Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

The foregoing study of the poetry of Dorothy Livesay and Judith Wright bears out their consistent adherence to some set themes of universal significance and shows how they resemble each other in their concerns as well as in their vision of life. A Winnipeg Childhood, a collection of stories by Livesay does not come under the purview of the present study. This book however lays bare the social and moral prejudices that shape an adult mind in sharp contrast to a child's initial naivete. It echoes many of the later concerns in her poetry and helps us to understand better how her poetry came to be.

A poet relatively unsung even in her own country, Livesay however is not a victim, but a revolutionary and her poetry reveals a fine sensibility becoming informed by a sense of community and making art out of the dialectic of her private and public selves. That her poetry has constantly refreshed itself by keeping in touch with the issues of the day till she breathed her last is irrefutable. Peter Stevens, with his deep sympathy for her political poems, observes, "Dorothy Livesay has never quite been given her due as a significant writer in the development of modern Canadian poetry in English" and sees
her collection *The Documentaries* as "essential reading" for those who "perhaps decry the poetry of the Thirties as jejune and uninteresting" (7). She is at once a public and a private poet. There is an old legend that the best lyricists are those who died young. Livesay's case however disproves this. Her speech is strong and firm and her sympathies are astonishingly wide. And she was eighty seven when death finally claimed her.

One may ask at this juncture whether poems should be used as a means for understanding the past. Cannot such tasks be entrusted with the historians? Ever since Plato's time, this has been a polemical issue. Livesay with her poems, particularly "the Documentaries" was holding a mirror up to the contemporary society. No wonder, she calls herself a "resource" (Barber 18).

Livesay is a poet with a compelling voice, always alert to new experiences and new people. Her sensitivity to issues, as mentioned already, are as much social as personal and her writing betrays stages of development emerging from each other moulded by her keen insight and unique perception.

Her earlier poetry remains in sharp contrast to her writings during the Depression. She wrote her earlier poems under the influence of Hilda Dolittle, Emily Dickinson and Elinor Wylie. Her early poems, influenced in particular by the French
Symbolists and the American Imagists, were followed by her poems of passionate and eloquent sincerity. During the Depression she willingly laid aside her ego-centrism and devoted herself to a human cause and her work therefore displayed a broader outlook on life.

B. Mitchell has identified three distinct "psychic stages" in Livesay's poetic career. Poems written in the first phase reveal a sense of growing self-awareness and a concomitant sense of mystery. There is a gradual progress from sensitive adolescence to equally sensitive young womanhood and the focus is shifted from the physical world to man. Poems written during the second phase reveal a sense of the collective "other" and an awareness of the social evils that beset the world. These, her "public" poems, were written when she was in her mid-thirties. In the third phase she emerges as a mature poet showing almost a pagan exaltation in nature and sexuality. Like a mother, she tries to effect a reconciliation between her "separateness" and her desire for "unity" (510-28). Unfortunately, she soon realises that her vision of peace is shortlived and she is betrayed even by her own body. In her last years she took up, like her Australian counterpart Judith Wright, issues pertaining to the conservation of forests and the protection of the natives' rights. The various stages of her development as a poet can be presented as follows:
Imagist-Symbolist, Agit-prop, Feminist-Confessional, conservationist.

The writings of most Canadian writers betray their acquaintance with more than one culture. With her clear sensitivity to Canada’s multiple cultures, Livesay has ventured into more than one alien segment of the mosaic. Significantly enough, she had spent her childhood in Winnipeg, an intensely multi-ethnic region. The Depression that followed invited her interest in the common man and her work in Montreal and New Jersey involved multicultural and multiracial experiences. A newfound consciousness of the “other” led to a shift in her concerns and took her from British Columbia to London and from there to Paris and later to Africa. Later, she returned to the many problems the native people encounter in Canada. Thus her poetry is a frank celebration of the richness of diversity obtaining in Canada. Desmond Pacey is right when he says: “she has in her own verse exhibited the qualities which she has asked for in the work of others: objectivity, lyricism and passion” (268). While celebrating the most intimate experiences, her poetry reveals a universality which goes beyond the boundary line of the personal and in her public poetry there is the same quality of intense personal response and an obvious
empathising with the objects of her concern found in her earlier personal poems.

