

THE ADDER'S TALE: MEMORIES OF A LITTLE MAGAZINE OF THE 1960S

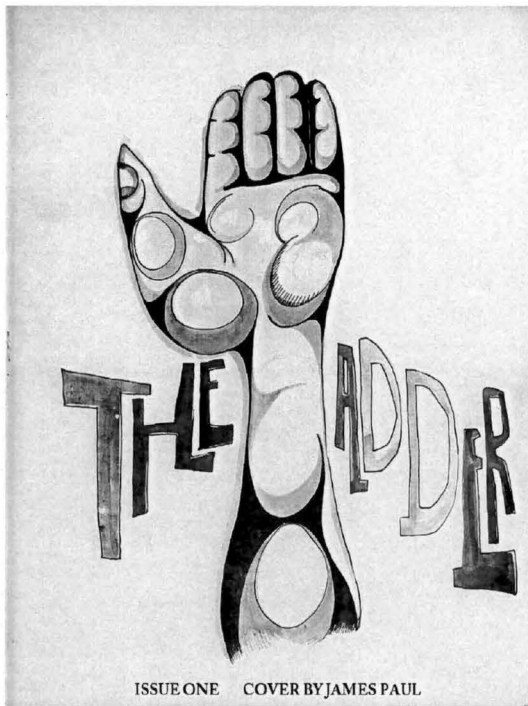
Glenn Woodsworth

“NEVERMORE,” QUOTH THE ADDER. Vancouver in the late 1950s was a bleak place for aspiring young literary writers. What few home-grown literary periodicals there were catered to established poets and tended to be provincial in outlook and backward-looking in taste. But by the end of the 1950s the scene was changing. Many new and important writers emerged in just a few years, and most began their careers with appearances in a new and vigorous generation of “little magazines.” The change began in 1959 when Jan de Bruyn founded *Prism*, which was committed to publishing work by unknown writers. By 1967 there were at least a dozen little mags in Vancouver. Some were strongly anti-establishment in outlook and format; others were more traditional. Some had university affiliation; others were fiercely independent. Some were inconsequential; others had an influence that spread throughout the country. It was an exciting time and place to be an aspiring writer.

Some of the magazines were long lived; others had brief tenures. One of the earliest of the many short-lived independents was *The Adder*. I was part of a loose group of friends and acquaintances, all of whom wrote poetry and short stories. We read a great deal of literature and shared our favourites with the others. I remember an eclectic mix of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, including Carson McCuller’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Gide’s *Strait is the Gate*, poetry by Robinson Jeffers, P.D. Ouspensky’s *Tertium Organum*, and Erich Fromm’s *The Sane Society*. Of course, we much admired the Beats, especially poetry by Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac. I don’t recall much Canadian content on our lists, but some of us enjoyed Earle Birney and were influenced by the exuberant energy of UBC’s little magazine *Raven*, especially the issues designed by Robert Reid and his students. We occasionally hung out at the Black Spot, a coffee house and jazz club on Dunbar near 27th, where the music was by the likes of Charles Mingus (on records) and Al Neil (live).

In those days, high-school literary magazines and annuals were the main outlets for student writing. These magazines tended to be pro-establishment and conservative in literary taste. New ideas and experimental writing were definitely not welcome, and most of their poetry was too sentimental even for Hallmark.

I recall that one of us had had his material rejected by his school’s magazine for being “too radical.” So we decided to start a new,



independent magazine. According to the editorial manifesto in the first issue, we wished to “encourage young writers and provide a medium for them.” There are no editors listed for the first issue, but they were the same as for the other two issues: Jim MacLean and Jim Alexander (the leaders of the project), Ross Clark, Frank de Bruyn, Arnold Shives, all students at Lord Byng

High School in Vancouver, and me, at Magee High. The name *The Adder* was chosen by MacLean, Alexander and de Bruyn, who opened a dictionary at random and pretty much chose the first interesting word they saw. We solicited contributions and wrote some of the stuff ourselves, in part pseudonymously.

We did 100 copies of the first issue, optimistically labelled volume 1, number 1, in June 1961. Jim MacLean’s mother typed the issue and printed it on the Gestetner where she worked. Our 100 copies sold briskly for 25¢ during the last days of the school year, probably helped by the cover illustration by James Paul of Lord Byng. Bill Duthie, always a friend of little magazines, took some copies, but most we sold at schools and through friends. We couldn’t sell them on the school grounds, because the magazine was banned from all Vancouver high schools on the grounds that it was subversive. But the issue was reviewed favourably by Donald Stainsby, book review editor for the *Vancouver Sun*, who condemned the school board ban. Sales were helped by the school board flap, and we ran off another 30 copies. The second printing was issued without the yellowish pictorial cover, just a white cover sheet that said “second edition.”

