

# Dickinson, "Canadian Primal: Poets, Places, and the Music of Meaning"

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## Book Review

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Dickinson, Mark. *Canadian Primal: Poets, Places, and the Music of Meaning*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021.

This is a book primarily about relationships, so I'd like to begin by acknowledging my own relationship with the author. We were introduced about a decade ago by my older brother, a conservationist who monitors the illegal wildlife trade in Asia, and who had been Mark Dickinson's guide in the jungles of Indonesia several years earlier. After that, Mark and I had many conversations about poets and poetry, and nature writing in its many forms. I'm not pretending to be an objective reviewer: my name appears in the book's Acknowledgements section, under "Conversation and correspondence with the following individuals gave me much insight into the lives of these poets"; my brother's name is on the same page: "Chris Shepherd helped me understand the magic of birdwatching" (Dickinson 2021, 244). Mark gave me invaluable post-secondary education advice and a mind-opening reading list, and I'm grateful.

In a 2009 article in *The Walrus* – a predecessor of this 2021 book with the same title – Dickinson wrote, "[t]here's an ecological renaissance under way in Canada right now, but chances are you haven't heard of it, because it is flowering in one of the most ignored and feared regions of the high arts: poetry" (Dickinson 2009 para. 1). He was referring to five contemporary Canadian poets: Robert Bringhurst, Dennis Lee, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay, and Jan Zwicky. These poets, who are also environmental philosophers among other things – they all publish philosophical and literary essays; Bringhurst is known for his work with typography and his multi-lingual translations; Lee collaborated with Jim Henson in the making of the movies *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*, and the television series *Fraggle Rock*; and Jan Zwicky is a classically-trained musician – are the collective subject of *Canadian Primal: Poets, Places, and the Music of Meaning*. Put simply, this book is about five nature writers who may not be very well known outside the echelons of Canadian poetry. But Dickinson believes, and I agree, that these writers have a lot of important things to say.

Dickinson calls them the "thinking and singing poets" after the title of a 2002 essay collection that compiled their work. Bringhurst, Lee, Lilburn, McKay, and Zwicky are "a group of artist thinkers" who, in the 1970s and 1980s, found common cause "in a summons issuing from outside the modern mindset." Dickinson (2021) compares them to the Group of Seven, along with outliers Tom Thompson and Emily Carr who return "to the site of encounter between non-Indigenous people and the land, looking to reset a relationship that after centuries had never graduated beyond colonialism, tourism, and one-dimensional extraction of natural resources" (xii). This return, and this reset, is clearly more urgent today than ever. As a society, we are nowhere near graduating from those same near-sighted and destructive tendencies. One need

look no further than the daily news – industrial logging of old-growth forests on the West Coast, unmarked graves on the grounds of residential “schools” all around the country – to realize the importance of a project like this. We are still doing a terrible job. But these writers remind us that it is not too late.

They remind us that the narrative of progress that we keep telling ourselves, in which more technological innovation, more industrial development, and more individual consumption will somehow make everything right, is not the solution. It is the problem. “Meaning is all around us [...] but because of the way we live as moderns – ‘distracted, insecure, ill, battered by urban noise and electronic media’ [and here Dickinson (2021) is quoting Jan Zwicky] – we are mostly unable to perceive it” (xiii). The progress narrative surrounds us, and inundates us, and it is difficult if not impossible to remove ourselves from its influence. But the work of these poets provides us with some possible alternatives. The paths they have laid out for their readers, however, are long and slow and difficult. There is no quick fix, and these are not self-help writers. Collectively, they explore “a number of philosophical and spiritual traditions largely forgotten in the West,” Dickinson says, “including shamanism, pre-Socratic Greek philosophy, Taoism, Buddhism, and Christian mysticism” (xi). Many of these modes of contemplative thought seem increasingly foreign, and out of reach to the (post)modern citizen.