Livesay's poetic world however is not limited to ideas or to the problems of social organisation. Nature too makes a strong appeal to her and she is a poet of delicate as well as strong sensibilities. Throughout her life, she had been trying to effect a mystical fusion between man and nature and it is reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence's attempts in the same line. Similarly, her urge for self-sufficiency recalls Thoreau's attempts towards the same goal. Her concern throughout her poetic career has been a search for a means of bringing her conflicting responses to life into some kind of reconciliation. She urged her fellow beings to set up communication with a larger order of things thereby becoming one with the natural cycle. And Livesay has achieved a near-perfect understanding of the order of nature and her role in it. D. Leland's comment is quite relevant here:

Livesay sings of mankind integrated with nature..., of mankind surviving and growing only as they accept nature in all its facets. Once integrated in this way, mankind can sing their songs together, as man with man as poet with reader. (412)
Though marked by a tension of opposites, her nature poetry in fact resolves the dichotomy of public and private concerns. She is at her best as a private poet rather than as a poet of protest. She is by temperament a "private" poet and her "public" voice often sounds contrived. Interestingly enough, even her public poems convey a sense of intense personal response and her innate capacity to sympathise with others. In recent times, there seems to be a conscious move to downplay the importance of her social verse. Many rightly feel that two contradictory impulses shape her poetic vision. She envisions, as pointed out already, almost Thoreau like, the individual trying to link himself with the eternal cycles of nature through contemplation and at the same time tries to make this link, Lawrence-like, through the energy of sexuality. Her development as a poet can in fact be studied in terms of the dominance of one or the other of these visions.

The changing perspectives of Livesay's world-view are reflected in her poems, in content as well as in form. The underlying quest in all these poems is to find out what compels us to live on earth. This quest for the meaning of life has remained a perennial theme with Dorothy Livesay. In her quest to discover the purpose of existence she is ready to explore every aspect of life. In Paul Denham's estimate "both lyric and
documentary are essential aspects of her poetic genius, and that part of the power and authority of her best work derives from the coalescence of the lyric and the documentary impulses” (88).

Livesay’s mature love-poems reveal a sort of spiritual evolution. Like the New England recluse Emily Dickinson whose chief concerns were the different aspects of life and death, Livesay, a highly liberated and politically conscious woman, too has delved deep into the mystery of life and death. Initially in the Livesayean poetics death signifies a wish to escape from the prison of the body. But in course of time it becomes fear of life and finally death is projected as another good experience in life. One may recall here Dickinson’s projection of death as a gentleman caller in her famous “Chariot” poem.

“I don’t myself feel there is any contradiction (between the lyrical and the political in poetry) ... I believe poetry is for people. People’s feelings come into the poetry, and one expresses poetry,” Livesay once remarked (“Poetry is for people” N.pag). There is however an obvious paradox in her social poetry. While affirming that industrialisation reduces people’s individuality, she looks upon mass-action as the means for restoring the individual’s identity.
The process of shifting literary and political orientation does not seem to affect Livesay’s style profoundly. Her style is direct and simple with variations in tone from the lyrical and subdued through the emotional and political, to the genuinely humane and passionate. As far as possible she uses everyday language and speech rhythms thereby rightly earning for herself a niche among poets belonging to the native tradition. Goethe and later Arnold made a strong plea for cosmopolitanism in literature which was taken up by many later writers. But interestingly enough, Patrick Anderson finds in her apparent disenchantment with cosmopolitanism, a stark colonial mentality (44). Margaret Atwood, however, in her Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature suggests that her poetry has an international rather than a particularly Canadian flavour (242).

Livesay’s final volume of poems, The Self-Completing Tree, “the selection of poems that I would like to be remembered by contains many poems showing an almost obsessive preoccupation with sex (SCT3). The overlapping of themes and the random selection makes it nearly impossible to trace the development both in the ideas expressed and in the poetic techniques used.

Livesay’s career almost parallels the development of modern Canadian poetry and in her development as a poet,
like any other poet, she too has been wrestling with problems, both philosophical and formal. She was willing to experiment with hitherto untried forms and rhythms whenever new experiences and attitudes came up. She however was quite particular about the simplicity and directness of her style.