In general, we were encouraged by the reception, though the content was heavy on teenage cynicism, depression and the over-cute and mannered poetry that we scorned when it appeared in the much-detested high school yearbooks. My own writing was sharply but kindly criticized by my English teacher, a remarkable woman named Marion Langridge who was active in the B.C. Mountaineering Club in the 1920s.

With the proceeds from the sale of the first issue, we could afford to continue. The second issue appeared in the fall of 1961 and had a print run of 200 copies. Typing and layout for this and the third issue were done by Mrs. MacLean, but printing was done by long-established Vancouver job printer Chapman & Warwick on Seymour. I think we went to them because they did all the B.C. Mountaineering Club's printing (founder Charles Chapman was Honourary President of the club when I joined), and a few of us were already heavily involved with the club. Many of the covers (by Arnold Shives) were defective in that the ink didn't take properly on the heavy yellow paper and they came out greyish rather than the desired jet-black. The third and last issue, with a cover by Lord Byng student Sheila Dyer, appeared in February 1962 with a print run of 190. It's the one with "Wow! Limited edition" rubber-stamped on the back, which we intended as a parody of limited edition statements then appearing on many small chapbooks, little mags, and the like.

We planned a fourth issue with a "peace" theme, but it never appeared. Partly this was because we were by then going our separate ways, but also we weren't happy with the quality of the work being submitted. Most of the best stuff was by that time going to *Tish*, which had started up in September 1961, just a few months after *The Adder*. The *Tish* editors, including Frank Davey, George Bowering and Fred Wah, with Warren Tallman as mentor, were much better poets than we. They were also a few years older than us and attended UBC rather than high school. And much of the fun of doing *The Adder* went with the death of Frank de Bruyn.

Frank de Bruyn (son of Jan de Bruyn of *Prism*) was the youngest and probably most multi-talented of our group of editors, with strong interests and abilities in linguistics, mathematics and the sciences. He was killed in a mountaineering accident in the summer of 1961, soon after his 16th birthday. He, Arnold Shives and I were great friends. The three of us had planned on climbing Mt. Garibaldi together, but, for one reason or another, Arnold and I were unable to go that weekend. Frank went with two others and was killed in an icefall. Frank's death resulted in a curious and rare Morris Printing item. This pamphlet, *The Frank de Bruyn Memorial Books: a Bibliography*, lists the books that were purchased with donations from friends and family and donated to UBC in

Frank's memory. The attractive design reflects the strong influence that Robert Reid had on the Morris books of the day.

What became of the other editors and twenty-five or so contributors? Do any Lowryesque webs of coincidences, and oddities link them after more than forty years? Of course, I never met all the contributors, and high school connections fade over the years. Jim MacLean is now on the faculty of the Department of French at Memorial University. Ross Clark moved to New Zealand years ago and is a professor of linguistics at the University of Auckland. I don't know what became of Jim Alexander, other than that he moved to London in the late 1960s.

Arnold Shives and I met on a B.C. Mountaineering Club trip in 1959, and we remain good friends. It was he who introduced me to the Lord Byng group. He has built a successful career as an artist, and it was clear even in *The Adder* days that art was his calling and passion. Appearances in *The Adder* may have been his first published work. He has seen more of the Coast Mountains (his mountains, and mine) than any artist of stature and has, I think, seen more deeply into their essence than any other artist. Arnold has issued several books of his work under his own imprint, Prospect Press, and his work was featured in *Amphora 136*. He and bp Nichol were close friends and confidants who met through Jim Alexander. Arnold suggests that it may have been bp's exposure to *The Adder* circle that seriously jump-started his writing.

Scott McIntyre (issue 1, with his name incorrectly spelled) was a Lord Byng student who later obtained a fine arts degree from Simon Fraser. He and Jim Douglas formed Douglas & McIntyre, now the largest and most important Canadian publisher west of Toronto. He recently wrote that his poem for *The Adder* "should explain why I chose publishing instead, but we were all young once."

Bob McDonald (issues 1 and 2), was a Magee classmate of mine. He worked in Greece for many years as a journalist and correspondent for the BBC and CBC. He has written several books on political issues in that region and now lives in London. In 2003, his large archive of modern Greek manuscripts and papers was donated to the SFU library, where it rests near the bp Nichol-Shives correspondence.