In the *Walrus* article, Dickinson (2009) wrote that as a group, these five poets have “broken through a rigid division in Western thought that has effectively kept thinking and singing separate from each other for hundreds of years” (para. 5). Despite their lack of mainstream recognition – or perhaps because of it – these writers have achieved something remarkable. In his 2021 book, Dickinson suggests that they offer us “the rarest of gifts: a cure for the sense of rootlessness and the inability to perceive meaning in the world around us that drives so much of a predatory behavior as a modern civilization” (xiii). This might sound like a tall order, but anyone familiar with the essay collections of Tim Lilburn, for example, from *Living in the World as if It Were Home* (1999) to *The Larger Conversation: Contemplation and Place* (2017) will have an idea of what Dickinson is getting at. Lilburn, like all five poets featured in *Canadian Primal*, writes from a lifelong engagement with ancient and recent philosophers, both Eastern and Western, as well as ecology and Indigenous thought. He asks hard questions about Canada, for example what can be done about our “intractable psycho-social problems,” like the refusal to acknowledge Indigenous voices and perspectives, the unrootedness and alienation that people of European descent experience, and the resulting ruthless and damaging capitalistic exploitation of the land? “It’s almost an engineering question,” Lilburn (2017) suggests. “How do you go about lifting such a huge social and cultural weight?” (109).

In *The Larger Conversation* and elsewhere, Lilburn advocates for an apprenticeship to the land, and especially to a particular place. Because we as a culture have driven away the “ministering

land,” we are left homeless and dissatisfied, uncomfortable in our own skins, always hungry. Lilburn (2017) suggests that perhaps “the larger self we miss and pursue is a terrain or a locale” (203). Could it be that a relationship with the land is what we have been missing all along? This notion of land apprenticeship, of relationship with place, is one of the common threads in *Canadian Primal*, and a guiding principle also shared by Bringham, Lee, McKay, and Zwicky. Their core achievement as a group, according to Dickinson (2021), is “the recovery of a mode of musical thinking open to ancestors, non-human beings, natural processes, and the genius of specific places” (xiii).

*Canadian Primal* provides fascinating human portraits of each of these five poets, including their family backgrounds and upbringings, their diverse jobs and educations, their early forays into literature, and the writers and thinkers who inspire them. Dennis Lee, in the chapter entitled “Polyphonic Soul,” is described as an elder and a catalyst in the group. Don McKay is introduced as a “Shapeshifter,” Robert Bringham as a “Renaissance Man,” Jan Zwicky as a “Lyric Philosopher,” and Tim Lilburn as “The Conversationalist.” This is not a volume of literary criticism so much as it is a series of life narratives. According to Dickinson (2021), it is the result of “eighteen years of edifying conversation and correspondence” (xvi). He explains how the book’s completion took much longer than he originally expected, and that ultimately it is about more than scholarship, because he cares deeply for its subjects (246). They began as the research topic for his PhD, but over the years they became mentors and friends.

Dickinson claims that despite their many collective publications and accolades, the work of these writers has yet to be properly recognized and acknowledged. I would say that poets themselves might be an exception: these five have been well known to many readers and writers of poetry for years, and some of them have been hugely influential. Don McKay, for example, has been something of a mentor figure for a generation of Canadian poets, particularly those interested in wildlife (especially birds), geopoetics, and biosemiotics. In his *Walrus* article Dickinson (2009) described McKay as the “craggy face of Canadian poetry,” headlining “innumerable poetry workshops, readings, and literary festivals from coast to coast” (para. 8). One of the values of this present book is its potential to introduce these poet-philosophers to a new audience, perhaps outside the world of poetry. While the Canadian literature scene is currently obsessed with youthfulness and newness (in other words, obsessed with the progress narrative), it seems imperative that we also consider voices from the past. The thinking and singing poets represent some of these voices, and more importantly, they point us in the direction of even older voices, and older, wiser, ways of knowing, which are in danger of being paved over and forgotten.

It is difficult to say anything critical about this book because it does exactly what it sets out to do. The writing is personal, and obviously – necessarily – subjective, yet it is comprehensively researched: Dickinson writes from personal correspondence and memories, as well as extensive

literature reviews and interviews. Readers interested in standard literary criticism will not find what they are looking for here. What they will find is, as the back-cover describes, literary biography “reconceived as an adventure of the body, mind, and spirit”. They’ll find a potent new genre of writing about writers: a fusion of literary history, bioregionalism, and personal relationships.

Kelly Shepherd

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