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A short interview with Cameron Anstee

this interview was conducted by rob mclennan over email, January 2015

Cameron Anstee lives and writes in Ottawa ON where he runs Apt. 9 Press and is pursuing a PhD studying Canadian literature at the University of Ottawa. He edited *The Collected Poems of William Hawkins* (Chaudiere Books, 2015) and has a chapbook forthcoming from Baseline Press (London ON).

Q: What was the original impulse for *The Collected Poems of William Hawkins*?

A: There were a few separate but related impulses at work. It began out of an interest in tracking down lost and uncollected Hawkins work purely out of personal interest. It was also sparked by a comment that you made somewhere, rob, that someone should put together a bibliography of Bill's little magazine publications from the 1960s. I also have to point to the publication of *Sweet & Sour Nothings* by my own Apt. 9 Press in 2010. It was thrilling to work with Bill and to return something previously lost to print. I wondered what else could be found. As the manuscript grew, I sent it to Bill for his interest, and by the time the manuscript was complete with notes and an introduction it felt substantial enough to warrant publication. After a few conversations, and after Bill consulted with some of his trusted lifelong readers and supporters, we decided to send the manuscript out for consideration.

Q: *Sweet & Sour Nothings* was originally scheduled to appear with another press, but that never solidified. Do you have any idea why, or why the piece was never included in any of Bill's subsequent publications? How could such a piece simply vanish?

A: I think circumstances conspired to render it lost and forgotten. I can only find two mentions of the sequence prior to the Apt. 9 publication. The first is the actual publication of the sequence in *Anthos* 2: 1&2 (1980). The second is a single line in an *Ottawa Citizen* article from on February 16 1980 ("Area poets hold read-in program"): "Bill Hawkins, whose new book, *Sweet and Sour Nothings*, is coming out this year..." It seems unlikely that *Anthos* appeared before the *Ottawa Citizen* article in February of the same year, so perhaps after it was published in the journal, Bill thought that it didn't need to appear as a discrete book object so soon after? Bill had forgotten about it entirely when I first approached him about reprinting it in 2009. I'm not sure if he had a press lined up in 1980. I am only speculating, but I wonder if Anthos Press had been thinking of doing it as a book, before finally including it in *Anthos* the journal (the issue in which it appears is dedicated to Bill). *Anthos* also published a broadside of Bill's ("Still Life") around the same time.

It was written after *The Gift of Space* (1971), which was Bill's representative selected poems until the appearance of *Dancing Alone* in 2005. Poems in journals have a way of slipping from view if they aren't collected into a later publication, and I think that in the 25 years that passed between its appearance in *Anthos* and the publication of *Dancing Alone*, it was simply forgotten. I'm not sure what sort of circulation *Anthos* had in 1980, so am not sure how many would have seen it in the first place. I only saw it thanks to

the kindness and sharp eye of Ottawa-based bookseller Richard Coxford. Richard knew of my interest and Bill and sent me a note when he found the journal, generously passing it along to me.

Relative to Bill's books from the 1960s, *Sweet and Sour Nothings* constitutes enough work for a separate publication. As a sequence of 35 parts, it is longer than *Ottawa Poems* and more or less equivalent in length to his other books. It can be read in its correct place relative to Bill's other books in *The Collected Poems*, helping to fill the silence between *The Madman's War* (1974) and his gradual reappearance in the 21st century.

Q: Were there any surprises you discovered during the process of researching Bill's work?

A: I was surprised by how much previously uncollected material I was able to find. When I started the earliest phases of the project, I was thought that filling in the gaps in Bill's bibliography would be both doable (because Bill wasn't prolific following the 1960s) and valuable (because the poems are wonderful). That the final manuscript doubles the contents of *Dancing Alone* was a welcome surprise. A typescript held by Joanne Wiffen turned up 7 previously unpublished poems circa 1993, which was a great find. I located copies of two of the poster poems that I hadn't seen before as well ("Zaap" and "Rubber Boots: Canto 1").

I also began to learn more about some of the artists that Bill collaborated with early on (Robert Rosewarne and Fran Jones in particular), that I hope to turn into an academic paper sometime during the next few years. Rosewarne's work publishing books for Jay Macpherson's Emblem Books is remarkable, and his professional life as a heraldic artist for the Department of National Defence is a fascinating contrast to his work making and distributing radical, experimental, occasionally obscene works of art. Two sides Ottawa's identity in the 1960s are wrapped up in Rosewarne's output.

Q: I am extremely interested in knowing more about all of that activity—the artist collaborations, work for Emblem Books and his National Defence work—none of which I'd even heard about before. I would imagine that part of the research process has introduced you to a whole range of artistic activities throughout Ottawa, long discarded or forgotten. What kind of portrait have you been compiling of Ottawa's literary community? What else have you discovered, and what might you do with any of it?

A: Rosewarne worked for DND, Jones worked for the Art Section of the Department of Public Printing (in addition to both being practicing artists). Around the time the two were working with Hawkins and other artists on the infamous poster poems, they also designed and printed two books for Macpherson's Emblem Books: *Wind in a Rocky Country* by Alden Nowlan (1960) and *The Blur in Between* by Al Purdy (1962). Aesthetically, they fit right into the poster poem work, with some truly amazing and colourful prints included with the poems. They were printed on Rosewarne and Jones's "Blue R Hand Press" (acquired from the *Westport Mirror* newspaper according to Jones). It was operational from 1961-1965 before the studio that housed the press suffered a fire. The two couldn't afford to repair the press, so it was abandoned. Rosewarne was active in other spheres too. He designed sets and posters for theatrical production in Ottawa, and was even a puppeteer! He was also an amateur glass collector. I'm sure Jones had other projects on the go (I believe she was teaching as well), but I haven't turned much up yet. Credit here must go to my incredibly supportive dad, Rod Anstee, for his labour searching newspaper and journal databases for much of this information.

This is a research interest I've only been able to indulge occasionally, owing to my more formal academic obligations these days (writing the dissertation at long last). So, it isn't as fully formed as I might like at this

stage. It has focused primarily on Hawkins over the last few years, but Rosewarne and Jones have certainly received the bulk of my attention otherwise, as well as little bit on the activity surrounding Le Hibou (though Ken Rockburn is a more diligent chronicler of that scene, with a book on the subject coming out this year—*We Are As The Times Are: The Story of Café Le Hibou* from General Store Publishing House).

A nascent small press scene emerged but wasn't sustained as in other cities. Hawkins helped to run a little magazine with Denis Faulkner (of Le Hibou) for a single issue—*Something Else* (March 1963). Rosewarne was responsible for “design” on the mag. Hawkins and Roy MacSkimming self-published their first book, *Shoot Low Sheriff, They're Riding Shetland Ponies!* in 1964, one year after Harry Howith self-published his first book, *Burglar Tools* (Bytown Books, 1963). A second book was announced (Seymour Mayne's *That Monocycle, The Moon*) that was eventually self-published by Mayne instead. There was also Rosewarne and Jones's Nil Press, responsible for the posters and for Bill's *Hawkins: Poems 1963-1965* in 1966.

My limited impression is one of a small community where artists moved with relative ease between different spheres of activity. Hawkins was active in music and poetry, for example. Rosewarne and Jones worked in visual/graphic forms, publishing, theatre. Most of these names went on to long publishing or artistic careers. So it was certainly fertile, producing more artists and writers than most outsiders would likely expect from Ottawa in the 1960s. Not sure what I'll do with it all yet, but there is an article or two to be written down the line. Material accumulates.

Q: Looking through Hawkins' entire body of work, what sort of patterns have you seen emerge? How has his writing progressed over the space of fifty-plus decades?

A: Formally, he has covered a pretty remarkable range, especially during his most productive years in the 1960s. There are the early free verse experiments of *Shoot Low*, the attempt at a historiographic long poem in *Louis Riel*, the Olson-influenced projective verse of *Ottawa Poems*, the characteristically-1960s lyric work in *Hawkins*, some of the energy and fantasy drains out in the 1970s in *The Madman's War* giving way to a more plain-spoken lyric form, and his return to writing in the 1990s and 2000s saw a deeper interest in rhyme and more traditionally structured lyrics.

In terms of content, I think one constant is a desire to roam, to project parts of the self outward, while simultaneously exploring the home place of Ottawa and at times feeling resigned to being here, to inhabiting the contrasts of a life in art in Ottawa. His work returns again and again to an attempt to achieve some kind of innocence, to locate and mark beauty (the innocence is more pronounced in his more recent lyrics and their use of simple rhymes), but always aware of loss and death. Roy MacSkimming has described the “perversely compelling, idiosyncratic wonder” of Bill's work, and I think that stands as a good description of Bill's work over fifty-plus years.

Q: One thing that has always been clear about Hawkins' history has been the influence he had on writing and music, both in and beyond Ottawa, and just how well respected and regarded he and his work continue to be, even though he's barely published since the 1970s. To what might you attest such considerations?

A: Bill's life and work lend themselves to myth, to legend. His behaviour and his art were defiant, often aggressive, but his work was also tremendously readable. His collaboration with other writers, artists, and musicians broadened the pool of those he influenced and was influenced by, exposing different dimensions of his practice to different communities. His withdrawal from those same communities in the 1970s was undoubtedly felt acutely in Ottawa (and by those aware of his work elsewhere). He left behind a substantial

body of the work in the 1960s followed by twenty or so years or near silence that in some ways marginalized his work and in others created room for his legend to grow. If your eyes were open, it was possible to hail a cab and find the legendary outlaw poet of 1960s Ottawa sitting behind the wheel.

Bill was from here (and as you said when he was inducted into the VerseOttawa Hall of Honour, he *stayed* here), but that didn't prevent him from taking part in important movements and activities in Canadian literature. He published with important presses (*Contact*, *Weed/Flower*), in important experimental magazines (*Alphabet*, *TISH*, *Island*, *El Corno Emplumado*), attended the UBC Summer Poetry Seminar of 1963, achieved success as musician, helped to bring influential people to Ottawa to read and perform, and generally performed vital service to the arts in Ottawa. If you are a young writer in Ottawa, Bill's body of work is something to look to, to aspire to, to learn as much from and about as possible. *The Collected Poems* will make accessing his work easier going forward.

Q: Given that the bulk of Hawkins' work was originally published well before you were born, how did he originally get on your radar, and how does the work you've done on his writing fit with the rest of your projects?

A: He wound up on my radar as I started to actively look around for a small press history in Ottawa, 2006/7-ish I'd say, shortly after *Dancing Alone* came out (I was too late to see the celebration surrounding its publication in 2005). I came to Canadian small press through learning about Contact Press and the Toronto-area activity that followed in its wake. Finding Bill's name in *New Wave Canada* or in a book from Weed/Flower Press (a title like *Ottawa Poems* was always going to catch my eye) prompted me to actively seek out his books.

I'm interested in literary history in Ottawa, so Bill's work fits naturally into that dimension of my research. My academic research is concerned with bookselling and the small press, poets who took on cultural roles in addition to writing (editing, publishing, organizing events, bookselling, etc.), the ways that texts are created and circulated on short and long term measures. Bill's rise, silence, and reemergence touch on all of those interests for me. My publishing work with Apt. 9 happens on a continuum that reaches back to Canada's small press history and Ottawa's literary history more locally; Bill is part of both. I try to be aware of and informed by these things when I write and publish. Editing *The Collected Poems of William Hawkins* is the largest project I've seen through to completion, and in some ways, it feels like a natural extension and culmination of all the work I've done in the last decade.