By temperament, Livesay is a lyricist "incapable of catching any voice except her own" (Davey 169). Frank Davey does not attach much significance to her social poems:

Most of these poems are energetic, vivid and engrossing. However, because of conventionality in form and an occasional tendency to slip into the jargon and rhetoric of left-wing politics, they are somewhat less powerful than her early lyrics. (169)

A "documentary" is in fact a confluence of the merits of the prose lyric with the merits of the encyclopedia and the novel. It provides an intersection of sort between the realms of history and imagination. To quote Livesay's own words:

A poem is an archive for our times. That is one of the definitions I have offered lately. Now I find it to be an apt description of the long poem that is both documentary and dramatic. Documentary because it is history, it has been researched, and dramatic
because it uses voices, actors. It can be played on radio or screen or stage. (127)

Her political or social commitments notwithstanding, her long poems however do not contain any formal didactic tone. But she will undoubtedly be remembered as one of the chief exponents of this typical Canadian genre. We may also recall here the words of Michael Ondaatje that Canada is “really not the country for the haiku ...” (11).

Livesay's career thus has had a remarkable range spanning as she herself rightly notes in Right Hand Left Hand the imagist lyrics of Green Pitcher, the political poems of the 1930s, the documentaries like Day and Night and Call My People Home and the lyrical - confessional in her later work.

In her writing there is a clear intertwining of the romantic and the political. In fact the beginning of her politico-social awareness as a writer coincides with her first love affair. Even while her political poems were moving outwards from the personal relationship, she could not but keep having haunting memories of that affair. Her short but decisive honeymoon with Marxism does not seem to make her convinced that with the change of society, the lot of women will also change. So she "turned away from the political struggle to think of the
individual struggle. All my later poetry is mostly dealing with relationships” (Meyer and Brian O’Riordan 76).

“With Dorothy Livesay, it is not her early Marxism, but her intense feminism that emerges most strongly, and that is a feminism less political than concerned with the personal intensities of the passional life, no longer dominated by the inhibitions of history”, says George Woodcock (Introduction. Canadian Poetry 27). Despite her association with feminist causes and feminist writing, she is labelled an ‘unabashed romantic’ by some. But this allegation seems to be answered by her own definition of the ‘romantic’: “A romantic is someone who is spurred on by a positive view of humanity, who believes in hope rather than despair and who believes in the freedom of the individual above all things” (Meyer and O’Riordan 84). In this sense Livesay is a true romantic.

Frank Davey has been justly eloquent in praising Livesay when he calls her one of the most important Canadian poets of the last half-century. He calls her “the finest lyricist of her generation in Canada” (2: 171). Lorraine M. York has been equally eloquent in complimenting Livesay:

It is the energetic belief in the capacity of man and woman to create anew from what Yeats called ‘the
individual struggle. All my later poetry is mostly dealing with relationships" (Meyer and Brian O’Riordan 76).

“With Dorothy Livesay, it is not her early Marxism, but her intense feminism that emerges most strongly, and that is a feminism less political than concerned with the personal intensities of the passional life, no longer dominated by the inhibitions of history”, says George Woodcock (Introduction. Canadian Poetry 27). Despite her association with feminist causes and feminist writing, she is labelled an ‘unabashed romantic’ by some. But this allegation seems to be answered by her own definition of the ‘romantic’: “A romantic is someone who is spurred on by a positive view of humanity, who believes in hope rather than despair and who believes in the freedom of the individual above all things”(Meyer and O’Riordan 84). In this sense Livesay is a true romantic.

