

Oral History: Michael Gnarowski

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An Oral History with Michael Gnarowski

Narrator: Michael Gnarowski

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Abstract

Michael Gnarowski is a Canadian poet and Professor of modern Canadian poetry, teaching at Carleton University, the University of Ottawa, Lakehead, and Sir George Williams University. Beginning in 1972, Gnarowski served as the editor of the Carleton Library Series which published important works of Canadian literature.

Gnarowski had a long career which also included the publishing and co-editing of various literary magazines including, *Yes*, *Le Chien d'or/The Golden Dog*, and *Tecumseh Press*. This session covers the development of *The Golden Dog* and *Arc* poetry magazine, as well as Gnarowski's career generally.

Patti: “Hi this is Patti Harper, I’m here with Michael Gnarowski on February 17th, 2015 and we’re conducting our third interview. Hi Michael.”

Michael: “Hi Patti.”

Patti: “So I think today we will do a little wrapping up and talk about a few things that we maybe didn’t cover quite as well in the first two interviews.”

Michael: “Sure.”

Patti: “So let’s get started, one of the things I wanted to talk a little bit with you about today was why you decided to found the *Golden Dog Press* in 1972?”

Michael: “Well the reason for it is very simple, we were going to move from Montreal to Ottawa, I was involved with *Delta Canada* at that point and clearly I would have to disconnect from Delta, we didn’t think that it would work on a long distance basis, my associates Louis Dudek and Glen Seabass, so we decided to break up Delta Canada and each one go our own way, as it were. They stayed in Montreal, Glen established a small press of his own, Dudek continued to publish under a new title, *DC Books*, and I founded or established the *Golden Dog* in preparation of moving to Ottawa. And also perhaps in a way, when you work with other people there comes a time when you want to say, I’d like to be doing things a little differently, and I don’t want to have to be constantly having to gather consensus. This is the problem that you have sometimes in your group, you know you’ve got to talk for an hour about whether it’s an and or ampersand, that kind of thing.

So I think it was a welcome development because we started *Delta Canada* in '65 and it ran for six years, so in '71 we decided to dissolve it, broke it up and I thought about what to do and I said, well I’m going to start my own little press. And I’d always been fascinated by that carved stone above the post office in Quebec City, which has an effigy of the golden dog gnawing on a bone, and of course there is also a great nineteenth century Canadian novel, *The Golden Dog*. And the whole business of the history of early Canada, which is all very near and dear – we’ll get to that later on – to me. So I simply borrowed the golden dog idea and called my press *The Golden Dog, le Chien D’or*. I had a sense also, which was very strong in my mind, of trying to keep things bilingual or bicultural, even if it’s very tenuous nevertheless it should exist there in the background. And so I took it, took the name and decided to do a couple of books to kick things off. I was still living in Montreal, we were preparing to move, I couldn’t get away from Sir George Williams because I had graduate students working on their theses so we were delaying our departure, delaying our move to Ottawa.

But I established a press and I commissioned a couple of books from a printer in Ulster, in Ireland, because they had very good prices. And when we were doing *Delta*, we had done at least one book I can recall... perhaps more than one with these people called W.G. Baird and Company, so I got in

touch with them. These were two little books of poetry. So I commissioned them to do this as a kind of kick-off, and there is quite a story there too, because we were working on the books and then one day I received a phone call from... they were located in Antrim. I received a phone call from them and they were quite distraught, and they said your books will be delayed. I said, "What's the problem?" They said, "Well the IRA came and destroyed our presses. So... which was a bit of drama. And they said, "But not to worry, we'll do the books anyway." And they did. In order to make up for lost time they shipped them by airmail, which cost them a fortune to ship these cartons of books from Antrim in Ireland to Montreal, where I picked them up at the airport. So there was a bit of drama there, and that's the kind of detail that should arise eventually in a more elaborate discussion of the Golden Dog.

