



Mr. Jon Robert Pearce

November 18, 2015

The beloved teacher, formidable athlete, champion of Canadian literature, and devoted friend to many, Jon Pearce, age 78, died in his sleep on November 18, 2015, at his home in Toronto.

Jon didn't understand how imposing he looked in his prime, with his large athlete's frame and ferocious eyebrows and a face that tended to settle into something short of a scowl. Seeing him for the first time you wouldn't know he had a heart as big as a house.

He also had a prodigious memory and a way of speaking that was level, direct, and emphatic. Once when this writer was a young professor I invited Jon to my seminar on Joyce, during the course of which he intervened three times to correct factual errors I was making. When I told him afterwards how embarrassed I had been, he was stricken. It was, truly, the last thing he wanted to do.

But Jon did know literature and had strong ideas about what was good and what wasn't. A well-crafted sentence brought him great delight, while a failure of grammar was cause for grave concern. He was always reading, right up to the end, and when he discovered a good new novel he would give copies to his friends, inscribed and carefully wrapped.

Jon had an extraordinary power of focus. In his early years, it made him a champion single-scull rower who represented Canada in the Empire and Commonwealth games, and in his later years it made him one of Toronto's premier squash players. This laser-like gift also made him an excellent close

reader, serving him well as an English major at McMaster, Johns Hopkins, UBC (BA), and the UT (MA).

With *Marked by the Wild: Literature Shaped by the Canadian Wilderness*, co-edited with Bruce Littlejohn in 1973, Jon contributed to EcoLit a quarter century before it became an academic field. The book itself was keyed to Northrop Frye's observation that 'everything that is central in Canadian writing seems to be marked by the imminence of the natural world'. It was also part of Jon's mission to heighten awareness of the literary riches Canadians had right at home.

Marked by the Wild was followed by *Mirrors: Recent Canadian Verse* (1975) and *Twelve Voices: Interviews with Canadian Poets* (1980), both demonstrating the range and on-going productivity of contemporary writing in Canada. They in turn complemented Jon's mission at Upper Canada College (1975-1996) to bring Canadian literature into the classroom so that Canadian students would learn early in life that they had their own Canadian cultural legacy. As Head of the UCC Prep School English Department, he created 'CanLit Weeks', a program that brought Canadian poets and novelists to the campus.

If literature was Jon's first love, teaching was a close second. His commanding presence, leavened by his sense of fun and above all his deeply caring nature, made him at once the students' mentor and friend. In retirement, he kept up with many of them. And in his passing, he has bequeathed funding for the Quentin Compson Bursary at UT to support graduate students in English. In naming it after Faulkner's brilliant, yet doomed, Harvard student, it is very likely that he wanted to memorialize a student he loved but could never save.

By his Friend, Porter Abbott

Tribute Wall

SJ

“ Jon was Godfather to my first born son.He was a close friend of my Husband and after graduation from McMaster U Jon and my husband and I spent a memorable year in Vancouver (1959 -1960) when Jon and my Husband did post grad and I worked.....it was a wild year with Jon in close telephone touch with Norman Mailer in NY ...many times .
Every day was an adventure when Jon was involved !!

Suzanne Mallett J - August 21, 2022 at 09:58 AM

OM

“ I recently learned of the sad news. Although Jon and I lost touch after I graduated from UCC, many of his lessons have remained with me. He was my first form master there and, with the full clarity of hindsight, I can say he had the greatest impact on my academic interests and habits. Thanks to Jon there's hardly a book I read that remains unmarked and I continue to have a strange affinity for Bridge Mixture. Farewell to a great man with a great heart.

Oliver Madison - September 16, 2020 at 06:06 PM

JB

“ Jon was my English teacher at Neuchatel Jr College (Class of '69). My favorite memory was travelling to Tunisia with him and his wife Julie for Easter holidays, after breaking away from the school tour in Italy. After a couple of days at the resort in Hammamet he got bored and wanted to return to Neuchatel, even though there were still 3 or 4 days remaining on the hotel package. Naturally, Julie refused and we stayed in Tunisia as scheduled. Jeff Blackstock

Jeff Blackstock - December 19, 2015 at 09:42 PM

RR

“ I am very saddened to learn of the passing of Jon. I have many happy memories of our year together in graduate school in the early 60's and of occasional visits over the intervening years. My condolences to all family members and friends at this dark time.
Robert Renwick

