Pratt (or at least not to this one).

1972

In 1972 we published two more new discoveries, **Bruce Woods** (b.1947) and **Elizabeth Woods**. Elizabeth was known on the Toronto poetry scene and recommended to us by Doug Fetherling who noted that although she had published poems in magazines, she needed a book – for which he offered to write a brief introduction. We liked Doug’s prose writing (though not his poetry which luckily was published in Toronto) and he had been supportive of my publishing the Stickney biography. (He was one of the few people who knew Stickney’s work well). And we liked a certain sharpness in Elizabeth’s poems:

METAMORPHOSIS

A woman to turn to, he said,
contentedly
and I saw us turning in –
to each other
helpless ever to turn
each other out
again.

But why not write this simply as a sentence (inserting punctuation)?

‘A woman to turn to’, he said contentedly, and I saw us turning into each other, helpless ever to turn each other out again.’

This is prose – sharp and clear, to be sure, but prose. And the ‘poem’ is chopped prose. I forget who it was who remarked recently on the Net that a lot of modern poems read as if the person started writing a letter then pressed the Enter key at random intervals.

Elizabeth was a lively and exuberant woman who was part of a literary scene we should not have gone near. Again we identified ‘promise’.

In contrast to Elizabeth Woods, Bruce Woods sent us his poems out of nowhere (Colorado in fact). He was a long way from any literary scene, having walked out of a junior academic post in New York State and gone hitch-hiking. He worked as a shepherd, migrant fruit picker, and dishwasher. He lived hand to mouth – hence *Food*. The title poem is dedicated to Knut Hamsun, the Norwegian who wrote *Famine*. But Woods was also a free-lance journalist, and he had published two books with small poetry presses in the USA before sending this book to us.

Food includes a sequence of eight poems about – sheep! They are brilliantly descriptive, but not exactly poems. Woods is also good at humour, and satire. I think we published these poems for their sheer openness to life and death – to nature. He *sees*. Furthermore, his poems although they seem like (regularly) chopped prose have a definite beat, and frequent assonance. There is a music in them.

LATE SPRING

The winter has gone
on too long, gentle rabbits
are gnawing at the thin
flesh of fieldmice, lifting
fuzzy heads, buck teeth
dripping in wolf parody.

Spring has been lost in the
wind somewhere, stiff
robins build brittle
nests on black trees
that seem frozen forever.

Will summer come, freeing the
trout that run down like
springs, snapping their length
in closing cells? Even the quickest
water rolls over upon itself
in a crystal thickening.

Who can find the sun, when
sky has on a white to match
the ground, and distances
walk on air? Fooled shoots
of crocuses go yellow in rows,
soil clamped on their roots
tight as thumbscrews.

Bruce Woods is recorded on the Internet as having been the editor of various periodicals, including *Mother Earth*, and as the author of a thriller about vampires, a book on building bird-houses, and instruction books for 'country guitar'. He has reviewed poems here and there, but I can't find any of his own poems, unless a book called *From the Carp of Good Hope* (1970) was a collection.

1973

In our final year we published two new poets, **Carolyn Grasser** and **Ian Adam**.

Carolyn Grasser wrote in her cover note:

'When I write, I feel that I am not myself. Rather than an ordinary brown-haired girl, I am something more akin to a vibrant shiver, or current. As simple person I am like anything else that you might see in the shops or streets of Ottawa. But as a living poem, I am everywhere at once.'

This reads like the voice of a rather self-conscious young person, and sure enough the photo below is of a lovely young woman sitting on a porch chair in a prettily patterned dress. There are many young women who write poems about their own lives, and in 1973 social permission was widely granted for these lives to include love and sex – which is what most of Carolyn’s poems were about. We were wary of publishing her poems before we read them, because she had been a student of friends of ours, and they liked her as a person. Our wariness was against liking her poems because we would probably like her (as indeed we did when we met her).

But the reality of her poems was an awareness of the morbid and the louche, the deceptive and the fake, in the world of love and sex.

