



The Al Purdy A-frame Association

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Al Purdy has been described at various times and by various writers as the “first,” the “last,” and the “most” Canadian poet, but for many of us he is simply *the* Canadian poet – the poet who captured and came to personify the distinctive genius of Canada. In a creative career that began when he was serving with the R.C.A.F in Vancouver during the Second World War to his death in 2000, he wrote with passion, commitment, and brilliant insight about almost every part of Canada and every aspect of Canadian life, past and present. No anthology of Canadian literature would be complete without such Purdy masterpieces as “The Cariboo Horses,” “The Country North of Belleville,” “Trees at the Arctic Circle,” “Wilderness Gothic,” “Lament for the Dorsets,” “Roblin’s Mills,” and “Elegy for a Grandfather.” Among Purdy’s many honours were two Governor General’s Awards, the Order of Ontario, and the Order of Canada.

During much of his writing life, Al Purdy drew inspiration from the A-frame house that he and his wife Eurithe built in 1957 on the shores of Roblin Lake, near Ameliasburgh, Ontario. It was there that he wrote many of his masterpieces. It was there that he communed imaginatively with the Loyalists who settled in Prince Edward County in the 1830s. It was there that he discussed the past and future of Canadian literature well into the night with Milton Acorn, Margaret Laurence, Michael Ondaatje, and many other friends, including, it is rumoured, John Labatt and Johnnie Walker. In a quite literal way Eurithe’s and Al’s A-frame is part of the fabric of Canadian literature and Canadian culture: among the “ingredients” of its chimney, he wrote in “Place of Fire,” are “limestone from an 1840 Regency house,” “historic stone from the Roblin gristmill site,” “anonymous stone from Norris Whitney’s barnyard,” and “some pickup loads from the Point Anne quarry” near Kingston. There is surely no more striking and concrete metaphor than the Purdys’ A-frame house for the integration of past and present, everyday and historied, Canadian literature and the Canadian landscape that lies at the very heart of Al’s poetry.

In 2008 the A-frame was threatened with sale and demolition. Had that happened a unique piece of Canada’s literary and cultural heritage would have disappeared. In October 2012 with funds raised to that date, the property was purchased by the Al Purdy A-frame Association. With funds raised at The Al Purdy Show in Toronto in February 2013 upgrade work began on the property.

Upgrade work may sound simple and straightforward—just upgrade the electrical from 60 amp. In reality it was anything but easy as architect and board member Duncan Patterson explains:

...my consciousness hung like a great silver metronome
suspended between stars
on the dark lake
and time pours itself into my cupped hands shimmering.

“On The Flood Plain” a story not of removal but of immersion. Immersion, for want of a better word, in the earth: sticking both thumbs in the stony earth, pulling it apart, leaning sticks against each other to bend a small arc of the horizon into a kind of bump, & changing the contour of the earth itself.

In “On The Flood Plain”, Al writes not about being a million miles from anywhere but of being in the midst of things. This is why they built on the flood plain, he says, damn right, the seriousness of things beyond understanding, and, presumably the need to be sunk down in the thick of it.

Well, goddammit, all I can say is 'thanks, Al!', you certainly made it fun for us years later, inheriting your poetic decision, mud up to our eyeballs, shaking our heads, and staring at a crawlspace dug below the level of the lake & filled with 20 inches of water. It feels a bit silly in hindsight, but those of us working on the 'restoration' of the A-Frame didn't initially realize how much of our time, and budget for that matter, would be spent mediating Al's decision to live 'in the seriousness of things beyond understanding'. It felt like a minor consideration at the time. About 150 feet of drainage tile, 4 tonnes of clean 3/4" stone, sharp sand, fill, filtercloth, a sump pump, and a sump pit later and it doesn't feel like such a minor consideration after all! I am happy to report, however, that with all of this stuff in place the crawlspace is actually dry!

Of course, a few joists and a beam in the floor had to be replaced due to the inevitable damage of being so close to water for so long, part of the foundation had to be replaced too, and it took a good long while and a lot of effort to get the house relieved of its musty perfume, but really the negative consequences of 'building too close to the lake' were not as bad as might have been predicted. Last spring, we filled the joist cavities with 2 pound closed cell sprayed foam insulation, sealing the house off from the crawlspace underneath. This was the last piece of the puzzle; we now confidently give our blessing to the unlikely siting of the A-Frame, for poets of the future to comfortably dwell amidst the seriousness of things beyond their understanding.

The A-frame welcomed the first writer-in-residence July 1, 2014 and to date there have been 18 writers in residence. Writers report that the wonky little place that so inspired Purdy's writing still has that magic:

“It's hard to properly stress the importance of the A-Frame residency in the Canadian poetic landscape, and it's hard to adequately express its uniqueness among residencies in Canada. The books, photos and records; the places and buildings and landscapes and nature made iconic through Purdy's poems; the artistic energies of Prince Edward County: these are just a few things that distinguish the residency. I went to the A-Frame in awe of the place I knew from poems, but I left there with a deep care for that house

beside the lake. And I left there an advocate of the A-Frame Association and all the work it does.”

We continue to raise funds to support the writers-in-residence program and because more upgrade work is required and we would like to create an endowment to preserve the A-frame as an inspiration for present and future Canadians and writers. We are developing education projects (including a literary tour) to help connect the A-frame and its writers with the community.

Writers are offered the opportunity to live and work in a space and place of inspirational literary and historic significance and resonance. Please help in any way that you can—by writing a cheque, holding an auction, having a bake sale, or buying The Al Purdy A-frame Anthology from your local bookstore...and please encourage colleagues and friends to do so as well. Canada has not done an admirable job of preserving its literary sites. Together we have changed that in the case of the Purdys’ A-frame. Saving the house honours the memory and the work of one of Canada’s most important and beloved poets: Al Purdy. We are seeding our literary future by preserving our literary heritage.

Please help us continue by contributing to this important project.

Cheques can be made to “The Al Purdy A-frame Association” and mailed to
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Or donations can be made through the website www.alpurdy.ca

The Al Purdy A-Frame Association is a not-for-profit corporation and registered charity, with charitable registration number 843540840 RR0001. Donations over \$50 receive tax receipts.

For more information contact the Association’s President Jean Baird at jeanbaird@shaw.ca or 604 224 4898

If you live in the Toronto area come join us for Purdy Drinks at the historic Monarch Tavern (12 Clinton Street) on Monday, April 2, 2018, starting at 6pm. Purdy Drinks is a fun evening of music and poetry and this year’s performers include the poets Laura Clarke, Jeff Latosik, Damian Rogers and Karen Solie. More information about the event can be found on our Facebook group page, and tickets can be purchased here: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/purdy-drinks-vi-tickets-44171314591>