

# DOWN IN THE VALLEY

*Trevor Carolan*



*Trevor Carolan and Professors' Delias and Ferguson c. 1960s*

WHILE COORDINATING the literary festival attached to the XV Olympic Winter Games in Calgary during the late 1980s, I became aware of how significantly the prairie provinces regarded their homegrown literary communities. Fine regional presses such as Coteau, Thistledown, NeWest, Turnstone and others, published work that was, and remains, broadly representative of Canada's plains culture. I was glad to see it — especially anthologies like Fred Stenson's *Alberta Bound* (NeWest, 1986), which packages thirty Alberta short story authors. Good anthologies are indispensable reference sources so they tend to remain on our shelves, always ready to inform and entertain.

I was reminded of this a year ago after a Literary Café reading event I attended at the Harrison Festival of the Arts. Janet Vickers, Marion Quednau, Evelyn Lau and myself read that night, and we were introduced to Kuldip Gill. One good gig has a habit of leading to another, and I was invited to other valley readings. Each time, I was struck by the excellence of the area's homegrown literary talents, most of whom are unknown in Vancouver.

The idea of an anthology of Fraser Valley writing arose in conversation with Ron Dart, poet, longtime valley Amnesty International coordinator, and a fellow instructor at University College of the Fraser Valley (UCFV). Accordingly, I dug up my copy of *Alberta Bound* and a handsomely-produced work from Port Townsend, Washington entitled *Dalmo'ma* (Empty Bowl, 1986). The latter, a compendium of Pacific Northwest poetry and prose subtitled *Working the Woods, Working the Sea* made a valuable template, I thought. Curiously, the editors—Finn Wilcox and Jeremiah Gorsline—had an interesting connection to Mission City through author Tom Jay, Mal Peek, and other local Estonians. Twenty years ago, Wayne Holder, who ran the Literary Storefront with Estonian nationalist Tom Ilves in Gastown (after founder Mona Fertig moved on to Saltspring Island) hosted a rural bohemian literary salon at his five-acre spread in Mission. There, my wife and I met, among others, Robert Bringham, Marion Quednau, George Payerle, and Crispin and Jan Elsted from Barbarian Press. Holder and Ilves also occasionally invited one or another of us to their amazing get-togethers with Stephen Spender, Joseph Brodsky, Edward Albee, W.S. Merwin *et al.*

Inspired, I broached the subject of a regional Fraser Valley anthology with Richard Olafson at Ekstasis Editions in Victoria. After looking

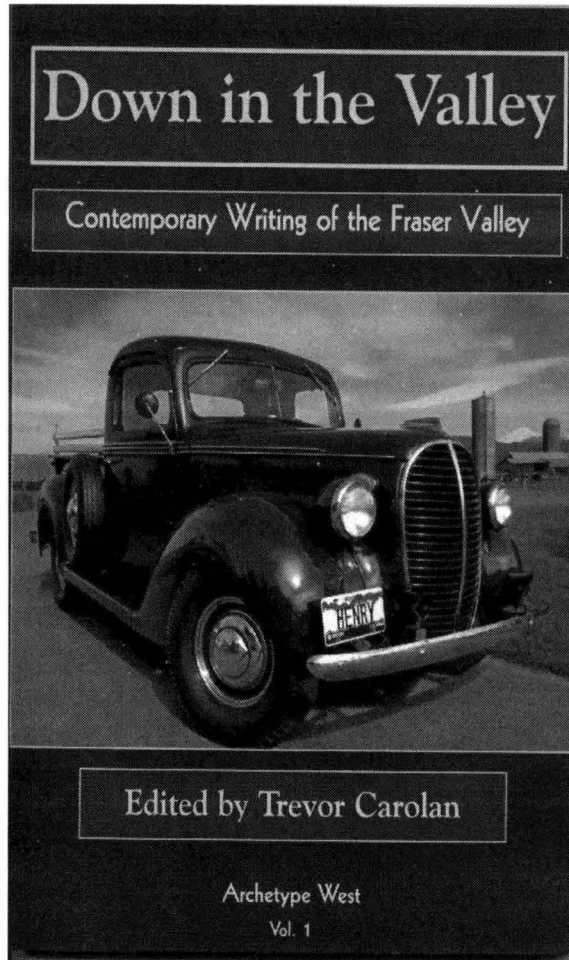
at *Dalmo'ma* he saw the wisdom of the idea, but explained the cost of producing anthologies is pricing them out of the market.

Jim Andersen, head of English at UCFV who is from a Marpole sheet-metal family, learned of the anthology idea and supported me with introductions to senior administrative brass. It turned out that the Fall 2004 term would mark UCFV's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The school has had close links to the valley's creative arts community since its inception, and Dr. Skip Bassford, our president, and Yvon Dandurand, head of research programs, saw the project as an example of UCFV's community outreach mandate that was worth supporting. Between Ekstasis, the Canada Council and UCFV, we made the project happen.

And so *Down In The Valley: Contemporary Writing from the Fraser Valley* was born. A newspaper call in January, 2004 requested submissions of poetry and prose that would in some way be reflective of the writers, the people, and sense of place that is the Fraser Valley. Mail-ins came from everywhere — unknown citizens and veteran authors alike, local seniors centers, high schools and jails. Editorially, the choices were made in record time. One hot summer day, Ron Dart and I were outside examining manuscripts when an exquisitely preserved 1939 Ford pick-up drove by. I said, "There's our cover shot." Ron knew the owner. Catherine MacDonald of Literary Café fame kindly got Bob McGregor, a valley pro to photograph the old beauty with farm silos and snow-capped Mount Baker in the background. As you can see in the accompanying picture it's a Ray Carver kind of image.

On October 21st, Ekstasis delivered the handsome 160-page book just in time for the launch at UCFV's Abbotsford campus. Our 36 contributors included veterans Crispin Elsted, Andreas Schroeder, and Marion Quednau and Kuldip Gill who both read for an enthusiastic, jam-packed crowd. Two UCFV students, Ranbir Banwait and Kristine Archie of Punjabi and Shuswap Nation background, were especially welcomed to the old poetic lineage by elder contributors. And present in the audience there were valley Mennonites, Dutch and Hungarians, community elders, old bronc-riders, farmers, you name it. Most seemed to reckon that we'd shaped an honest literacy of place from the valley's landscapes and its diverse cultural mosaic. My 14-year-old daughter Erin handled the book table and did land-office business, moving box-loads. It was quite a party.

As the Fraser Valley's traditional agricultural, logging and fishing ways of life continue their transformation under pressure from metropolitan Vancouver, I'm grateful to have had a part in celebrating new ways to sing the valley's old songs and stories, renewing them for the changing generational mosaic of our times. The title for the collection came unbidden as the last line of a poem that began writing itself in mind while I drove one early November evening past Old Clayburn Road on Highway No. 11 from Abbotsford to Mission in 2003. I've always loved this area. My stone-mason father bought his fire-bricks from the kilns at Clayburn village, and I double-handpacked brick-tong loads of them, helping my dad on weekends and in summers throughout my boyhood. Sometimes we'd head up to Westminster Abbey afterwards to hear Vespers chanted in Latin at eventide and the old monks would bless us on our journey home. It's a memory I've cherished for nearly 50 years.




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*Trevor Carolan is a widely published writer and editor who has published books in the areas of poetry, fiction and non-fiction. He also teaches English at the University College of the Fraser Valley. He is married with two children and lives in North Vancouver.*