

Alden Nowlan

Alden Nowlan (1933-1983) overcame hardscrabble beginnings to become an important Canadian poet of his generation. His writing sometimes reflects the rural poverty that marked his Nova Scotia childhood, and it frequently explores the cultural character of Atlantic Canada, the region in which he resided for five decades. Eleven collections of poems appeared between 1958 and 1982, a body of work gathered in *Alden Nowlan: Collected Poems* (2017). Across its 650 pages, that volume documents a maturation that moved from formal to free-verse and from local scenes related by a distanced observer to intimately reflective pieces as well as poems inspired by travel or world history. The author's lesser-known contributions include two novels, two collections of short fiction, three published scripts, a history of Campobello Island, and a book of adapted "Micmac Legends." Nowlan also worked as a writer-in-residence, journalist, and political speechwriter. Today, he is remembered as an influential figure in the Maritime provinces, although he retains only a minor place in the Canadian literary canon. His reputation declined following an early death, the result of health complications exacerbated by alcoholism.

Two biographies document Nowlan's life: Patrick Toner's *If I Could Turn and Meet Myself* (2000) and Gregory Cook's *One Heart, One Way* (2003). Nowlan was born in January 1933 at Stanley, Nova Scotia, to Freeman Nowlan (b. 1904) and Grace Reese (b. 1918), who was an adolescent at the time of his birth. She abandoned Alden and his sister, leaving them to the care of their father, who was chronically underemployed, often drunk, and sometimes violent. Nowlan left school during Grade Five, ending his formal education. He began labouring in the woods and then at the local pulp mill. His unusual bookishness and intelligence were mistaken for signs of a limited mental capacity by his neighbours, so he was assigned the lonely role of

night watchman at the mill. He spent many shifts reading classic works of literature borrowed from the public library at nearby Windsor. Because of his mother's absence, an oppressive home environment, and intense ostracization in his rural village, Nowlan developed emotional troubles that made social contact crucial but at times difficult. His formative years receive creative representation in his novels: *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien* (1973) and, an earlier novel published posthumously, *The Wanton Troopers* (1988).

Nowlan departed Stanley in the early 1950s, maintaining only provisional contact with his Nova Scotia relatives going forward. He spent the subsequent decade in Hartland, New Brunswick, working at the town's newspaper, *The Observer*. He gained that position on the strength of a fabricated reference letter summarizing public schooling and professional experience he did not in fact possess. Freed from a painful homeplace, he became deeply involved in Hartland's community associations. Escape from an impoverished rural environment was a personal victory. Even so, he would depict the class of people he grew up among with notable compassion and would claim a rural or working-class identity when living in the relatively comfortable settings of Hartland, St. John, and eventually Fredericton, New Brunswick. In the 1950s, Nowlan gained a sense of community belonging and married *The Observer's* linotype operator Claudine Orser. He adopted her son from a previous marriage, John, as his own. Personal developments matched advances in his literary career. While in Hartland, he progressed from publishing adolescent verses under pseudonyms in small magazines to releasing well-crafted chapbooks and confident poetry collections under his own name. *The Rose and the Puritan* (1958), *A Darkness in the Earth* (1958), *Wind in a Rocky Country* (1960), *Under the Ice* (1961), and *The Things Which Are* (1962) contain many spare, formal verses with regular meters and rhyme schemes, although experiments with free-verse appeared with increasing frequency

during this initial period. Those volumes became the basis for Robert Gibbs's collection *Alden Nowlan: Early Poems* (1983), along with Nowlan's contributions to the anthology *Five New Brunswick Poets* (1962) edited by his early supporter Fred Cogswell, with whom he formed a lasting friendship while living in Hartland.

In the early 1960s, Nowlan relocated to the city of St. John with his wife and son. There, he took up reporting and editing work for *The Telegraph-Journal*. The St. John years were interrupted by a battle with thyroid cancer, resulting in three dangerous surgeries that left him with physical markers: a bloated appearance and scars about the neck that he hid behind a signature beard. Stays in hospital inspired moving poems that appeared in and subsequent to the breakthrough collection *Bread, Wine and Salt* (1967). That title captures the central modes underwriting most of Nowlan's creative work, which ranges across quotidian experience, poetic sacrament, and biting satire. With *Bread, Wine and Salt*, Nowlan largely left his reliance on patterned verse and local scenarios behind. This and later collections—such as *The Mysterious Naked Man* (1969) and *Between Tears and Laughter* (1971)—replace a constrained, formal register with a plain-speaking voice that roams freely through everyday occurrences, current events or world history, as well as dreamscapes.