PERSONAL COUNTERFEIT

The mystical experience
of spending a night with you.
forgetting myself,
weaving the total net
of forgeries –

I am a personal counterfeit,
my love is not legal tender.
When I am with you
we pull each other off,
and this is the crime
of the century.

‘Not legal tender’. The pun chills the heart.

In other poems, she shows a more florid imagination, as where she makes a ‘grain of sleep’ the seed of a parasitical plant:

NIGHT FLOWERS

Too cold at night to breathe,
the spiderwebs of sleep closed my nose.
This is the morning that changes time,
But this is my moment of dying.

Stagnant in the cloud of re-breathed air
I can move enough to pick myself up,
to collapse on a wrinkled couch to find
a grain of sleep squeezed between cushions.

I plant it in my brain where it feeds,
spreads white tentacles in the dark loam.
My tears give it wetness and green leaf.
Sprouts from the vine that greedily spreads
stifle my lungs in a flowering bed.

But as well as florid she can be succinct:

I try to wind my inner watch
which never stops and never listens.

The down side of her collection was that many of the poems were self-absorbed. But yes she had promise, and we published her book without hesitation. And in 1975 she published a further book, called *Nine Lives*.

Ian Adam had published poems widely in Canadian literary periodicals, and we could see why: his poems were mostly safe and academic (he taught at the University of Alberta). His title *Encounter* was dull, and in the poems the encounters were with everyday life, meticulous descriptions of weather, swimming in lakes, weddings, watching a kestrel with his sons, even politics. So why did we publish his poems? Because I was struck with sudden intrusions (perhaps these were the real encounters) of disturbances and oddities in what seemed a quiet life. These at least made moments of poetry. And in the title poem, he watches on a moonlit night the corn he has planted in his garden:

do I hear a rustling?
the tassels have been out for a week.

perhaps the corn goddess
or maybe I just imagine
with the moonlight meeting the stalks
and long shadows like hands towards me
and the field around in pallid light
a motion within, outside,
someone dancing?

There is something there – not just the corn goddess but a bit of a poem. But, as can be seen, the ‘house style’ of Canadian verse in the 1970s was no punctuation and no capital letters. It made things awfully dull and limited, although occasionally poetry peeped through.

The poem that actually made me decide (it was me, not Marnie) to publish the book was:

UNTITLED

at night it is quiet, you hear only
the breathing of nesting birds
and the racing of your blood
the moonlight through the window
thinking of Doreen and madness
it does not need interpreting

Again the disturbance, the sudden appearance of the Muse – called Doreen! – in a calm world. Some of Adam’s more vivid ‘poems’ – vivid but more prose than poetry – described the squalor of a ward in a Mental Hospital. ‘Madness’ was what his poems were really about. I have no idea whose madness, although I doubt if it was his.

None of the seven writers whose poems we published following submissions by them is easy to track down over forty years later. It seems that none has become well-known for his or her poetry. That doesn’t matter: there are always a few good poets who work quietly and publish seldom. I cannot trace further publications by any of them – apart from Carolyn Grasser’s *Nine Lives* which is listed on Amazon as ‘unavailable.’ Did they just move on from poetry? Or was the poetry we published simply promising – and the promise not met?

Yet when I read these books again now, I find poems that are still alive and standing – from five of the writers, anyway. Poems are one-off events. One poem does not predict another. It seems that some people are fated to write many poems, and some people few. I am glad that the Ladysmith Press published these books – and the others by more dedicated (or obsessive) poets.

Although some poets form circles, or try to – as Coleridge did with his one-man periodical, *The Friend*, around 1810, and Graves and Laura Riding did with their series *Epilogue* in the 1930s – we did not expect a circle to form around the Ladysmith Press. Marnie was too introverted, and I was too bloody-minded, for such a thing. But we did make friends through the Press – not poets, but readers! They do exist, even for poetry. Robert Graves used to say that although he had many thousands of readers for his prose, and a few thousand bought his *Collected Poems*, his poems only had a hundred or so ‘real’ readers. Although this may seem arrogant, he meant it humbly. Reading a poem is an act of engagement. If the Ladysmith Press engaged some poets and some readers in its project, then that’s good enough for me. And I still enjoy reading the books.