Robert Renwick - November 29, 2015 at 07:24 AM

RA

“ Have not seen or heard from Jon since we both worked at Consumers Gas in Toronto in 1959 as pipeline note keepers/ Inspectors. At the time Jon's dad Bob was a contractor for the Gas company. We were both the same age and had similar interests so we chummed together for the summer and then lost touch. I had not attended university but was interested in English studies as was Jon's interest at the time. Jon was still in training as a scull rower. Jon encouraged me to attend University and to pursue my interest in English studies. I did but ended up in Commerce studies. Jon in his youth was everything Porter Abbott described in his tribute and beyond his imposing frame there truly was a big heart and a big smile and a strong will to achieve.
I am not surprised at his accomplishments and I know he leaves a host of friends from all walks of life. I regret that I could not have been part of that friendship over the years. But maybe I was, as literature has so much "wonder" and in that "wonder" I had about him so could he about me. Accordingly for all those years we were friends. Farewell friend. Yours was a life well lived. Bob Wall, Ottawa On.

Robert A. Wall - November 28, 2015 at 12:28 PM

JL

“ People often talk about UCC having a strong "old boys" network. I often think more about the old teachers, and "Big Jon" is certainly on that list. He was one of my home room teachers in the mid 70's. While I certainly recall his love of literature and poetry my fondest memories are some of his personal characteristics. He was the only teacher, except perhaps Mr. Mould, who brought his personal art to decorate his class room, and boy did he like to talk about that painting. He did believe in penalties for misbehaviours, lateness or forgotten homework however he allowed creativity within that. Forgotten texts meant standing at the front of the room with some solid texts in your hands, arms straight out from the body for the complete period. No student every survived that one, however he forgot a text one day and self imposed the penalty. He did survive the period however we believed he had hollowed out the books. He liked assigning lines. "I will not forget my homework again" Typically one to two hundred times. These were to be done during study period. He did however allow us to get the whole class to help the penalized student write these as he felt it promoted team work. The task would be completed in minutes. Occasionally a heinous misdemeanor by a student meant a long walk from the prep to the upper school for the whole class where the miscreant would be thrashed in a squash game, regardless of his talent, while the rest of us watched. Jon was a great character, developer of boys, teacher, and is a great memory.

John La Prairie

John LaPrairie - November 27, 2015 at 06:35 AM

PH

“ Jon was my grade 11 teacher and private tutor at Lawrence Park Collegiate in Toronto in 1967. Beyond *Catcher in the Rye*, he introduced me to a wealth of literature and sparked an interest I did not know I had. He treated all his students with respect and they respected him. Over the years I have often hoped to encounter him again. He was an amazing teacher and mentor. My enduring image of Mr. Pearce is his arrival at school on a motorcycle, in a three piece dark suit, briefcase tucked under his arm. He approached literature like a stock portfolio; it has been a very profitable investment. My condolences to his family and friends.
Peggy Hutchison

Peggy Hutchison - November 26, 2015 at 10:38 PM

TF

“ I met Jon as a 13-year old boy in the Prep at UCC when he was my Form 5 master, which I believe was his first teaching position. I felt, but did not know, that he could be circumventing the curriculum by teaching some advanced poetry book called “Various Bravery” along with J. D. Salinger’s “9 Short Stories” and “Greater Word Power” (which I can only explain as Reader’s Digest on steroids). I definitely knew he was off-the-page when he allowed the most spoiled student called Chandler to host the end of year party with endless spins of a record by the James Gang.

Jon tended more towards Cat Stevens “Tea for the Tillman”, which he played for us occasionally. You could smell a little lager in the air on those days. Too bad for us Jon that Cat hightailed it for Haifa.

Thanks for calling me “the only normal one in the class”. I took it as a compliment at the time but now realize its limitations

Yes, there were some nice teachers there despite all that is published.

Twenty years later I joined the Toronto Racquet Club where Jon was an elite A doubles squash player and was definitely no saint with his social set down there - Tim P. etc. But Jon took the time to try to ground me in this unusual sport which combines jai alai and badminton. I got to the B level but it turns out that normal players don’t reach A, just the poets.

Jon, I know you never said, but I could tell that you suffered . You may have written some poetry but I never saw it. You never said.

We need more such poets.

Goodbye my friend on this perfect day for bananafish.

Anthony (Bean) Frost

Tony Frost - November 26, 2015 at 02:46 PM