

Clint Burnham [fragment from an] interview with Jeff Derksen

Burnham: So, I was looking at the interview that Susan and Pauline did with you before. .

Derksen: That was my last day

Burnham: Was it in 97?

derksen: 99

Burnham: The first thing I want to ask about like are the material conditions of the Kootenay School in NelsonPre-Nelson. In that interview you talk about going to the library in New Westminster when you were a kid.... You went to SFU right out of high school?

Derksen: Yup, right after high school I went to Douglas College.

Burnham: Right. So Bowering at SFU and Leona Gom at Douglas, right?

Derksen: Yup.

Burnham: So you did have a sense of the avant-garde, of the TISH period probably, sort of? So first of all what kind of catalyst were both the personalities of both Bowering and Gom and also the two institutions?

Derksen: Well, Bowering was very dynamic in like 1976. Bowering ... this dynamic ... large lecture rooms for like a couple hundred people.

Burnham: Right.

Derksen: And I remember thinking at the time that he ran it like a talk show. He like chatted with people, he brought people in... I think the first person I saw a reading by was either Earle Birney or Gerry Gilbert. Both of them came in to class to read in the lecture hall. Birney was on double crutches because he'd fallen out of that cherry tree, you remember from the Cherry Tree poem, so he was kind of hobbling and he did some sound poetry stuff. And then Gerry Gilbert came in So he sort of gave me a sense of poetry being something dynamic, off the page. But Bowering just taught the course in a way that didn't differentiate between avant gardist practices and more normative practices, so we had Stein alongside Tillie Olsen.

Burham: Right.

Derksen: And William Carlos Williams alongside standard Canadian poetry. So it was kind of collapsing poetry into this big art.

Burnham; Right.

Derksen: I just found it very dynamic. And also Bowering would pay quite a lot of attention to poetic form. So and I'd just come out of high school which totally - just thematic reading, just thematic reading of poetry. So we read Earle Birney's David and then talked about euthanasia. And also there was a bit of a naked Canadian cultural nationalism so we read Neil Young lyrics and stuff like that as poems. Which - it was definitely a different decade ha ha ha. But Bowering actually taught about particular formal aspects. I remember him talking about Tender Buttons and things like that. So that really got me interested for readings I don't know particular formal aspects, that poetry about how you did it. So I just thought my high school education was not very good other than this one science prof named Jeanne Robinson who worked at Spartacus Books and took us to see...

Burnham: Wow.

Derksen: So he would ... from high school.... from Spartacus to buy books for our class. I remember I had to do a book review ... he gave out assignments but I could do but I could do a book report on neocolonialism in Portuguese in former Portuguese colonies in Africa .. I had to go down to Spartacus and pick it up. So that was pretty great actually. So I found SFU a bit overwhelming in terms of the structure education plus I felt so [poor] so I kind of shifted down to Douglas College .. and then I met Leonna Gom there who was teaching creative writing and so you had to submit a portfolio of work. And I'd been kind of writing some fake Margaret Atwood type things, I'd been taking her work for from like um Power Politics.

Burnham: Right, the acerbic lyric.

Derksen: Acerbic lyric with the heritage and the images so I was interested in that and I had also started reading Pat Lowther and that opened up more political possibilities in that imagistic language and opened it up to the work poem in a sense the party hearty But also I had been aware of what I'd found out in Chile this autobiographical stuff Latin America sandanistas

Burnham: You already moved into the city?.....

Derksen: Yeah I we moved back and forth between New Westminster, Surrey and [Commercial Drive?] So when we were in Latin America we met a young guy who was on a break, a young sandanista around my age, late teens, who was on a break, a [recon] break in Costa Rica getting a pair of boots so he was telling me about the final push and his whole family had been killed. His brother and sister, maybe his mom was still alive, so that really made an impact on me you know thinking that somebody my age a revolutionary program I think that made me more interested in politics you know I can trace back from Lowther to.... to Pablo Neruda things like that Nicaragua And you know you'll remember that too in Vancouver you had some

connection with arson Arsenal Pulp Press when they did that Margaret Randall when they did that anthology quite nicely translated selection of her revolutionary lyrics So, while I was at Douglas College I was taking an anthropology course on the West Coast Indian [] and I was looking in the library to do some general research in a way that ... my research research

Burnham: What is dog?

Derksen: Yeah, and I found Fred Wah's Pictograms from the Interior of BC which I thought was going to be about

[8:11]