

## The Essential Jay Macpherson

**Jay Macpherson**

**Melissa Dalglish, Editor**

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*The Essential Jay Macpherson is a must for poetry enthusiasts, if only to experience the pleasure of deciphering the complexities of a brilliant mind.*

*The Essential Jay Macpherson* is an anthology of the award-winning poet that presents a wonderful sampling of the various permutations of Macpherson's work throughout her life. The volume is the fifteenth in Porcupine's Quill's Essential Poets Series spotlighting the works of Canada's most celebrated poets.

The selected poems showcase the range of Macpherson's poetics, beginning in 1946 with early periodical and unpublished poems, and running up until the year before her death at age eighty in 2012. Excerpts from several of her books are featured, including poems from *The Boatman*, which earned her the Governor General's Award in 1958. The volume includes a foreword written by Melissa Dalglish, who selected the poems; a bio of Macpherson; and a bibliography of her work.

Macpherson was a leading figure in the mythopoeic movement, where myth and fable blend with contemporary imagery. Early in her career she borrowed from the classic and biblical myths and "always claimed an allegiance to what she called 'authentic myths,' those that retain emotional and psychological resonance, even in their debased mass-media and marketing forms, because they speak to the fundamental feelings, dreams, and desires that make us human," writes Dalglish. It was Macpherson's ability to thread those ancient myths and fables into the current world that created the excitement present in her work.

Some consider her poetry impenetrable at times, especially her earlier work, which has also been described as academic. However, several readings of these complex poems are all that's needed to uncover wit, irony, and lyricism. One must work for the bounty of allusions that Macpherson so brilliantly buries within the lines of verse.

At times her work verges into political and activist poetry, rooted firmly in the world around her and focused on the lives of the less fortunate: children, women, and the unloved of her community. At the end of her life, straightforward laments such as in the poem "Plants" showed an entirely different side of Macpherson:

*It's sombre, looking at plants  
This dying shoot in my window  
Mistreated by me all winter  
Puts out what it can.*

The book is made with thick and substantial paper sandwiched between beautiful green endpapers embossed with leaves. A delicately painted narcissus from Redouté's *Les liliacées* decorates the cover and refers to the Narcissus myth, which was significant to Macpherson. The loving care with which this book was produced will make one think twice before underlining favorite passages.

There are vast rewards in store for those who tackle the enigmatic verse of Macpherson. *The Essential Jay Macpherson* is a must for poetry enthusiasts, if only to experience the pleasure of deciphering the complexities of a brilliant mind.

DIANE PROKOP (May 17, 2017)

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