

## Maoist Performativities: Milton Acorn and the Canadian Liberation Movement

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Alan Filewod, University of Guelph

If we Canadians, following the programme advocated by many, but most clearly by the Canadian Liberation Movement, seized the foreign-owned industries in our territory -- and if the principal foreign owner, the American Empire, launched military operations against us; What are the odds? Would we win? (Acorn 91) [...] A people armed with a modern Marxist-Leninist ideology is invincible in a defensive war. (Acorn 102)

This militant assertion of Canadian revolutionary valor may be fairly typical of the rhetoric of the New Left in Canada as it decomposed into sectarianism at the close of the 1960s, but it is remarkable because it is the thesis of an essay included in one of the best-selling volumes of poetry in Canadian publishing history.<sup>1</sup> Milton Acorn's 1972 collection, *More Poems for People*, sold some 10,000 copies in a country where the (statistically) average poetry volume sells less than 500.<sup>2</sup> *More Poems for People* marked the high point of Maoist sentiment in the field of radical culture in Canada, not just because Milton Acorn was one of the most highly regarded Canadian poets, but because his relative celebrity legitimized the Canadian Liberation Movement, which existed primarily in the form of its publishing house, New Canada Press (also known as NC Press). As a member of the CLM, Acorn was the vindication of its strategy of popularizing the highly romanticized Maoism of a movement that after its collapse in 1976 was described by one critic, in language characteristic of the sectarian wars of the extreme left, as "a national chauvinist, social-fascist, absolutely degenerate organization" (Pickersgill 8).

A consideration of Acorn's role in the CLM leads to a useful comparison of the performative and textual strategies deployed by contesting groups that vied to mobilize support for Maoist-inflected Marxism-Leninism. By the early 1970s, the CLM found itself competing with the Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist) (CPC-ML) as the voice of "authentic" Maoism, and although three decades after the demise of the CLM, the CPC-ML continues as a registered political party,<sup>3</sup> it seems clear in retrospect that the CLM was vastly more successful in commanding public attention, and through its programme of recruiting highly visible legitimizing artists, some measure of support. The CLM's improvised, ideologically confused and politically naïve activism was in the end more effective than the unashamedly Stalinist party apparatus utilized by the CPC-ML. If the CLM can be considered an *enactment* of a revolutionary movement, the CPC-ML can be seen in contrast as a *simulation* of a mass party. Both of these terms suggest a fundamental performativity, but they encode crucial differences. My usage is designed to suggest that a simulation follows a patterning script of a regulatory structure, whereas an enactment resists governing structure. The difference at play here is that between script and improvisation.

Both the CLM and the CPC-ML arose out of the student movement of the late '60s, and flourished in the political vacuum left by the paralysis of the Soviet-client Communist Party of Canada (CPC). Despite a long history of militant organization in the labor movement, and the successful navigation of the same problems of ethnic factionalism and "exceptionalism" that had been experienced by its fraternal party in the United States, the CPC had been severely damaged by the Soviet repression of Hungary in 1956 and by its flip-flop on the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which it at first opposed, and then in a quick strategic reversal, supported (Avakumovic 63). By the late '60s, the CP was mired in crisis, with an aging membership of Stalin-era loyalists,

ideological dissent in the ranks and no strategy of renewal at a time of increasing student disaffection.

The origins of the New Left in Canada begin, as they did in the United States, with the peace campaigns of the early '60s, principally through two organizations, the Canadian Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and the Student Union for Peace Action. The turning point, again as in the United States, was the Vietnam War, which not only radicalized a generation of students, but also polarized Canadian society. Although Canada, as a member of the International Control Commission, resisted American overtures to participate in the war, a significant number of Canadian joined the US forces. Estimates of the number of Canadians serving in Vietnam range from 3,500 (Shand), to 12000 (Graffen), to 20,000 (Levant). But of far greater impact was the flood of American war resisters to Canada. Although this figure is hard to pin down, *The Canadian Encyclopedia* suggests 20,000 draft evaders and 12,000 deserters (Levant). The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, in a television report on American immigration in Canada, stated that 125,000 Americans (of both sexes and all ages) came to Canada between 1964 and 1977 (CBC). This constituted one of the most influential waves of immigration in Canadian history: as a whole, the war resisters were highly educated, politically sophisticated and culturally active. Their arrival had a particular impact on the cultural sphere.

The American intervention in Vietnam aroused the residual anti-Americanism that had been one of the formative principles of Canadian nationalism since the émigré Loyalist settlements during the American Revolution. In the imaginary of the Canadian left, America had always been perceived ambivalently, at once family (in the figurative and often in the literal senses) and imperial center. Canadian public opinion tended against the American intervention in Vietnam, and the Canadian government quietly eased the way for American war resisters to cross the border. In

the late 1960s, anti-war sentiment eroded the continentalist sentiments of the 1950s and began to merge with cultural nationalism. In the fragmentation of left splinter groups that followed, clear tendencies began to coalesce. Two of these fragments become important to this account: in Toronto, a small proto-Maoist party, Progressive Worker (allied with the Progressive Labor Party in the U.S.) founded Canadians for the National Liberation Front to mobilize anti-war action, and in Vancouver, Hardial Bains founded the Internationalists in 1963, (or as he later wrote, the Internationalists “rose in the thick of the revolutionary upsurge of the youth and students”) and transformed it into the CPC-ML in 1968. (CPC-ML, *Documents* 23).