Frank Davey has been justly eloquent in praising Livesay when he calls her one of the most important Canadian poets of the last half-century. He calls her “the finest lyricist of her generation in Canada” (2:171). Lorraine M. York has been equally eloquent in complimenting Livesay:

It is the energetic belief in the capacity of man and woman to create anew from what Yeats called ‘the
rag-and-bone shop of the heart’ which gives Dorothy Livesay’s poetry both its technical spark and its enduring courage”. (22)

George Woodcock sums up her achievement thus:

I cannot think of another Canadian poet whose work has advanced with such assurance into a mature self-sufficiency, where almost every poetic statement is memorable and complete, and however brief somehow enlarged with the grandeur that comes from the hard-won concord of language and intent. (“Sun, Wind and Snow” 2)

It seems, one can even argue that Livesay has never been an ideological innovator. Her response to various events has been emotional almost intuitive and always directed by her generally humanist democratic values. Despite the usual shifts in attitudes and interests during the various phases of her career, no one can easily miss two major consistencies. Stylistically, she has always related poetry to music, song and dance. Thematically, her major concerns have been the silent and alienated individual pitted against the collective activity and dynamism of society. The basic tenets held by Livesay can be listed as follows:
i. The world must rid itself of war

ii. Woman can play a greater role in changing society.

iii. There must be a closer and more meaningful understanding between man and woman.

iv. Capitalism has done nothing but create wars.

Despite the rich and significant body of poetry produced by Livesay, she has never been given her due as a significant writer in the development of modern Canadian poetry in English. A dead poet generally invites greater recognition than a living poet and therefore Livesay is sure to receive more critical attention and patronage in the years to come.

Judith Wright's very first poem in *The Collected Poems*, "The Moving Image" is a helpful pointer to almost all the themes she was later to deal with in her poetic career, namely, love, time, death and the concomitant pain. Interestingly, these major themes branch out into a variety of sub-themes like sex, marriage, birth, children and motherhood on the one hand and nature, landscape, alienation and anthropological problems on the other. This in fact has lent a richness of sort to her poetry and has saved it from turning monotonous.
That Judith Wright is most essentially a female writer is best illustrated in her second volume *Woman to Man*, a collection of poems of biological intimacy, of spiritual affinity between man and woman, between mother and child. This mystical vein continues to be sustained in the next volume, *The Gateway*, the epigraph of which are a few lines from Blake's "Milton", a celebrated mystical poem which emphasises eternity even in the tiny centre of a flower. *The Two Fires* written in the wake of the discovery of the hydrogen bomb has also been endowed with the vein of philosophical reflection. Her poems written in the background of the wars show a different poet peeved at the growing violence in the world and dazed to see the world crumbling around her. *Birds*, a volume written mainly for the benefit of her young daughter, Meredith, formed a relief from the burdensome concerns of her earlier works. *The Five Senses* that followed presents a more assured poet who has found reconciliation. The volumes that followed like the *Other Half*, *Shadow*, *Alive* and *Fourth Quarter* contain poems essentially feminist and a few ones about poetry and her career as a poet. *Phantom Dwelling* contains poems which reveal mostly her environmental concerns and her unrelenting interest in Aborginal issues.
After she turned fifty, she in fact seems to show a greater obsession with the ravages of time, more so in the personal front. "Counting in Sevens" (Fourth Quarter) for example, despite its apparent simplicity, is rich in symbolic overtones. The penultimate stanza where the image of a hag is presented is undoubtedly a reflection of the poet's own sense of awe at the advent of old age: "Seven nines are sixty three, seven tens are seventy/ who would that old woman be?/ she will remember being me,/ but what she is I cannot see" (WCP385).

Notwithstanding the tall claims made by her that she is the 'maker' and the 'creator' she cannot help admitting that time and the resultant decay are callously wreaking havoc on her as well. But this motif is not confined to this volume alone. It runs as a major motif in Alive too.

The mournful tone evident in poems published in the seventies stems from her sense of bereavement and loss on the death of her husband. But she shows a remarkable restraint while expressing her grief. Never even once does she become hysterical nor does her poetry degenerate into the level of melodrama. "Twenty Five Years", where she laments that after the lover's death, the world has been wholly stripped of its innocence, reads almost like a Tennysonian elegy with its restraint
and the genuineness of the sentiments expressed: "I see your hand/ in mine and feel no touch,/ only a will to grief. Yet it was true" (WCP377).