Patricia Horrobin (issue 2) was another Magee classmate of mine. At UBC she worked on the *Ubysey* with other *The Adder* alumni Bob McDonald and Sheila Dyer and edited a volume of essays, *Student Protest*

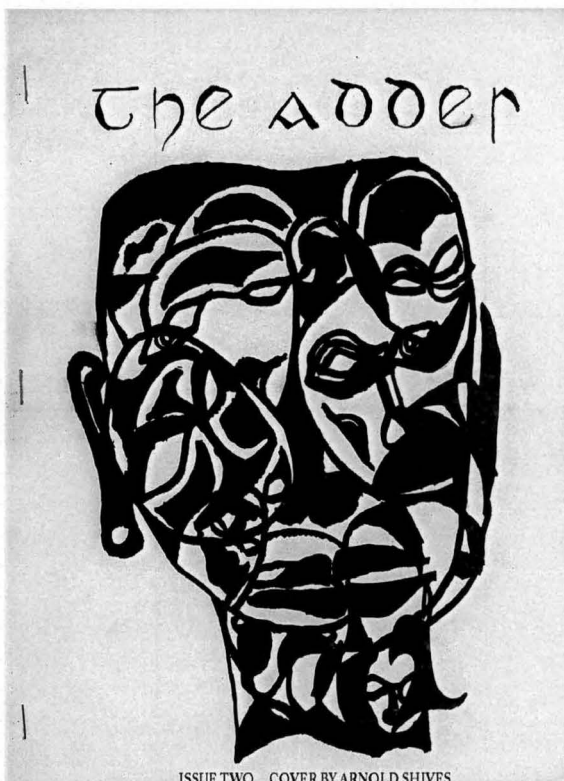
(1968) with George Payerle, who was to become a well-known poet and novelist. Pat spent some time in China, worked briefly as an assistant to Anne Yandle at UBC Special Collections, then became an Anglican priest.

Bob Woodsworth (issue 1), my brother, was another of our group with a strong interest in mountaineering. He has been a college teacher of political science, a potter, a carpenter, and currently owns and operates the popular Naam restaurant in Vancouver. He still gets out into the mountains with Arnold Shives.

We also received contributions from UBC students. Michael Atchison (issue 3) had been a classmate of mine before taking geology at UBC. He did his B.Sc. work on some Yukon hot springs that he examined while working with one of my future geological mentors, Hu Gabrielse. Mike had finished a M.Sc. and looked forward to a bright career, but he died of leukemia in 1970. Another UBC student, Norman Turtle, moved to New Zealand in the 1970s and now works for the Christian Radio Missionary Fellowship.

Another UBC student, David Cull (issue 2), had his first publication in *The Adder*. He soon became one of the *Tish* poets and started his own little magazine, *Motion*, in 1962. He wrote half a dozen generally well-received books of poetry in the 1960s and early 1970s. After a sojourn in India he, too, moved to New Zealand, where he has lived for the past 20 years and writes on various subjects.

Dick Culbert (issue 3) was another UBC student and is the only contributor to *The Adder* with his own entry in the *Encyclopedia of British Columbia*. Earle Birney wanted him to enroll in creative writing at UBC, but Dick chose geology instead. His great passion in those days was mountaineering. He gave up serious climbing in the mid-1970s, but what he accomplished in a few years remains legendary. His pioneering *Climber's Guide to the Coastal Ranges of British Columbia* (1965) has been



cited by many as one of the greatest and most literate climbing guides in North America. After living in Chile for many years, Dick now resides in Gibsons. He wrote much poetry in high school and university, mostly in such out-of-fashion forms as the narrative ballad and rhyming couplets. The Robert Service influence is strong in much of his work, but his literary talent went far beyond that.

As for me, I went with Arnold, Frank, Bob and Dick into the mountains, followed Dick into a career in geology and Michael into hot springs research. In 1969 I sold a collection of *CV*, *Tish* and *Prism* accumulated during and after *The Adder* years to a young bookseller named William Hoffer, who had just opened a store up on 10th Avenue. Without *The Adder* memories, I probably wouldn't have caught the publishing and collecting bugs and wouldn't have formed my own Tricouni Press. And I certainly wouldn't have written *Cheap Sons of Bitches*, my tribute to Hoffer and his publishing enterprises.

The Adder had one other far-reaching and unexpected consequence. In 1963, a small group of Magee students who had bought and read *The Adder* started *Talon Magazine* to "fill the gap left behind by the unfortunate death of *The Adder*" (*Talon*, issue 1). *Talon* from the beginning had stronger literary content than *The Adder*, publishing the likes of bp Nichol, Margaret Atwood and George Bowering. Although the founders of the magazine soon left, the publishing house Talonbooks grew out of *Talon Magazine* and is now a major regional publisher of drama and aboriginal studies. It may not be too much of an exaggeration to think that, without our effort, we might have had no *Talon Magazine* or Talonbooks, and the Canadian literary scene would have been a bit poorer.

Glenn Woodsworth is a Vancouver mountaineer, geologist and book collector. With his wife, Joy, he publishes B.C.-related nonfiction under their Tricouni Press imprint. An earlier version of this article appeared in bookseller Stephen Lunsford's Catalogue 62 (winter 2004). Thanks to Arnold Shives for comments on early drafts.