The highest point of left nationalism was also the signal collapse of the New Left, and it happened not on the fringes but in the heart of the social democratic movement in Canada. In 1969, a small caucus of left nationalists in the New Democratic Party (the mainstream labor-affiliated political party) began a major effort to push the party to the radical left with its “Manifesto for an Independent Socialist Canada.” It was known famously in Canada as the “Waffle Manifesto” because, as one its authors quipped, if the group would waffle, it “would waffle to the left” (Morton 92). The Waffle Manifesto was the most articulate statement of left nationalism, and it is worth quoting its major point:

Our aim as democratic socialists is to build an independent socialist Canada. Our Aim as supporters of the New Democratic Party is to make it a truly socialist party.

The achievement of socialism awaits the building of a mass base of socialists in factories and offices, on farms and campuses. The development of socialist consciousness, on which can be built a socialist base, must be the first priority of the New Democratic Party.

The New Democratic Party must be seen as the parliamentary wing of a movement dedicated to fundamental social change. It must be radicalized from within and it must be radicalized from without. [...]

The major threat to Canadian survival today is American control of the Canadian economy. The major issue of our times is not national unity but national survival, and the fundamental threat is external, not internal. [..]

The American empire is the central reality for Canadians. It is an empire characterized by militarism abroad and racism at home. (Broadbent 1)

The emergence of this discourse in a political party that believed firmly in its mission to win the middle-class voter as well as the trade unions (a mission inspired by the party's origins in prairie agrarian socialism in the 1930s) was scandalous to the leadership. The Waffle challenge was one of the messiest chapters in the NDP's history, because it enlisted considerable support from the younger membership. The battle lasted three years, during which time a Waffle candidate came second in the federal party leadership race; it ended on the convention floor in 1972 when the Waffle caucus surrendered. Following the subsequent purge, core members of the Waffle founded the Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada, which in turn fragmented into factions, the most notable being the Independent Socialists, one of the galaxy of Trotskyite organizations that continued the thrust of the student movement. The defeat of the Waffle marked the failure of the New Left to capture a main party in the political arena. Several years later, Tina Craig, writing in *Old Mole* (the newspaper of the Trotskyite Revolutionary Marxist Group), made the insightful comment that

1969 marked the real termination of the New Left. Socially the period was characterized by the relative apathy of the domestic working class; the escalation and extensification of the

Indo-Chinese war; and the development of a youth and student radicalisation. The three components of ideological determination were (for these reasons) “culturalism”, youth-vanguardism, Third Worldism. The form of Marxism that most “fitted” these conditions was Maoism, which absolutely permeated the New Left. In fact one should distinguish between a first period new leftism which was predominantly reformist and libertarian, and a second period which was predominantly revolutionary and Maoist. (Craig)

She was however less insightful in her concluding comment that “After 1969, the end of the Cultural Revolution and the right turn of the Chinese bureaucracy made Maoism less ideologically attractive.” The collapse of the New Left opened the ground for a resurgence of Maoism. The Cultural revolution may have met its bloody end by the turn of the decade, but it was just beginning its life as a cultural export. That China was turning the army against the Red Guards didn’t much matter in Canada, because, as Hardial Bains would discover, even if China betrayed the revolution, there was always Albania.

Not far from the seedy inner city tavern hotel that was Milton Acorn’s Toronto home, in the heart of a Chinatown divided by political loyalties, the Great Wall bookstore supplied eager Canadian youth with the artifacts of revolution: Mao pins, Little Red Books, scripts, posters and recordings of the Revolutionary Model Peking Opera troupes. (One of my treasured souvenirs of those days is a small envelope of vibrantly colored postcards showing scenes of ballet dancers *en pointe* with rifles in *The Red Detachment of Women*.) For most Canadian would-be Maoists, these images were the reality of revolutionary transformation. History was reduced to iconography, just as ideology was reduced to slogans taken from *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. The Chinese revolution, like the Cuban, offered three great solaces for radical youth: it was perceived as modern and liberatory, as opposed to the bureaucratized imperialism of the Soviet Union; Mao’s

call for cultural revolution seemed to validate youthful dissent; and most importantly for Canadian left nationalists, the theory of national liberation enabled an analysis of Canada as a colony of an American empire.

It was on this latter point that the programs of the CLM and the CPC-ML diverged, and it is in this divergence that their opposing strategies of mobilization -- their fundamental performativity -- differed. The CPC-ML offers an example of the most familiar structure of a revolutionary party, to the point where it may be in a sense considered a caricature of a Stalinist party apparatus. Its organization adhered to the Stalinist template but in its rhetoric, public campaigns and sloganeering, the CPC-ML consciously mimicked its Chinese sponsor, to the point of what appeared from the outside as fetishism. (Even its publications adhered strictly to the format and appearance of the ubiquitous pamphlets from China, with their red covers, yellow hammer and sickle, grainy photographs lengthy slogans and cheap paper.) This mimicry was essentially a performance of heroic revolutionary struggle devised to sustain the appearance of mass support, and as a simulacrum was activated by a cult of the leader clearly modeled on the international cult of Chairman Mao. Thirty years after its founding, and some five years after Hardial Bain's death (by cancer), the personality cult remains undiminished. Bains' widow succeeded him as party leader (a position she still occupies), and as the CPC-ML's commemorative website announced on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the party,

On this occasion, our deepest respects go to the memory of our founder and leader, our comrade and friend, Comrade Hardial Bains. Comrade Bains provided us with the quality we represent today, the quality that the Party's word is its deed. Like our song says, *Your life, Dear Comrade, finds expression in us. In the Struggle. In the Party. In the Seventh Congress. ... This is the Party of Hardial Bains.* We dedicate our thirtieth anniversary year

to you and pledge to step up our work to realize the aims we took up together thirty years ago. (CPC-ML, “30th Anniversary”)

The son of a leader of the Communist Party of India-Marxist, Bains was without question an indefatigable organizer, founding not only the CPC-ML, but three marxist-leninist parties in India, the Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain (M-L), the Communist Party of Trinidad and Tobago, and the Communist Party of Ireland (M-L). In the words of an American dissenter, he also “played a significant, if controversial, role in the early history of the MLP-USA” (Seattle 2). He ran party publishing houses, and established a bewildering number of front activist committees.