Long before Feminism had attained its present status, Judith Wright had started writing poems which were overtly feminist in content and spirit. While celebrating womanhood, she also lays bare its helplessness. At the same time she is not blind to the fact that woman willingly lets herself melt at man's sheer touch and even goes "overboard" for him. Her staunch conviction is that the perfect union of the two alone can tide over the on-slaught of time and guarantee continuance of the human race. For her, this union is tantamount to the regaining of paradise. Judith Wright's most eloquent utterance on woman's importance and her helplessness occurs in "Eve Scolds" where she brushes aside the "oldrib-story" as an absurd tale (WCP 359).

Going by the current popular definition of ecofeminism both Livesay and Wright are ecofeminists. Greta Gaard's definition of 'ecofeminism' merits mention here:

Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorises oppressions such as those
based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and physical abilities is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. (Lal 309)

Joyce Nelson clarifies further that “by making explicit the connections between a misogynist society and a society which has exploited ‘mother earth’ to the point of environmental crisis, ecofeminism has helped to highlight the deep splits in the patriarchal paradigm” (Lal 309). In recent years, Wright is getting actively involved in the anti-pollution campaigns.

Any outbreak of violence is but a manifestation of evil which no effort on our part can wholly destroy. What makes evil indestructible is the urge in all of us to act it. The self-annihilating urge lies latent and working in all creatures. According to Judith Wright, it is this propensity which actually accounts for the invincibility of evil. The Indian philosophy of Karma also seems to come to her help in looking upon warring men as mere puppets in some unseen hands. Massacres and wars shall go on in future as the law of Karma ordains some to oppress and the others to suffer.

The study of evil and violence in the light of the law of Karma lends a positive, sobering effect on the poet’s mind.
She is wise enough to take all unsavoury things with a sort of equanimity almost like a true stoic. It is this robust ambivalence which lends gravity and dignity to her poetry. Though she has learnt a lot from other men and diverse movements, she does not allow herself to be carried away by any and keeps a fine balance. So she defies classification as a romanticist or a classicist, a lyricist or an intellectual, a Jindyworobak or an Angry Penguin, a votary of Lindsay’s Vitalism or its detractor.

Judith Wright is reported to have started writing poems at the tender age of six. But unfortunately, the poems written in her younger days are not available for study. So it is nearly impossible to examine the growth of her mind and art in her formative years. However, the good crop of poetry available shows a clear technical as well as thematic progression. Like Livesay, Judith Wright too seems to have modelled a great deal of her earlier verse on W.B. Yeats. When she says “Let the song be bare” she is actually echoing the famous Yeatsian credo “For there’s more enterprise/ In walking naked” (63).

This probably accounts for the impression given by most of the poems in Alive that they have been jotted down rather post-haste. Most of the poems in this volume have been stripped
almost to a verbal skeleton. In the case of Livesay, more than social vision, it is her lyrical voices that lend beauty and grandeur to her poetry. But, more than the lyrical outbursts, it is her social vision that makes Wright a great poet. With the lyric note vanishing from her verse, her style becomes harder, but more solemn and respectable. She is evidently concerned more with the communication of ideas and her feelings rather than with any technical trappings. Her diction in her later verse, particularly in volumes like Alive and Fourth Quarter, is more direct and simple. The poems in these volumes suggest a clear progression towards more common, closer and less mythified realities. The many references she makes to bacteriology, parasitology, botany and even astronomy show her remarkable interest in science. To a modern reader, it is the language of science that rings truer than that of any abstraction, however sound and appealing it may be. No wonder she tries to dislodge mysticism in her poetic imagination which is all too clear in her earlier verse.

In short, the massive work produced by the two poets reflects their love of language, their commitment to social justice and their passionate involvement in the changing world around them. Breaking with the hitherto popular literary conventions,
both have ventured to tackle subjects like racism, women's sexuality, the lives of working people, the rights of the Aborigines and the conservation of nature. Both have vehemently voiced their protest against another disturbing menace, the environmental pollution. Their commitment to peace and human welfare make them interested at once in establishing an ideal harmony between man and nature and in working for disarmament and abjuration of nuclear military hardware.
Works Cited


Select Bibliography

I. DOROTHY LIVESAY

1. Primary Sources

a. Poetry


*Day and Night.* Toronto: Ryerson, 1944.


b. Short Fiction


c. Reportage/Documentary


d. Memoir


e. Novella

2. Secondary Sources

a. