

## The Essential Earle Birney

**Earle Birney**

**Jim Johnstone**

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The poems in *The Essential Earle Birney* represent the spirited work of a poet's career stretching from 1940 to 1987. Birney is a well-known and respected Canadian writer and medieval literary scholar, and his poetry is, according to Jim Johnstone's foreword to this edition, "striking for both its prescience and its range." After the publication of his poem "David"—Johnstone calls it "the quintessential Canadian poem of the 20th Century"—Birney's work began attracting broader attention.

"David" is the poem that opens this collection; it is broken up into nine sections and operates in a way that stands out amid his other work. Notably, a harrowing narrative drives it forward, yet in its language and allusions, the poem can very much be read as an elegy to a lost companion. In the final stanza, a sort of marriage between the narrative and the speaker's internal voice emerges: "I will not remember how or why I could twist / Up the wind-devilled peak, and down through the chimney's empty / Horror."

There is something astonishing about Birney's ability to bring the natural world into direct confrontation with an equally vulnerable internal voice. The juxtapositions in "David" between the upward force of the mountain peak and the downward horror of a chimney can be seen as aiding the biblical undertones that run under the poem, yet these sources and allusions are never directly addressed, and they don't need to be. Birney's eye is spare and genuine enough to lead a reader slowly into a poem's thematic implications.

Most of the pieces in this collection are ordered chronologically as they were written, resulting in a kind of panoramic vision of the poetry's evolution over time. Poems written during the sixties and seventies seem to return to a kind of minimalistic sincerity in their lack of punctuation and capitalization; line breaks and spaces are given more significance compared to some of Birney's earlier work, and love poems begin to emerge in a language that is refreshingly colloquial.

The natural world in these later poems, however, is one that becomes increasingly unfamiliar, at combat with the advancements and speed of a modern society. "Twenty-third flight" starts this way: "Lo as I pause in the alien vale of the airport / fearing ahead the official ambush / a voice languorous and strange as these winds of Oahu / calleth my name." In this poem in particular, there is an obvious tone of satire, but there's also an unmistakable sadness of sorts, something uncalled for that speaks under the surface of the speaker's awareness.

The tropes that appear in Birney's poetry are both quietly political and overtly sincere, experimental and traditionally sound. It isn't an easy feat for a poet to develop and change as he did, and if his work is to survive and be collected, it should be acknowledged as living, for as Birney stated, "Living art, like anything else, stays alive only by changing."

KENNY JAKUBAS (March 3, 2015)

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