So... but I've answered the question a little bit wide, I wanted to do the Golden Dog, and also I wanted to – this is an important point – I thought that in the Golden Dog I could do a certain kind of publishing, which I could do with Delta, but it wasn't really Delta's mandate or objective. And that was specifically to do early Canadian poetry, not only the newly emerging poets, but also the early poetry. Because... and I will address that question much later, my objective always has been to... I think of the literature as something that has to be looked at from the bottom up. I've never believed in cherry-picking. You know and saying, "Oh well, I want to teach Canadian literature, oh I'm not going to teach Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, these are kind of in the wind now, so why teach them?" I believe that's shallow and it lacks really an understanding of cultural and literary traditions and to me you cannot do a literature, you cannot study a literature unless you have the necessary tools to know it. And you know it by reading it and by studying it, and if it hasn't been published, printed, and reprinted, then the student cannot get at it.

It is very wonderful to see when you go to the public archives, the national library, you have the special collections and look at the rare book there wearing white gloves. Students don't do that. They may do it from time to time but you can't expect to walk into an undergraduate class of fifty or sixty persons and not be able to refer them to a book which they can get at a bookstore. So the Golden Dog would give me that kind of opportunity, and it did, and I published early Canadian poetry and new Canadian poetry. So that would have been really the real kind of underpinnings of the Golden Dog."

Patti: "So that's how you felt this press..."

Michael: "Fell into Carleton Library Series... I beg your pardon?"

Patti: "Well, how did you feel this press differentiated itself from other presses?"

Michael: "Precisely, nobody else did... no other little press did that kind of work."

Patti: “I had a question for you that arose from just what you were saying now, why was it important to you to have a bicultural and bilingual efforts in your publishing?”

Michael: “I didn’t publish French books, but I had... well because I suppose my Montreal background and having in a way lived there for quite a while having encountered French Canadian life and culture in an intimate way. I think I was fortunate in that I had no difficulty addressing the French language, the French presence, the French faction in Canada. Although in Montreal, curiously for many Anglophone Canadians it was still an issue, and a problem... which it should not have been. I’ve always felt like that was a great failing on the part of Anglophone Canada in Montreal, the Anglo ascendance as I called it. Who felt like they had a privileged existence there, and did not have to learn French, did not have to relate to French Canadians.

I was always baffled by the fact, my friends who I had mentioned to you before, well known Canadians, and important contributors to Canadian heritage, people like Hugh MacLennan, Frank Scott, and others... never ventured beyond St. Laurent Boulevard. Because that was the east end, which was francophone. The odd one amongst them, like Frank Scott had French maybe because he was born in Quebec City and eventually felt the need for it. But I think that’s been a huge problem, the unwillingness on the part of Anglophone Canadians to in a way address French Canadian factions in this country. We pay a price for it now. Still a divided country, basically.

So I don’t want to rant about it but this is so fundamental to me, I can’t understand why people do not have this. What is a second language? My father, of fainted memory used to say, “Learn languages, a language is not a sack of coal to carry on your back. Once you know it, you have it.” People resist it anyway. You know when I was a student studying at McGill it was essentially an Anglophone institution, and now they can write their exams in French etcetera, etcetera, but they brought their professors in from France to teach French. You know because I took courses and I could sort of remember Madame Rochon, Professor Rigaud, all francophone, francophone from France. Not French Canadians, so there you are. What kind of closed mind did McGill have? As my alma mater I love that institution very much, I’m very proud of it, but huge failings there. Anyway, enough. So does that answer your question?”

Patti: “It sure does.”

Michael: “I hope so.”

Patti: “Thank you. So we’ll switch a little bit to talk about the *Arc Poetry Magazine* that was established in 1978. What role did you have in that poetry magazine?”

Michael: “I had very little role, Chris Levinson came to me one day, I guess because of my involvement with Carleton Library Series and other presses, and the other publishing stuff I had

done. And he said, "I'd like to start a little magazine, would you join with me?" And he had also approached Tom Hannigan, and I think the three of us in kind of the beginning there, but it was essentially Chris Levinson who carries it forward. He had all the contact information with all the younger poets in Ottawa. I had been kind of sidetracked from literature because when I got involved at Carleton Library Series I was doing sociology, geography, political science and so on, but not literature as such. And my contacts with literature were spotty, even though I was still running the Golden Dog Press parallel to Carleton Library Series, but I wasn't exactly involved in going to readings or meeting young poets, or doing any of the other things. I was more interested in the fact of being more of an archivally concerned I think, to bring stuff out of the past. Which is why I got to know people like Carl Link, Bill Morley and so on, who were major figures in the Canadian cultural establishments at that time."

