

Canadian Poetry & Poets

by Bernice Lever

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Thank you to World Poetry, especially Ariadne & Alejandro, the City of Richmond and all the talented groups supporting this conference. It is an honour to take part.

Sharing poetry created by Canadian poets could fill our weekend, easily with stories and songs from our First Nations storytellers who have enjoyed life in our mild, rain forest climate for 6 to 8 thousand years. Europeans are new comers to this West coast, (Vancouver city is now 125 yrs. old), but then our East is not old either compared to other countries. Even though we claim a massive & beautiful landform, our 34 ++ million population is about the size of Shanghai.

So our history of books printed in English & French is short, so even I am known as an OLD Canadian , having been a Canadian for 75 years as was my father all his life. Just a young country, yet Canadian poets using mass media today communicate with each other across the miles as well as with poets and audiences globally.

World Poetry Radio and its annual readings honour Nobel Poetry prize winners from around the world -- knowing we all strive to follow their fantastic examples. I will share the words of 2 famous Canadian poets who were my teachers in university classes, then who became lifelong friends. My 2 poets show the power of poets who have a PASSION for WORDS & for life to its fullest. Passion for Mind, Heart & Spirit. Yes, they had physical passion for their lovers, yet were equally involved in ideas & beliefs for world politics & spiritual values. These led to their continuing with poems & in person in battles against injustices. They led public street protests, wrote letters to editors as well as spoke bluntly and often on radio & TV. Yes, they not only wrote many poetry books, but also believed poets have the duty to use their word talents to help others!



As we are First Nations land, I will quote briefly from **Pauline Johnson** whose monument is in Stanley Park, Vancouver. Her mother was an English woman and her father, a Mohawk Chief, so she was taught to value this land, her home.

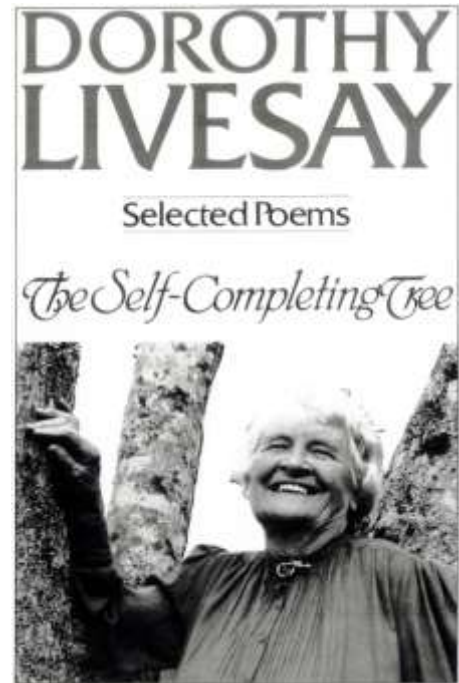
The Song My Paddle Sings

She was a princess with a regal manner that wowed them in London, thus ?breaking trail? as we say for future generations of poets to read across oceans, such as our famous novelist Margaret Atwood whose first books were fine poetry.

Dorothy Livesay, born in 1909 in Winnipeg, central Canada. Her English speaking parents were both published writers. Her first book, published when she was 18 yrs. old, already displayed her ability for short, memorable lines.

Fire and Reason

Livesay studied French & Italian at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1931 on, but mainly learned the horrors of the Depression and the threatening war. She returned to Toronto, studied Social Work so she could work in that field, and also joined campaigns for social change. She wanted others to know how to be close to nature & to ordinary people. Livesay believed in socialism until Stalin joined forces with Hitler.

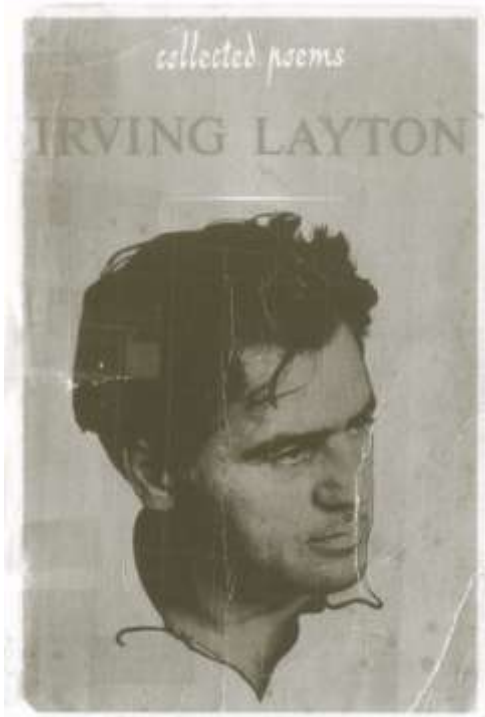


Spain

Livesay won 2 Governor Generals -- our highest national poetry award & much more. She developed the Canadian long narrative - the book long poem.

Her **Day & Night** was for the victims of the Depression in 1930's & **Call My People Home**, was a radio documentary first, then book for the Isseis that dramatically explained Canada's bad treatment of the Japanese in WW11. She fought against many injustices, raised 2 children, worked for Unesco, even in Zambia and later was Writer in Residence at 11 Canadian universities & colleges.

Like most poets caring for the WORD, she was active with literary magazines, even started CV11. Our annual BC poetry book prize is named in her honour.



Irving Layton, born in Roumania in 1912, came with his Jewish parents to Montreal, Quebec, as a toddler. So he grew up learning Yiddish, French & English, & later words in other languages. He first taught at a private boy's school, then as Poet in Residence for Sir George. Wm. University, and eventually as a Prof. of English at York University, Toronto, when creative writing classes were accepted

Irving Layton & Dorothy Livesay led other poets to leave sweet Victorian poetry, to be brave & honest with their blazing words.

Layton has been described as 'iconoclastic, controversial, opinionated, & bigger than life'. When he entered a room, the electric energy of any class or audience ramped up.

Layton believed poetry was a political act, so his words were aimed at those who had dull, even stupid cultural values. Of course, he meant those who did not support the ARTS--especially poets!

In this country, 'the poet has to fight for his survival. He lives in a middle-class milieu whose values of money-getting, respectability, and success are hostile to the kind of integrity and authenticity that is at the core of his endeavour.'

He has been compared to the USA's Walt Whitman as Layton travelled through many countries and several marriages, earning himself 3 Nobel book nominations: Canadian, Italian, & South Korean. His over 40 books have become several translations available around the globe. He, too, was involved in little poetry magazines, wrote 100's of letters to newspapers, and loved to arguing on radio & TV talk shows.

Layton knew 3 of the World's largest religious groups which all trace their sources to the prophet Abraham of the Old Testament and the Near East, so he got attention by naming one book, **For My Brother Jesus**.

His angry poem about a holiday boat on the Rhine recalls WW 11. His often quoted poem is **Whatever else, Poetry is Freedom**. So much more biography could be added, but I believe poets should study & praise poets of all nations. So I will close with his softer poem,

Keine Lazarovitch - 1870-1959: for his mother.

Please read again these poems I have shared today, then many more by these two Canadian poetry icons.

Have a great weekend: sharing important words in poems, art, song and dance.