

The Man That Killed David

A generation of Canadian schoolchildren and university students has grown up knowing the story of a mountain climber who fell 50 feet to a narrow ledge, was badly injured, then pushed off the ledge to his death by his friend in an act of mercy. The climber's name was David, also the title of the story. Its author was Earle Birney. At one time or another in the last 25 years, David has been required reading for high schools and universities in every Canadian province. Mountains that are actually on the map near the Banff-Lake Louise area - Inghismaldie, Assiniboine and the Sawback Range - form part of the setting. Reaction on the part of teachers and students has been swift and marvelous: many fancied themselves literary detectives, deciding that Earle Birney had pushed his friend David off a high ledge to death in a remote Rocky Mountain valley. Which is murder, by some definitions. Birney was exasperated and frustrated by these interpretations of his fictional story. Carried to a most fantastic length, it didn't seem entirely improbable that he might be hauled into court and charged with homicide. And sentenced to real death for committing a fictional murder? In fact, a number of schoolteachers in Ontario protested against having to teach a poem that "advocated mercy killing". One Alberta university professor said in a 1971 essay: "... there is proof that this was no fictional story. Birney's companion on that fatal mountain climb was a real David. His death was reported as being due to a rockslide." In a 1963 Canadian Alpine Journal there's an article about Birney's imaginary Finger Mountain, entitled "How Many Routes on the Finger?" It begins: "Modern legend, based on a poem written by Dr. Earle Birney, has led at least 10 climbing parties in the last few years to an intriguing rock climb near Banff. It is not known whether the hero in David actually climbed the spire..." Of course that article assumes David to be a real person. Another odd thing: when Birney wrote his poem, the Finger was imaginary and did not exist. But since that time (1942) a mountain near Banff has actually been given the name. Chills must run up and down a writer's back as the people in a fictional landscape gather round him with accusing glances. It's little wonder that Birney doesn't want to include the poem in his university readings. Or that he displays impatient irritation if some fledgling sleuth says to him: "Why did you kill David?" Especially since the poem's genesis actually derives from a newspaper story in the twenties, about a student mountain climber. This man had broken his spine while ascending a mountain. His fellow climber, unable to move him, had guided rescuers back to the accident within a few hours. But the real-life David was dead from his injuries and exposure. Birney appropriated his name for the poem. Birney is sick of the subject of David, and since I've known him for some 20 years, I have some idea of his feelings. It must be like being taken over by a Doppelganger or the ventriloquist's puppet into which you've thrown your own voice. Still, I'm fascinated by the idea of part of your personality getting away on you, having an existence of its own. And that is the ultimate tribute to the writer's art, and to Birney himself. The poet-novelist-man-Birney is six feet tall, thin and built like a whiplash. Blue eyes and sandy-grey beard, with an energy that drives him pacing round the living room from typewriter to balcony to boxes storing hundreds of books, then back for more talking. His energy is something I've always envied. Birney is 15 years older than I am, and he's leaving the country for London, Paris, Cairo, Bangkok, Singapore and Australia - with a zest for all the onrushing strangeness of other countries and the friends there he will see again. He thinks of it as his "last hurrah". Earle Birney is one of the two best poets in Canada (the other is Irving Layton). Honors have poured on him throughout a long life of writing and teaching:

the Governor-General's Award twice, a first Borestone Mountain poetry award, the Lorne Pierce Medal for Literature, several Canada Council awards. Beginning in 1942 with David, he has published some 20 books, including the two-volume Collected Poems published this fall. Projected works include one volume each of plays, short stories, political writings, Chaucer essays (he's an authority on Geoffrey Chaucer), travel, literary essays and reviews. I suspect there are several more books gestating, although he says, "I know too much about poetry!" Meaning that mass accumulation of knowledge can overwhelm and stifle creativity. It doesn't seem to have worked that way in his case. Earle Birney was born in a log cabin on the banks of the Bow River in Calgary in 1904. Until the age of seven he lived on a remote farm in northern Alberta. When the family moved to Banff he played hockey in the days of the seven-man team.

Because of his speed and agility he was the rover, the man expected to go everywhere on the ice. "But I was so light and skinny, I kept getting injured. Where other kids got bruised, I came out of a scrimmage with broken bones. We were playing miners' sons from Canmore in high school hockey; big hard kids, some of them 200-pounders. I learned to skate fast just to escape being killed." And the young Birney wanted desperately to be part of school athletics. "As a boy, I felt superior in some ways, in others inferior. But never equal. I always wanted integration with other people - on my own terms." But that time of racing the wind on Bow River ice ended in 1917. The family moved again, this time to Erikson, British Columbia, near Creston in the Kootenay Mountains, where, tragically, there was no ice. They lived, Birney and his parents, on a 10-acre farm only partly cleared of bush. He was an only child, wanted to be average, but "I was always getting into quarrels and being beaten up." There were compensations. His mother was religious, but a "complete mom", and his father a restless man who kept moving from place to place, prototype of the compulsive wanderer Birney himself became. He rode a horse or sleigh in summer and winter to high school in Creston, and at the age of 14 "romance reared its lovely head". The girl was Beatrice, a year older than Earle, and it was a "wrestling romance". Not in the way that description sounds, but because Beatrice's twin younger brothers told Earle, "We don't let any guy go out with our sister, not unless he can wrestle her down!"

Birney's first thought was that the twins themselves intended to beat him up. But no, they had decided he must prove himself a better man than Beatrice by wrestling her to a standstill. The great Olympic gladiatorial contest took place in a barn loft. Earle went into battle expecting at least minimal co-operation from Beatrice. She had other ideas, and struggled against him like fury. The idea of her brothers standing watching made her fight all the harder, but at last her shoulders were pinned to the hay-covered floor." Great," said the twins in unison, "now kiss her." But Beatrice wouldn't co-operate in that either, and renewed the battle with even greater fury. Thus ended the first romance. The first job was at the Bank of Commerce in Creston when Birney was 16, wages \$15 a week. He was a "promising young man" when the bank transferred him to Vernon in the Okanagan Valley. Vernon was a three-day boat trip, and passing a waterfall on the Kootenay River he wrote his first poem - a very bad one, he says. Later he worked at some of the same jobs as the picaresque army private, Turvey, the hero of his first novel: swamper, rock-driller and ditch-digger around the Vermilion Lakes, axeman and rodman to surveyors on the Continental Divide. In some modern sense he was a mountain man, having fished the Kootenay canyons; pack-horsed into lakes in Banff National Park; guided tourists into the high ranges; hunted fossils on cliffs for museums and strung meteorological cable on Sulphur Mountain. Birney got back on the academic track expected of a poet when he entered the University of Toronto at 18. On graduation in 1934, loaded down with degrees, he became an instructor at the Mormon-administered

University of Utah, by that time a confirmed Marxist. He was fired from the school for Communist activities, but then rehired as the result of a student general strike. He interviewed Leon Trotsky in Norway; was jailed for failing to salute a Nazi parade in Germany. And, ever since that first doggerel verse written on the Kootenay River, imitating all the conventional rhyming poets who were the only ones he knew at the time, Birney has been writing poems, poems and more poems. Poems, for him, are a sort of exorcism. He experiences something or witnesses an event, and even without knowing it at the time, a poetic nag may begin to work in his mind. Something wants to come to life, desires its own being. Visiting northern India in 1958, he caught a glimpse of two Kashmiri men from his passing car. They were driving a bear south on a nose chain, and likely it would be trained to dance - and make money for its owners in Delhi. A huge beast from the Himalayan Mountains. Very likely they had come hundreds of miles through mountain passes, down to the hot fevered plains of tropic India, themselves driven by necessity for money to live. All three in a sense prisoners. After-images of the men and the bear pursued Birney for 14 months, along with guilt feelings of being a comparatively wealthy Western tourist in a country where poverty is the norm and people live in hovels. At last he exorcised those ghosts on a Mediterranean island. In about two hours and a dozen tinkering sessions afterwards, he captured men and bear along with himself, and caged them in the relative freedom of a poem. Its final passage, referring to the bear, runs like this: It is not easy to free myth from reality or rear this fellow up to lurch, lurch with them in the tranced dancing of men. All through the years of teaching Chaucer, English literature, running creative writing classes at the University of British Columbia, Birney has wanted to make enough money to stop teaching and do nothing but freelance writing. After the war, during which he was a personnel officer and gathered the amalgam of experience that became his novel *Turvey*, he worked toward that end. The novel sold 30,000 copies in Canada, but little in the US. "And I knew I'd never write anything as popular again." But it wasn't enough money to stop teaching, not with a family to support. Down the Long Table, a 1955 Marxist novel about the depression, didn't flop but made little money. Not that university life is an unrewarding existence. It has enabled Earle Birney to travel around the world, pursue his skin-diving hobby in the shark-infested waters of Fiji, off Majorca and on Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Birney quit teaching 10 years ago, to accept successive posts as poet-in-residence at Canadian and American universities. And to write, above all to write. The furies that drove him in earlier years are lessened; a heart attack two years ago slowed him down still further. But you wouldn't know that to watch him while we're talking. The blue eyes are just as flashing, the opinions just as vehement and uncompromising. Some of them strike fire on current live issues. Our American good neighbors: "The US is an imperial power, which is difficult to like. They are sloughing off whatever democracy they have left with succeeding waves of reaction, neo-fascism and imperialism. Nothing short of a major catastrophe will stop that drift. They may even be breaking up right now, almost while we are watching. We in Canada must have courage and willingness to sacrifice and wait for the time when the US will no longer be able to bully." Mankind: "We are a lethal species, like a huge skin cancer around the surface of the earth, reducing all else to extinction. I'm profoundly cynical about the average human being, including myself. Sometimes it's difficult to remember there are still good people left in the world..." Religion: "I view the world as something in transit, which does not know where it is going....God? I have no faith in the existence of a god." Birney does not, as they say, suffer fools gladly. He's been involved in controversy a good part of his life, fighting for the right to remain a creative human being, despite the strictures of academicism. John Robert Colombo once remarked that Birney

should be given the post of Canadian cultural ambassador,
travelling round the world to every country. But he is, unmistakably, a
citizen of none but his own. Over the years Birney has changed his work,
revisions continuing even after poems have been published. Punctuation, for
instance, has been dropped in many of his best poems. Nothing is
fixed and certain, there are few absolutes on this unstable planet. In which
connection I think of the French painter, Pierre Bonnard, in his old age
sneaking into the Louvre with paint brushes under his coat, avoiding the
glance of uniformed guards - to retouch and alter his own paintings hung
on the sacred walls. Birney has been a creative human being over the 70
years of his life. A man who strips himself in his writing - that naked man
is the poet, travelling light and streaking into his own past and future.

Word Count: 2323