Nowlan and his family left St. John for Fredericton in the late 1960s. In 1968, he was appointed writer-in-residence at the University of New Brunswick, released his first collection of short fiction (*Miracle at Indian River*), and won the Governor General's Literary Award for *Bread, Wine and Salt*. He went on to receive other prestigious accolades while living in Fredericton, including two honorary doctorates; a Guggenheim Fellowship; a Queen Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Medal; and two President's Medals from the University of Western Ontario. No longer reliant on regular work for newspapers, Nowlan nonetheless continued his association

with *The Telegraph-Journal* as a popular columnist and wrote for regional publications such as *Atlantic Insight* and *Atlantic Advocate* as well as national magazines such as *Weekend* and *Maclean's*. The published finding aid to *The Alden Nowlan Papers* (1992) provides an extensive list of his journalistic writings, and three collections select from these: *Double Exposure* (1978), *White Madness* (1996), and *Road Dancers* (1999). Nowlan's life in Fredericton was further supported through a formal association with UNB and the Province of New Brunswick that lasted from 1968 until his death. Supports included a regular stipend and a university-owned house on Windsor Street, which became known as "Windsor Castle," an important meeting place for many in the community. Raucous parties hosted at this residence on the edge of campus contrast with the more sober writers' workshops hosted by Nancy and Bill Bauer at the former UNB Icehouse. Nowlan participated as an occasional member of Fredericton's "Ice House Gang," but he spent more time at home developing a unique coterie of local poets, artists, academics, and assorted characters.

Frequent visitors to Windsor Castle included student-writers Nowlan mentored through his official university role: James Stewart, Brian Bartlett, and David Adams Richards. Local figures who regularly came to hear the poet "hold court" included Newfoundland-born theatre impresario Walter Learning, Australian-born philosopher Leo Ferrari, and New Brunswick Premier Richard Hatfield. Personal friendships with these men led to writerly collaborations. With Learning, Nowlan produced a series of celebrated scripts: *Frankenstein: The Man Who Became God* (1976), *The Dollar Woman* (1981), and *The Incredible Murder of Cardinal Tosca* (1981). His close association with Ferrari led to the founding of the obscure (and satirical) Flat Earth Society of Canada in 1970, the result of a night of revelry with author Raymond Fraser and others (see Garwood, *Flat Earth*). Hatfield hired Nowlan to compose scores of political speeches

during his tenure as Premier. Alongside these alternate pursuits, poetry collections continued to appear: *I'm a Stranger Here Myself* (1974) and *Smoked Glass* (1977). The late 1960s to mid-1970s was a high point for Nowlan's career and his place in the artistic community of Fredericton. Subsequently, a penchant for instigating personal feuds and his obstreperousness when intoxicated resulted in fewer visitors in the late 1970s and early 1980s. His health declined rapidly following the release of his final poetry collection, *I Might Not Tell Everybody This* (1982), and he passed away in June 1983 at the age of fifty.

Whether laudatory or critical of Nowlan, twentieth-century reactions focused on his use of regional settings or the conversational tone of his literary voice. Reviewing the early collection *Under the Ice* in *Canadian Forum* in 1961, Eli Mandel saw Nowlan's anti-pastoral Maritimes as pure invention; he famously wrote that "no one, surely, will mistake Nowlan's Faulknerian world of barn-burnings, bear-baiting, child-whipping, and Saturday-night dances for the actual Maritimes" (91). Writing of his own tenure in Fredericton, John Metcalf hinted at amateurish provincialism, reducing the "warm, wise, and philosophical" pose of Nowlan's mature poems to "cracker-barrel philosophy" fit for "*Reader's Digest*" and describing his stories as "folksy" (122). In a book review for a 1968 issue of the *Tamarack Review*, Al Purdy similarly described the seeming simplicity of Nowlan's work, critiquing it as "oddly naïve, perhaps verging on the sentimental" (363). Ambivalent or even denigrating responses such as these helped rally Nowlan's champions. Much of the favorable commentary from the past century was written by the author's associates from Atlantic Canada, such as Michael Brian Oliver, Robert Gibbs, and Fred Cogswell. Their appreciations often suffer for paying more attention to the man behind the poems and his personal experience than to the writing itself. Introducing their 1996 edited selection, Nowlan's friend Patrick Lane and his wife Lorna Crozier resisted the