Patti: "So what do you think the impact of the Arc Poetry Magazine had on the English department, if any?"

Michael: "You have to ask the English department. I don't know, I suppose that... well I think that frankly, candidly, and sadly I don't know that the English department at Carleton or English departments in general are as responsive to the creativity that exists in little pockets of the department. I say that because I know from personal experience, my friend, mentor, whatever Professor Louis Dudek taught for thirty-four years or so at McGill, he was an isolated figure. Hugh MacLennan was an isolated figure. I don't know what other members of the department did there. They wrote their studies of whatever they did, which are dense and impenetrable most of the time, and they weren't interested in the fact that they were living right there among living writers.

That for me has always been an important point, literature is a living thing. It is not written by dead people. It is written by living, ongoing people, for other living ongoing people. If you study the past, you know... I'm charmed with the fact that Homer existed at some point, and I like to read Shakespeare, etcetera, etcetera, but literature is an ongoing, living thing. But when you're right there in the middle... when I went to McGill as an undergraduate and was assigned to a class being taught by Louis Dudek, and discovered that he was a poet, my jaw dropped because I always believed that poets were people like Tennyson, Swinburne, and those who had died long ago, and we studied their work out of respect, etcetera, etcetera. I was charmed to death by the fact that he was a real, living author. And then Hugh MacLennan, another real living author, Frank Scott, another real... I said, "Oh my god, literature lives and exists." And that was when I was seventeen, eighteen, but boy was that ever a powerful lesson.

Patti: "So, to bring it back and finish up with the Arc Poetry Magazine, how did it differ from other magazines in Ottawa at that time period, in your opinion?"

Michael: "I don't think I can make a judgment, I was not in touch... were there other magazines in Ottawa at that time when *Arc* existed, when *Arc* started? There were some, well there may have been some, I don't know. There was nothing like for example what is in the English department now, *In/Words* with Collett Tracey, that's a living, ongoing thing as well. She has readings, she has students doing stuff, she has a press that she publishes with the students or has them run stuff that is quite unique. The department is not too much aware of it, either... so as it is."

Patti: "So let's ask you this, what do you think has been your greatest accomplishment since teaching?"

Michael: "Well, accomplishments... someone else has to decide that. I think mostly... I take great satisfaction, most satisfaction out of the fact that I saw the literature as having to be addressed from the ground up. I think I mentioned it earlier on that you could not... and that's why I started that series *Critical News on Canadian Writers*, with thirteen books of criticism, etcetera, on Canadian writing, on specific authors, Frederick Grove, etcetera, Mordecai Richler and so on, Margaret Laurence. I felt again that if the student, or a serious reader could approach the literature, he or she would have to approach it, things would have to be made accessible. So if someone wants to read Margaret Laurence, and wants to know the critical opinion, is that person the average reader going to go to the library and dig out reviews? Well, no. If it exists in a book they'll be able to read that stuff. And similar to when you are teaching it, they'll be able to access and address it directly, so your class is a much richer class as a result. Similarly if you had a seventeenth century poem written in Canada, you don't have to go to the archives and take it out, you can go and find it between the covers of a book published by the Golden Dog Press, available for three or four dollars. That to me is important."

Patti: "So what would you say were the things that you were the most proud of in publishing, or that were major accomplishments in publishing?"

Michael: "Exactly moving that kind of material along and making it available, in the general sense. And that's why I was happy to work with the Carleton Library Series, because we did a lot of reprinting of valuable past materials. Everything from *Lord Durham Report* to... you know, we were teaching Canadian history, etcetera. And the *Lord Durham Report* was only available in the archives. Until Rob MacDougall and Jack McClelland got together and had a number one in the Carleton Library Series, and suddenly you had to teach the political history of Canada. Before that, no. You know it was right because it sold thousands of copies. And I know when I travelled and gave lectures in Europe and so on, academics who were doing Canadian studies would say to me, "Thank you for the Carleton Library Series. We could not teach anything about Canada without the existence of that series.'"

Patti: “Many of those books are still sold.”

Michael: “Exactly.”

Patti: “In general, overall when you look at the breadth of your career and publishing, what would you... what are you most proud of? If you could pick one thing.”

Michael: “Doing that, doing all of the stuff that I’ve just said to you, Louis Dudek used to tease me about it, he wrote a poem about me in which he teased me about digging somewhere in the ground and coming out with a discovery, poking fun at my being a literary archaeologist. That’s fine, you know I enjoyed reading the poem. It’s... the literary history of Canada in a serious way came out of publishing in the 1970’s, 60’s. I was lucky to have lived at that time, at the height of my powers, as they were. And Carl Link was the editor, who I got to know, and I admired that he also had a kind of archival sense about the literature. And when I began to read the literature of Canada I realized of course that there was a lot, a lot. Even though I’d been teaching, I said my god, all of these gaps in my own knowledge. And so I went and dug stuff out, and once I read them in this precious forum wearing white gloves, I said we can bring this out and make it available, so that anyone can have access without going through the rigmarole of going to special collections or archives, those are wonderful, and they’re there of course to preserve. But not only preserve, preserve and use. The use comes out of republishing, and so publishing, republishing, making things available.”

Patti: “So now, when you look at what’s being done now in literature, publishing and poetry, what matters to you now knowing those areas? Or what do you think could improve? Or that’s being done very well?”

Michael: “You know I certainly don’t see myself as having changed a great deal, I continue to do what I believed in, all of the things I said. I continue to do it to this day. I have a series of books being published by Gunther in Toronto called the *Voyageur*. Classics, and they are aptly named, a name I devised. *Voyageur* being the beginning of the exploration of Canada. We are doing about two, three, four books a year depending on how things are. We’re going to be publishing *In Flanders’s Fields* for example, John McCrae’s poem and the rest of his work which was published first in 1919. And has been essentially only available through reprint houses. That will be out again in March. And then we’ll be doing Mason Delaroché’s autobiography *Bring the Changes*. Then I want to do Farley Mowat’s very fine work, not wolves or dogs or groundhogs, but his war experiences. A very fine piece of writing by a Canadian soldier who fought in the Second World War, which was called *The Regiment*. We’ll be bringing that out in the fall, hopefully. We’re negotiating for the rights to it. So as you can see a range over territory, but I enjoy that tremendously.”

Patti: “So we had talked a little bit before we started recording today that the oral history process has had an impact on you. Can you share a little bit of insight on that?”

Michael: “Well it sharpened the mind, it focused me quite a bit, because in reading the two transcripts which you were good enough to provide, and I’m very grateful to the transcriber because that’s a tough piece of work to do, very well done. And it made me revisit points in my own experiences in what I did in the past, and we’ve just skimmed the top you know Patti, it’s a wonderful what’s been done. But it’s created a bit of a furrow into which I can now fix myself, and that furrow is rediscovering my own experiences, my own life. You know dwelling – as I told you a minute ago – on the fact that I was very fortunate to know a lot of people who made the literature of Canada in the twentieth century. I knew some better and some less well, but I knew them, and I knew what they were doing, I read their work. I met them and I bumped into them at meetings and gatherings and so on, what else can you ask for in life?”

Patti: “So what would you consider the pivotal periods of your career based on that reflection?”

Michael: “I don’t think there’s a pivotal period in my career, once I was embarked on what I just described as much as possible it was an ongoing pivot I guess, you know. It was something that I could always fall back upon to revive me and rejuvenated my thinking, and there’s always stuff to do. It’s marvelous, always stuff to do. And it’s sitting there, and I think what saddens me a little is I read a little bit of the work of people who are in English departments now and as I said, I wonder what they’re about and what they know. Because you know it’s all good and fine to talk about critical theory, but theory has to be applied to something. And if you’re not totally familiar with the literature, and I have a suspicion that they are not... I don’t know how strong the theory is.”

Patti: “So you were telling me a bit about how you were viewing different eras in your career. Perhaps you could share that with us and give us a little bit of elaboration.”

Michael: “Well as a result of the interviews that we had and the questions that you gave me. I reflected on sort of the lifespan, and I said, well it actually breaks down very neatly into sections, compartments, periods, if you want to call it that. Each one of which is associated with a publishing venture, or a publishing event. The very sort of point of departure, I’m still an undergraduate at McGill at the end of my bachelor’s sort of process and we start Yes magazine. And that runs from about 1956 to about 1963, 1964. I’d graduated already, but I carried the magazine on. Wherever I go, the magazine goes with me, and I always publish an issue or two every year.

And then in 1964 I find myself deciding, talking to Louis Dudek about the possibility of starting a little press. Although when we were doing *Yes* we had thought of starting a press, we wanted to call it *Yes Press*, we were delighted with *Yes Press*, what a wonderful thing. We didn't get *Yes Press* going, but we thought of it and so in '64 I spoke to Louis about it, let's start a press. He was doing a little magazine of his own called *Delta Canada* and so... no, *Delta*. Then we started *Delta Canada*, a little press also devoted to publishing new poetry, although we published the odd old piece as well – my doing there. I have a *Yes* period, a *Delta* period say from '65, our first books came out '65, oh my god... an anniversary year, 1965 and it lasted until 1971. We broke up *Delta Canada* in 1971. So six years, and then I accepted my position at Carleton and I started *The Golden Dog*, I think in '71, '72, and the first books came out in '72 and so I have a kind of *Golden Dog* period which collapses at the same time into the Carleton Library Series and my involvement with Carleton University.

And in between there was stuff happening you know, all the time. Which is not maybe as worthy of highlighting, maybe not as major. And so Carleton Library Series, Carleton University Press we started in 1981, '82 and then now I started *Voyageur* books six or seven years ago, got involved with McGill-Queens [University Press] to reissue the novels of Hugh MacLennan, we've done four now. So you know, there you have it."

Patti: "It's quite the career. Fifty years since the start of *Delta*."

Michael: "Yes."

Patti: "Any last things that you would like to share with us?"

Michael: "You'll have to read the book." [Laughter]

Patti: "Well thank you Michael."

Michael: "I tell you why, I say that because *Delta* we started in '65, I was in Montreal... I came back to Lakehead, I went to Lakehead University when it was just starting as a University, a fantastic experience too. Again, maybe not literary quite, but literary enough because there too... at Lakehead the librarian said to me, we are starting a place, it was a small building, like a high school building. The librarian came and says, "Michael, I have a small budget... here's a thousand dollars. Buy Canadian books for us, Canadian literature. And so that led me to Bernard Hampton in Montreal, the great bookseller and so you know we started to build a collection of Canadiana at the Lakehead.

Anyway, so I came back from Lakehead in '64 in December to visit my family in Montreal, we came back my children and my wife and I and that's when I went to have lunch with Louis and I said, "Louis, let's start a press, a little press." And Louis was involved with *Contact Press* at that time, which was still functioning in Toronto with Ray Souster and Peter Miller, and Louis said, "Well I don't

know” ...he decided he’d go for it. And so we said well okay, we’ll go for it and I came back in the spring of ’65, yeah I guess... and we were embarked to start *Delta Canada*. So we said okay we’re going to go and have a nice dinner over this and bring some people along and so we met at a Russian restaurant which I believe still exists on Sir George there. We had dinner there and Louis pulled in Ron Everson and Colin Howard and I brought Glen Seabrass who was with me on *Yes* and we had a nice dinner and we decided to start *Delta*, and our first books came out in 1965. But there’s a lot of anecdotal history as well. There you are.”

Patti: “Well thank you Michael, this has been illuminating and interesting.”

[End of transcript.]