As national leader of the party, Bains emulated the rhetoric and posturing of the Chinese and after 1978, the Albanian parties. His party congresses featured prolonged exhortations, mass recitations of slogans, and the familiar icons of marxist-leninist genealogy copied from Chinese banners, with their array of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao. Bains repeatedly announced that the CPC-ML was the only legitimate heir of the original Communist Party that had been founded in Guelph, Ontario, in 1921: “Only the CPC (M-L) has been organised at the call of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and grounded in the history and tradition of the communist and workers’ movement of this country” (Bains, *Six Years*10). Positioning his party as the vanguard of struggle and the custodian of revolutionary purity, he enforced a fierce leninist conception of the party as “the general staff” of the revolution. At the “Fifth Consultative Conference” of the party in 1978, he made the stern point that

Once the Party is founded then the Marxist-Leninist party cannot be consolidated without the Party actively, in a vigorous manner, with courage, without fear and vacillation, leading the class struggle against the reactionary bourgeoisie. [...] The merit of our work lies in the fact that first we saw the necessity of disseminating the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin,



Stalin, Mao Tsetung and Comrade Enver Hoxha on a large scale as a necessary stage of preparing the subjective conditions. We carried out these activities under the slogan: Leadership of the proletariat is absolutely necessary for revolution, build the instruments of working class propaganda, disseminate Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought on a large scale. (CPC-ML, *Documents*)

Echoing Mao's famous remark that a revolution is not a dinner party, he invoked a bolshevik regime of dictatorial control "with courage, without fear and vacillation":

A genuinely Marxist-Leninist party is not a debating society and it cannot be formed out of debates by speculating on Marxism-Leninism A genuinely Marxist-Leninist party does not permit any speculation on Marxism-Leninism and does not permit any factions within it. It does not permit "freedom of criticism" and it does not permit any loosening of its iron discipline. It builds its unity of thinking and action in battle against the class enemy and it strengthens itself by opposing revisionism and opportunism of all hues. (CPC-ML, *Documents* 21-22)

With this ideological puritanism, Bains reserved his most ferocious attacks on the "class enemies" on the left, the revisionists, deviationists and opportunists – by which of course he meant the rival Maoist groups, and above all, the Soviet-client CPC:

These groups and sects which are taking the revisionist road pretend that they are "Marxist-Leninists", "genuine" Marxist-Leninists at that. But for them to say that they are "Marxist-Leninists" is merely to strike a posture, a frill, like adorning their hat with plumes, but in essence, they are the same -- reformists, terrorists, anarcho-syndicalists -- you name it. And their social base is petty bourgeoisie and lumpen proletariat. (Bains, *Six Year* 8)

For their part, “the revisionists” countered with the same charges. Following the 1974 federal election (in which Bains received a mere 60 votes in his own candidacy for Parliament), William Kashtan, leader of the CPC, wrote that “The Maoists' pseudo-revolutionary phrasemongering serves the interests of reaction and must be thoroughly exposed in the working-class and democratic movements and in the popular movements of the people” (Kashtan 232).

The CPC-ML’s moment of heroic crisis came with its decisive break with China in 1978. With the statement that “Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought belongs not just to the proletariat of China but to the international proletariat” (Bains, *Six Years* 8), Bains positioned himself as a custodian of Maoism even as he took his party into the orbit of his new sponsor, Enver Hoxha. Until the collapse of the Albanian Party of Labor, the CPC-ML and its affiliates were slavish in their devotion to Hoxha. Bains celebrated the new affiliation in hyperbolic rhetoric that reads like a parody of Stalinism: “The PLA has Comrade Enver Hoxha at its head, the great Marxist-Leninist. The Marxist-Leninist of the calibre of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tsetung. He stands at the helm of the International Marxist-Leninist Communist Movement. All glory to the PLA for such an outstanding Marxist-Leninist, Comrade Enver Hoxha, at its head!” (CPC-ML, *Documents* 78) Subsequently, the party held a “Special Congress” “which worked out the program to eliminate the adverse consequences of Mao Zedong Thought” (Smith).

As the tide of Maoism declined in the popular sphere, following the suppression of the Cultural Revolution, the CPC-ML’s overheated rhetoric appeared increasingly parodic in nature. Although Bains pointed out that Hoxha began the PLA with only 200 members (CPC-ML, *Documents* 77), a number roughly equivalent to the undisclosed membership of the CPC-ML,<sup>4</sup> the party never became more than its inner cadre. The entire party congress could fill one room, so that the vanguard was the mass that it mobilized. Bains’ organization strategy was in this sense a

simulacrum of a mass party without a mass, but it performed itself with the full panoply of power. Bains modeled himself after the Great Helmsman but his was a helm without a ship.

Not surprisingly, the CPC-ML made few inroads in the cultural sphere, although in the tradition of Great Helmsmen, Bains was said to be fond of poetry. After Bain's death, the noted poet and playwright George Elliot Clarke published a poetic "Homage to Hardial Bains" in which he wrote,

But you, Bains, you were the bane  
of Capital—that sadomasochism,  
  
and damned the shit that is money,  
and damned that shit called money,  
  
impeaching Nietzsche, and clawed  
off bankers' coldly horrifying masks,  
  
for you hated medieval-vile police,  
and let poems comfort you at night [...]

But this is the only indication of cultural interest within the CPC-ML, which held to an inviolate doctrine of socialist realism. The party's failure to attract artists (at least in English Canada; it had more success in Quebec) went along with its rigid adherence to the textual and iconic signifiers of Stalinism. This was perhaps one of the key reasons why the CPC-ML, despite the noise and acrimony it generated on the left and in the mainstream media, was never able to overturn the public perception of an extremist fringe sect.

The CPC-ML endorsed the theory of national liberation, but distrusted nationalism as “national and social chauvinism” (CPC-ML, *Documents* 86). Its optic was resolutely internationalist, seeing national liberation as a phase of the class struggle. Tactically, this was a position that failed to harness the tide of nationalism that characterized Canadian cultural production in the 1970. If the CPC-ML was a mass party without a mass, the Canadian Liberation Movement was a following without a party. Its structures were unstable, its leadership little more than revolutionary roleplay and its ideology fundamentally incoherent, but its popular appeal was undeniable.

The CLM catchphrase “Canada is a Colony” had substantial appeal in the late ‘60’s and early ‘70s, resonant with romanticized images of heroic Third World guerillas (of whom Che, the most famous internationalist of them all, ironically became one of the icons of the new nationalism), and inextricably connected to a resurgence of populist localism. This was for the most part a sentimental fetish of “the land”, and carried a host of signifiers of an unproblematized and unexamined “authentic” Canadianness. Two of the primary sources of this nationalist sentiment came from bitterly opposed camps: on the one hand, the independence movement in Quebec which sparked into revolutionary violence and state suppression in 1970, with the “October Crisis” (in which a Front de Liberation du Québec (FLQ) cell kidnapped a British diplomat, another murdered a Québec cabinet minister, and the federal government invoked the War Measures Act to put armed troops on streets of Canadian cities). Most left organizations in Canada accepted the necessity of an independent Québec, and the very real fact of Québécois nationalism invoked a partner sense of an anglo-Canadian nation. As many anglophones wondered, if Québec is a nation, what are we? When the CLM founded New Canada Press as its principal operation, its best-selling title was a

translation of Léandre Bergeron's comic book version of his marxist-leninist *Petit Manuel d'Histoire du Québec*.

The countervailing source of cultural nationalism was the federal government itself, which under Pierre Trudeau advanced a programme to build a Canadian national sentiment founded on bilingualism and multiculturalism. (It was during the Liberal Party regimes of the 1960s and '70s that most signifiers of Imperial history and the monarchy disappeared from Canadian life.) The government's principal means was money. A significant river of funding ran from Ottawa to cultural groups, chiefly in the form of grants through make-work programs that were denounced on the left as opportunist appropriations of dissent, but rarely refused. It was on such a grant that Theatre Passe Muraille in 1972 took six actors to spend a summer on a farm in rural Ontario, and changed the course of Canadian theatre by inventing a new kind of community documentary theatre with *The Farm Show*.

Much has been written about *The Farm Show* and its role as a template for the grass-roots theatre movement that transformed the Canadian theatre profession in the '70s, but little attention has been paid to its recycled Maoist project. Paul Thompson, the director of the project had returned to Canada after an apprenticeship with Roger Planchon, and a spell in Québec, where Maoism was more firmly entrenched than in anglophone Canada. Thompson was not himself a Maoist, but the idea of artists going forth to farms to learn from the people held an obvious appeal to him. The play was as much about its collective process as it was about the farmers it documented, and in the years following *The Farm Show*, like projects across the country reiterated the trope of the actor-investigator "recuperating" popular culture. (Of these, the most important was the Mimmers Troupe in Newfoundland, which directed the collective process towards community

interventions based less on ideology and more on partnerships with unions and social justice organizations.)

The most articulate and popular theatrical representation of the colony thesis was Passe Muraille's 1973 play, *1837: The Farmers Revolt*, written by a collective of actors with playwright (and unaligned left social critic) Rick Salutin. *1837* celebrated the legacy of the uprisings in Lower Canada (Québec) and Upper Canada (Ontario) in which republican insurrections challenged the autocratic rule of British governors and wealthy American Loyalist landowners. It was a turbulent, satirical and passionate restaging of Canadian history that appealed to a generation that labeled themselves nationalists but distrusted nationalism, and had not yet learned to resolve this contradiction in the language of postcolonial theory. The final dialogue of *1837*, between two condemned rebels on the gallows, synthesized the appeal of anti-colonial nationalism: one says, "We lost," and the other replies, "No! We haven't won yet" (Salutin 114). Audiences ate it up.

This was the climate in which the CLM prospered, by turning sentiment into material cultural production. From the outside, the CLM appeared remarkably energetic, sponsoring rallies and poetry readings, publishing a newspaper, and publishing a list of titles designed to legitimize its position as an intellectually responsible movement.

The CLM was formed in 1968 out of the rubble of the student anti-war movement by activists who saw a need to extend the idea of national liberation struggle beyond the context of Vietnam. (Barker, *Origins* 1)) A core discussion group, which included two of the leaders of the Waffle (Mel Watkins and Jim Laxer), and a prominent University of Toronto English professor and peace activist soon drifted apart, leaving the proto-organization in the hands of Gary Perly. Perly had been an anti-war activist at the University of Toronto, and later became a systems analyst for IBM until the later '70s, after the demise of the CLM, when he took over the family's map-making

firm. Perly established the group at the CLM, with himself as National Chairman. (Although the CLM imploded over a crisis of leadership cultism, it is significant that Perly was rarely identified in the movement's literature by name, only as 'The National Chairman'.) Terry Barker, whose occasional writings and archival papers are a major source of insight into the inner workings of the group, has written that "Evidence of an early nationalist cult are the trips by Perly, Laxer and Roebuck to the Canadian Shield to swim, canoe, and to think on the bedrock of Canada" (Barker, *Origins 2*).

Perly built his organization much as Bains did his, from the top down, but without the regulating script of the party apparatus that stabilized the CPC-ML. The CLM comprised a National Executive, local clubs (mostly in Ontario), the publishing house, and organizing drives in the labor movement. The structure appeared to be one of democratic centralism; in practice it was non-democratic and extremely centralized. The local clubs were inexperienced, young and unreliable, consisting mostly of students (the surviving minutes of a branch meeting in Guelph record a stressed discussion about acceptable levels of beer consumption in the group). The National Executive was also the editorial and management board of the publishing house, which was also the certified shop of the Canadian Workers Union, founded by the CLM, and whose principal organizer was a member of the National Executive and a major author of the publishing house.

Within this complex of virtual organs, the National Executive also comprised the Marxist-Leninist Caucus: of the movement. While the marxist-leninist tendency of the movement was an open secret, the CLM's membership criteria were ostensibly non-sectarian, asking only that members be anti-imperialist, pro-socialist and not anti-Communist. The presence of the Marxist-Leninist Caucus was a destabilizing condition of the group's history, because it was the site of

fierce battles and episodes of abuse strikingly similar to those associated with religious cults. The papers of former members of the movement, collected at McMaster University, contain testimonies of bullying, abuse and torture that are sickening to read. One member of the National Executive, and the author of the movement's anthem, wrote after the collapse of the group,

Congresses were week-long affairs with marathon sessions from 9 A.M. to 10 P.M. with 2 hour breaks for lunch and supper. They were held off in the back woods of Northern Ontario. [...] Another function of Congresses and the "Organizing Schools" which usually followed them, was to suppress any opposition to the Perlyite line. The unreal pressure-cooker atmosphere of them facilitated this.

One of the more disgusting examples of this was the 1974 "Organizing School" held at a farmhouse near Carnovan, Ontario. National Chauvinism and social-fascism were the main themes. The Chairman of the Victoria (B.C.) Club, who was originally from the US but who had taken out Canadian citizenship, was the main target. [...] Gary Perly decided to make a an example of her as an "arrogant Yankee." She was denounced as a "CIA agent", a "saboteur", a "scab", etc. At one point, the members of the "Organizing School" pounded the table shouting "Yankee go home." She was beaten and her hair was cut short to humiliate her. [...]

Myself and one other comrade who didn't like what was happening were denounced as "cowards" and "Yankee-suckers". I was goaded by Perly into starting a fistfight with the Victoria club chairman "to prove that I wanted to fight imperialism", while she tried to put a paper hat with the word "Yankee-lover" on my head (at Perly's suggestion). [...] a good many members, on other occasions, suffered worse mistreatment, particularly dissident caucus members, one of whom was forced to live in a closet for over a month, allow hot-tea



to be poured on her and turn over a sizable portion of her income to Gary Perly to “prove her dedication” to the cause! (Floznik)

Horrifying as these emulations of Red Guardism seem, the papers include worse, in the form of abject “self-criticisms” written in a template that seems to be taken from a cursory reading of Mao’s *On Contradiction*. There is a visible strain of masochism in these formulaic reports, in which members denounce themselves and identify their primary and secondary contradictions. In one case, the principle theorist of the movement wrote after a meeting with a right-wing worker at a shop he was trying to organize,

My collaboration with O, was due to my self-interest, keeping my special position with him. It is rooted in my petit-bourgeois arrogance and opportunism, which are my long-standing political problems. Collaborators should be punished by the people they have betrayed My collaboration was a base betrayal of all my comrades in the Movement, as well as the people in general, but especially of the members of this caucus. I should therefore be physically punished by the members of this caucus, to make sure that I understand the seriousness of my crime.<sup>5</sup>

Even more abject is a 40-page document, written in various hands, including shorthand (which suggests it was dictated) and then compressed into an edited typescript) by the woman who had been abused at the “Organizing School”, in which she states

I don’t like being a rotten yankee agent. I don’t want to be continue in my evil deeds, manipulating, lying, covering up, creating false images and impressions, splitting and wrecking, serving myself, being sectarian, opportunistic, arrogant. I want to fight for Canadian liberation, to be a CLM member, to be an anti-imperialist, to become a Canadian, to use my abilities and skills for the Movement, to care about people, for people to care

about me not because of false images but because I want to change, for my comrades to help me change.

In the same file there is a promissory note for \$4800 signed by her, written to a member of the National Executive “for value received.” A conclusion of financial coercion is not unfounded. In the self-criticism of another member of the National Executive is the statement that,

After my suspension I began to realize that my refusal to write a self-criticism – my refusal to criticize myself before the members of the Movement – was also a continuation of my splitting and wrecking activities. [...] Right now, my finances are under the control of the National Office. This was appropriate to dealing with the enemy – to confiscate (in a sense) property. I myself proposed that I receive \$200 per month from my salary for my living expenses...

All of this suggests that the CLM was indeed a “a national chauvinist, social-fascist, absolutely degenerate organization.” Certainly, the signs of cultism are ugly and disturbing, and they suggest the unwritten reasons for the revolt of the Toronto branch and the National Executive against Perly in 1975-6, which expelled him for “gross sectarianism.” Unlike Bains, who consolidated his leadership cult with the same self-discipline he demanded of the membership, and whose lengthy writings demonstrate a genuine erudition in the literature of marxist-leninism, Perly appears to have ruled by force of personality alone. It may be that the CLM’s courses on Marxist-Leninist theory (complete with written exams) intensified contradictions within the group. Milton Acorn, the movement’s only real veteran of the left, hinted at this in his valedictory remarks to the membership.

I have a suggestion to offer to those comrades who want to declare the movement Marxist-Leninist. Don't contribute to splitting in the Marxist-Leninist Movement! Join the CPC

(ML) or the Marxist-Leninist League. Struggle there to reform their sectarianism. The rest of us will wish you well....

Now back to the causes of sectarianism. It wasn't because Gary Perly was a bad man. It wasn't because we over-emphasized the role of leadership. It was Perly himself over-emphasized his own role and gathered a clique around him. Again, what was the cause of this? Internal contradictions are primary, there is no escaping our personal responsibility for what has happened to our movement. But internal contradictions are often set off by contradictions in the external world. (Anon. 4)<sup>6</sup>

The CLM struggled against “Perlyism” but could not survive Perly; when he was expelled the movement collapsed. He was the central actor in the improvisation, and although he depersonalized his centrality as the unnamed “National Chairman”, the apparent stability of the movement was in fact centrifugal, and it spun out of existence when he left. In the sense that the movement could not survive the loss of its founder and animating presence, the CLM fits the pattern of a cult. We can only guess at the damage and of conflict within the group that brought it to crisis but on the basis of the evidence of the self-criticisms, the psychological pressures within the group must have been extreme.

From the outside, however, all of this was invisible. NC Press put the CLM logo in all of its books, ensuring that it would reach thousands of readers in libraries across the country. In 1974, it made a bid for academic legitimacy with the publication of Barry Lord's *The History of Painting in Canada*. The movement's intellectual, and a member of the National Executive, Lord was a prominent art historian and former editor of *artscanada* magazine who had held a number of senior curatorial and administrative posts, including the directorship of the Vancouver Art Gallery and a stint as Education Director at the National Gallery of Canada. Lord's book was one of the major

successes of NC Press (the other of course was Milton Acorn's *More Poems for People*). As a text and an artifact, it was controversial. While many agreed with his thesis that Canadian art had been marginalized by the hegemony of the "imperial" art world, his over-the-top rhetoric alienated many. Writing in *Labor Challenge*, Ian Angus (who went on to become a respected communications theorist and academic) summarized the book succinctly when he wrote that "It is terrible because his entire approach is rooted in the mixture of crude Canadian nationalism and Maoism-Stalinism that passes for political thought in the CLM" (Angus).

*The History of Painting in Canada* reads like a party pamphlet, a reading confirmed by the inclusion of the CLM anthem as a preface, and a full-page recruitment ad for the CLM at the end. Lord's expertise is impressive, but his critical theory reiterates the CLM's fundamental incoherence on the relationship of colonialism and class. Whereas the CPC (ML) was insistent that the national liberation struggle was an historical stage of class war, the CLM sought to identify class structures by their national allegiance. As one former member of the National Executive wrote in 1976, "Class struggle, apart from its particular manifestation in anti-imperialist struggle, hardly existed in CLM's view of Canada" (Faier). An unexamined corollary to the nationalist thesis was the question of the suppressed Canadian cultural tradition and its relationship to multiculturalism, at a time when Canadian society was fast becoming one of the most culturally diverse national communities in the world. Whereas the CPC-ML had distinct success in recruiting among immigrant and minority cultures, the CLM sidestepped the issue. Its insistence on a historical tradition of Canadian national culture seems xenophobic, if not racist, thirty years later.

In the CLM's writings, the working class virtually disappears, replaced by an anti-imperialist mass struggling against the "comprador" class that acts as agents of US capital. Lord transferred this structure intact into the field of cultural production by substituting artistic form for

capital, and championing social realism against the “decadence” of his particular *bête-noir*, abstract expressionism. Glossing a painting by Jack Chambers of a landscape of a truck on a freeway, he combines formal analysis with a formulaic ideological assessment,

*401 Towards London* is national, enhancing the dignity of Canada's places and people as the subject for major painting. It is scientific, realistically portraying the very guts of the economy of southwest Ontario. And it is democratic, extolling a common scene from the daily life of work and travel of the masses of the people. As our national liberation struggle was growing, our new-democratic art was also moving a step forward. (Lord 235)

Lord was a serious and reputable critic, but his book was received as an aberration. In contrast, Milton Acorn, who held the same convictions, was received as an authoritative voice whose political principles enriched his poetry. The 10,000 copies of *More Poems for People* may have done more to popularize the CLM than all of the rest of the movement's efforts together.

And so we return to Milton Acorn, who in the mid-'70s was a familiar sight on Spadina Avenue (Toronto's equivalent to New York's Canal Street). Acorn was one of the most famous of Canadian poets, but most people who passed him on the street would likely have dismissed him as a derelict from the nearby Salvation Army shelter. Then in his fifties, he lived in a shabby room above one of Toronto's seediest taverns. A communist since his youth, a WWII army vet, a laborer from the small Maritime province of Prince Edward Island, Acorn was Canada's most celebrated working class writer. His poetry was angry, passionate, intensely lyrical, and popular. In 1969 he was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award, Canada's highest literary prize, for his collection *I've tasted My Blood*. When he was passed over, an angry group of fellow poets (who believed that Acorn had been shafted by an American-born member of the judging panel) invented “the Canadian Poet's Award” for him, and named him “the People's Poet.”

A short time later, Acorn walked into the CLM office and joined on the spot. His membership in the CLM was a stroke of luck for Perly, but his support was a mixed blessing. To have the People's Poet as a spokesman and as a best-selling author for NC Press reinforced the CLM's bid for cultural legitimacy, and his long history on the left (he had joined and quite several parties, including the CPC and the Progressive Workers Movement) brought political experience and a touchstone to historical tradition. But Acorn was also a complex and demanding personality – he had, after all, quit every party he had joined -- and he required care and tact. Perly seems to have been understandably ambivalent about the presence of an older man who, if he had the cultural capital to legitimize the movement, could by the same token destroy it. A CLM newsletter in 1972 registers this ambivalence:

Milton Acorn in Thunder Bay

In addition to getting considerable creative work done, he has found time to be valuable temporary addition to our Club here, helping with New Canada sales and other mass work, taking principled unliberal positions in criticism/self criticism sessions, visiting with contacts and taking an active part in meetings and classes. We have found that we have much to learn from Milton's past political experience, and that, contrawise, Milton has much to unlearn. [...]

Milton is not yet convinced that his CLM membership should be publicly known across Canada. Til he, in consultation with other members, makes a definite decision, this information should be kept within the organization. (CLM Newsletter, 1.2. June 1972)

Acorn allowed himself to be outed in *More Poems for People* in that same year. He was an active member, and participated in the Marxism-Leninism course in 1975. Acorn's communism was reinforced by a knowledge of dialectics and theory but it was built on long experience in struggle,

and he was by nature an anti-authoritarian maverick. At the same time he believed in the possibilities of the CLM, and appears to have tried to mediate a solution to its final crisis. As he told the membership at the end, “Our basic line is correct. The conditions of membership are correct. What we need now is a constitution, and a preamble to that constitution, stating our aims. In time we must write and publish a Canadian Manifesto” (Anon. 4).

The CLM could not heed this advice nor could its fundamentally improvisational character be concretized in a manifesto. As far as the CLM was concerned, Milton Acorn *was* their manifesto. After the movement disintegrated, Acorn helped revive NC Press with the nationalist critic and poet Robin Mathews as Steel Rail Publishing. He then proceeded to write his manifesto, in the form of a play, “a real gunpowder play ... Dry and fresh in the pan” (Acorn, “Road”).

Terry Barker calls *The Road to Charlottetown* “the clearest expression of [...] Canadian nationalist Marxism.” (*After Acorn*, 18). Acorn wrote the play in collaboration with Cedric Smith, a folk singer and actor who had been on the fringes of the CLM, and was best known as founder of the group Perth County Conspiracy (Does Not Exist), for whom he had set some of Acorn’s poetry to music. Acorn was an iconic figure for Perth County, as he was for the CLM. His poetry spoke fire, his life embodied struggle, and his demeanor was a self-performance of rough working-class masculinity. For the younger generation of radicals, Acorn was the avatar of the working class culture.

This was an image that he himself wrote into *The Road to Charlottetown*. The title of the play encoded a double meaning, referring literally to the roads blocked by tenant farmers who rebelled against British absentee landlords in Prince Edward Island in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and gesturing metaphorically to the Charlottetown Conference of 1864, which hammered out the details for the confederation of Canada three years later. Acorn’s thesis was that Confederation was a

political betrayal of the working classes, handing the country to agents of imperialism who were no different than the land agents who oppressed the tenant farmers of his island home. Confederation was simply a modernization of imperialism designed to improve the capitalist system, as described by a politician in the play:

We mustn't limit the extent of the capitalist system to fit your own small conceptions.. Let it expand fully ... let the Islanders build mills and hire each other and fire each other and you'll see it's the grandest system of exploitation ever devised by man... in other systems, slaves are unwilling, they sabotage everything they do, only capitalism makes people into willing slaves. (Acorn, *Road* 68)

*The Road to Charlottetown* developed over two years in several different versions.

Originally, Acorn wrote it as a cabaret performance of episodic scenes, poems, and songs. It was performed with four actors, and began its first tour by playing in prisons in Ontario; it then played briefly in Toronto, where it was reviewed enthusiastically by *The Globe and Mail*, and in the summer of 197, after revision, opened in Charlottetown (this is the version that was finally published twenty years later). In 1978, a rewritten version with six actors opened at Theatre Passe Muraille, advertising itself as “a toe-tappin Maritime musical about Landlords and Tenants” to mixed reviews. *The Globe and Mail* wrote that

This is a hell of a show The story of the island in the 1840s crackles with a zest and fidelity as palpable as red mud on your boots. The best of the humor packs a lovely ironic wallop. And the music ranges from rambunctious rallying cries to touching, simple songs of a very special beauty. GM 19 Nov 78

This view was endorsed by the Communist Party's *Canadian Tribune*, whose theatre critic Oscar Ryan (writing as Martin Stone) was a veteran of the workers theatre movement of the 1930s. He



wrote that it was “rollicking fun,” a “boisterous outpouring of folksongs, sketches, satire and farce abetted by singing actors and acting instrumentalists – all bristling with irreverent protest and popular defiance.” (20 Nov. 1978) In marked contrast, the tabloid *Toronto Sun* dismissed it as a “sophomoric revue” filled with “mawkish folksongs and bucolic clog dances [...] based upon limping meters and dissonant rhymes from doggerel written by a self-proclaimed P.E.I. poet named Milton Acorn.” (13 Nov. 1978).

The central character of the play is named either Milton Acorn or Old John Acorn, depending on the version (Old John in the published text):

I, Old John Acorn, not at first aware that was my name  
And what I knew was life,  
Came from an island to which I've often returned  
Looking for peace and usually found strife,  
'Til I came to see it was no pocket in a saint's pants  
While outside trouble reigned ... and after all  
My favourite mode of weather's been a hurricane. (Acorn, *Road*, 13)

However named, he is clearly the author retrofitted into his history as a falstaffian rebel determined to fight against oppression with his fists and his words. A typescript in the Passe Muraille archives contains a passage that expresses this explicitly:

Mary: So ye thin ye're saying to write a play, Milton? Let's see where ye'll start it.

Milton: No I didn't say I was going to write a play.

They play's in my head. It'll come out in time  
but not to raise idle fancies, hopes that are too  
far ahead, like Canada when we began.

It'll come out when people can dig into it

then dig out of it, dig something

Out of it.

It'll be a real gunpowder play,

Not to get mouldy. Dry and fresh in the pan

I'll explode with maximum force.

Maybe one of my great-grumpedty-granph

Grandchildren will write it.

Mary: There's always been a Milton Acorn,

Long as our traditions go

And no doubt there'll by [sic] many more

Maybe another Milton Acorn'll write it

Let's see where you'll start it.

After five years with the CLM, Acorn's decision to turn to the stage to synthesize his political ideas followed logically from the inherent performativity of the movement. Even though it never mentioned the CLM, *The Road to Charlottetown* was the theatrical rehabilitation of the movement, and a recuperation of its principles. In these terms it is not particularly important that relatively few people actually saw it. (The box office records from Theatre Passe Muraille indicate a total audience of 1935 over five weeks.) By transforming the argument of the CLM into theatre, Acorn transformed political improvisation into an enactment in and of the public sphere, and he freed himself from the ambivalence of his iconic position in the movement. In *The Road to Charlottetown*, Acorn historicized himself as author and subject, announcing that, "All days are

those days, even the days we're living in; because history doesn't stop, not for an instant it's carving us, and we're carving it, right now.”

Carved by history and carving history, Acorn realized that the struggle for socialism in Canada required an approach freed from the political culture that had fragmented the left. It was this culture that he sought to mythologize in *The Road to Charlottetown*, and it may offer another explanation for his decision to express himself through theatre, on a platform where history speaks through the plural bodies of actors rather than the texts of political doctrine. Only by moving beyond politics could the left survive its politics. In his final address to the CLM he had appealed for an end to sectarianism on the left with the warning that “time lost may mean that the Canadian phase of the World Peoples struggle for Liberation and Socialism may be fatally crippled and a permanent scar left on history, having after-effects lasting for thousands of years” (Anon. 1).

The conjunction of Hardial Bain's party congresses and *The Road to Charlottetown* exposes the basic contradiction between the CPC-ML and the CLM, and together they demonstrate the failure of the Maoist left in Canada. As a simulation of a mass party, the CPC-ML in the end became little more than a reiterative performance that continued to enact its script of revolutionary purity; as an improvisation of a political movement, the CLM could not survive its own Red Guardism. In *The Road to Charlottetown*, Acorn attempted to resolve this contradiction by historicizing ideology, liberating politics from the authorizing scripts of the failed revolutionary past, and embodying a Marxist-Leninism rescued from iconic cults of leadership. His transformation of his own celebrity into a collective theatrical community was his most articulate critique of the Canadian Liberation Movement and its vanguardist ideology

*Notes*

1 For “decomposed” I am in indebted to Terry Barker, who writes that the CLM “illustrates one effect of the decomposition of Marxism as a political theory in the modern world – in the persistence of Marxist-Leninist nationalities theories as nationalist socialism” (Barker, *Origins* 3).

2. Frank Davey has noted that Canada Council figures show that in 1985 (the first year for which figures are available), the average press run of a volume of Canadian poetry was 935 copies, with average first-year sales of 365 copies. (2))

3. Canadian political parties are registered if they meet the stipulations of Elections Canada, the federal regulatory body. Registration allows candidates to stand for Parliament under the name and logo of the party, and be identified as such on the ballot. They are also entitled to issue tax receipts for donations, and are allowed to purchase prime broadcasting time for campaigning. In order to qualify, a party must field a minimum of 80 candidates (in a total of 265 ridings, or electoral districts.) Consequently, parties that have no hope of winning any seats will field candidates in order to gain access to party privileges. In the last federal election, in 2000, the CPC-ML, registered as the Marxist-Leninist Party, received a national total of 0.1% (12,000 out of 13,000,000) of votes cast, trailing the Marijuana Party (0.5%), and neck-to-neck with the Natural Law Party, whose platform of Transcendental Meditation featured televised displays of “yogic flying.”

4. Although the membership is undisclosed, the scale of the CPC-ML’s operations today can be discerned from its audited statements submitted to Elections Canada following the 2000 federal General Election. The CPC-ML spent a total of \$2088.43 to field 84 candidates, and held total assets of \$2098.52. In contrast, the governing Liberal Party incurred expenses of \$12,485,417.00 to field candidates in all of Canada’s 301 federal ridings. ([www.elections.ca/fin/rep/](http://www.elections.ca/fin/rep/);

www.elections.ca/pol/exp/). On the other hand, the statistics also suggest that the CPC-ML was far more effective than the Liberals, spending 17 cents for each of its 12068 votes, as opposed to the Liberal's \$2.32 for each of its 5,252,031 votes.

5. The self-criticism documents are all signed and dated, and are held in the Canadian Liberation Movement fonds at the McMaster University Library. However, I have chosen not to identify the authors.

6. Acorn's valediction is an unattributed document listed in the CLM fonds as by an unknown author. However, internal references to his writings and the unmistakable language clearly belong to Acorn.

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## **Bio**

Alan Filewod is Professor of Drama in the School of Literatures and Performance Studies at the University of Guelph (Ontario). He had published widely on Canadian theatre history, postcolonialism and political theatre practice. His books include *Performing "Canada": The Nation Enacted in the Imagined Theatre* (Textual Studies in Canada, 2002), *Workers' Playtime: Theatre and the Labour Movement since 1970*, with David Watt (Currency Press, 2001) and *Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada* (U Toronto P, 1987), and several edited volumes of Canadian drama. He was an editor of *Canadian Theatre Review* from 1988 to 2002.