““regionalist writer”” (xviii) classification critics had assigned to Nowlan. They paid tribute instead to the intimate effects his poetry achieves, writing that “he speaks so clearly and directly that he might be sitting at your kitchen table, glass in hand” (xii). Some important arm’s length assessments focused on Nowlan’s fiction, rather than his poetry or biography, to analyze his complicated relationship to his roots. Janice Kulyk Keefer and Barrie Davies identified the central tension in Nowlan’s prose as that between the sensitive, creative individual and oppressive masculine expectations in industrial Maritime settings. Through the novel’s mixture of colloquial and urban voices, Paul Milton interprets *Various Persons Named Kevin O’Brien* as a creative rebuttal to critics who had seen regional qualities as limiting Nowlan’s importance. Because questions related to an accessible voice and Atlantic Canadian depictions circulated recurrently in Nowlan criticism without any significant resolution, in the year 2000 biographer Patrick Toner concluded that the scholarly conversation about this author had resulted in a “dead end” (13).

Few critics have returned to Nowlan’s writing in the twenty-first century, but those who do seem to recognize the need for new directions. Thus, W. J. Keith produced a “Critical Reassessment” in 2003. He generally prefers the early work to later offerings and points out a host of technical problems in selected volumes—“lovingly edited” by poets and friends—that make them unfit “for scholarly purposes” (Keith 9). Importing the poet into new territory, Ernestine Lahey includes Nowlan in two structural-linguistic studies that investigate his representations of landscape and metaphorical world-building. In 2014, Andrew Moore gave fresh treatment to the confessional “Broadcaster’s Poem,” finding in it “prescient” statements about the way “the communication technologies we use might be complicit in modern social crises” related to online harassment of youth (124, 125). A 2015 article by David Creelman

further expanded Nowlan scholarship by looking beyond his familiar poetry and prose. It returns to Nowlan's adaptations of missionary Silas Rand's nineteenth-century versions of traditional Mi'kmaq narratives, illustrated by Shirley Bear, the book *Nine Micmac Legends* (1983). For Creelman, the cross-cultural volume succeeds in "avoid[ing] some of the most egregious colonizing impulses of its author's literary predecessors" and their "sentimental, polarizing, and hierarchical discourses" (164). Despite inevitable projections from outside an Indigenous worldview, Nowlan's adaptations are "sympathetic" and, like the rest of his creative work, aligned with "the potentially chaotic side of the spiritual realm" (165). Subsequent to Keith's 2003 "clearing [of] the ground" (9), then, new approaches to Nowlan have emerged. But no confluence has brought about a unified or reflexive scholarly conversation. Brian Bartlett's *Collected Poems* (2017) has attracted the attention of reviewers who alternately pay tribute to Nowlan's importance (like Nicholas Bradley) and also caution readers about his potential irrelevance for contemporary literary culture (such as Trevor Cook and Richard Kelly Kemick).

Some markers of Nowlan's enduring legacy transcend edited editions and scholarly analyses. His archives at the University of Calgary have expanded throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s; these now contain fifteen metres of textual materials as well as many audiovisual resources. In the 1990s and 2000s, Maritime writers gained recognition through the Alden Nowlan Award for Excellence in English Language Literary Arts. Honorees include Nancy Bauer, Fred Cogswell, Anne Compton, Robert Gibbs, Elisabeth Harvor, Douglas Lochhead, David Adams Richards, and Kay Smith. Nowlan's gravesite in Fredericton's Forest Hill Cemetery neighbours that of another important New Brunswick poet, Bliss Carman. Together, the pair represent a pastoral to counter-pastoral shift across nineteenth and twentieth-century Canadian poetry. Another local marker of the author's legacy is the Alden Nowlan House,

situated at 676 Windsor Street. The writer's former residence now serves as the UNB Graduate Students Association's offices and pub, an establishment richly decorated in Nowlanalia.

Works Cited

- The Alden Nowlan Papers: An Inventory of the Archive at the University of Calgary Libraries.* Edited by Steele Apollonia and Jean F. Tener, Calgary UP, 1992.
- Bartlett, Brian, editor. *Alden Nowlan: Collected Poems*. Goose Lane, 2017.
- Bradley, Nicholas. "Through Tamarack Swamps." Review of *Alden Nowlan: Collected Poems*, *Canadian Literature*, no. 238, 2019, pp. 116-18.
- Cogswell, Fred. "Alden Nowlan as Regional Atavist." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1986, pp. 206-25.
- , editor. *Five New Brunswick Poets*. Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1962.
- Cook, Gregory M. *One Heart, One Way: Alden Nowlan: A Writer's Life*. Pottersfield, 2003.
- Cook, Trevor. Review of *Alden Nowlan: Collected Poems*. *Dalhousie Review*, vol. 98, no. 1, 2018, pp. 138-41.
- Creelman, David. "Refashioning Mi'kmaw Narratives into Maritime Fictions: Theodore Goodridge Roberts, Frank Parker Day, and Alden Nowlan." *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2015, pp. 150-70.
- Davies, Barrie. "*Dulce vs. Utile*: The Kevin O'Brien Syndrome in New Brunswick Literature." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1986, pp. 161-67.
- Garwood, Christine. *Flat Earth: History of an Infamous Idea*. Macmillan, 2007.
- Gibbs, Robert, editor. *Alden Nowlan: Early Poems*. Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1983.
- , editor. "Introduction." *Alden Nowlan: Exchange of Gifts, Poems New & Selected*, Irwin, 1985, pp. xi-xviii.
- Keefer, Janice Kulyk. *Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction*. Toronto UP, 1987.
- Keith, W. J. "The Poetry of Alden Nowlan: A Critical Reassessment." *Canadian Poetry*, no. 53, 2003, pp. 9-32.
- Kemick, Richard Kelly. "Hark, How the White Birch Quivers." Review of *Alden Nowlan: Collected Poems*, *Fiddlehead*, no. 276, 2018, pp. 171-75.
- Lahey, Ernestine. "Megametaphorical Mappings and the Landscapes of Canadian Poetry." *Contemporary Stylistics*, edited by Marina Lambrou and Peter Stockwell, Continuum, 2007, pp. 156-67.

---. “(Re)Thinking World-Building: Locating the Text-Worlds of Canadian Lyric Poetry.”
Journal of Literary Semantics, vol. 35, no. 2, 2006, pp. 145-64.

Lane, Patrick, and Lorna Crozier, editors. “Introduction.” *Alden Nowlan: Selected Poems*,
 Anansi, 1996, pp. xi-xix.

Mandel, Eli. “Turning New Leaves.” Review of *Under the Ice*, *Canadian Forum*, July 1961, pp.
 90-91.

Metcalf, John. *Kicking Against the Pricks*. ECW, 1982.

Milton, Paul. “Various Persons Named Kevin O’Brien: Nowlan’s Novel Response to the
 Critics.” *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1998, pp. 36-48.

Moore, Andrew. “Alden Nowlan Explains the Internet.” *Antigonish Review*, no. 177, 2014, pp.
 123-33.

Nowlan, Alden. *Between Tears and Laughter*. Clarke, Irwin, 1971.

---. *Bread, Wine and Salt*. Clarke, Irwin, 1967.

---. *Campobello: The Outer Island*. Clarke, Irwin, 1975.

---. *A Darkness in the Earth*. Hearse, 1958.

---, and Walter Learning. “The Dollar Woman.” *New Canadian Drama*, vol. 2, edited by Patrick
 O’Neill, Borealis, 1981.

---. *Double Exposure*. Brunswick, 1978.

---, and Walter Learning. *Frankenstein: The Man Who Became God*. Clarke, Irwin, 1976.

---. *I’m a Stranger Here Myself*. Clarke, Irwin, 1974.

---. *I Might Not Tell Everybody This*. Clarke, Irwin, 1982.

---, and Walter Learning. *The Incredible Murder of Cardinal Tosca*. Clarke, Irwin, 1978.

---. *Miracle at Indian River*. Clarke, Irwin, 1968.

---. *The Mysterious Naked Man*. Clarke, Irwin, 1969.

---. *Nine Micmac Legends*. Lancelot, 1983.

---. *Road Dancers*. Edited by Robert Gibbs, Oberon, 1999.

---. *The Rose and the Puritan*. Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1958.

---. *Smoked Glass*. Clarke, Irwin, 1977.

---. *The Things Which Are*. Contact, 1962.

---. *Under the Ice*. Ryerson, 1961.

---. *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien: A Fictional Memoir*. Clarke, Irwin, 1973.

---. *The Wanton Troopers*. Goose Lane, 1988.

---. *White Madness*. Edited by Robert Gibbs, Oberon, 1996.

---. *Will Ye Let the Mummings In?* Irwin, 1984.

---. *Wind in a Rocky Country*. Emblem, 1960.

Oliver, Michael Brian. *Poet's Progress: The Development of Alden Nowlan's Poetry*. Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1978.

---. "The Presence of Ice: The Early Poetry of Alden Nowlan." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1976, pp. 210-22.

Purdy, Al. "Group Review II." 1968. *Starting from Ameliasburgh: The Collected Prose of Al Purdy*, edited by Sam Solecki, Harbour, 1995, pp. 363-70.

Toner, Patrick. *If I Could Turn and Meet Myself: The Life of Alden Nowlan*. Goose Lane, 2000.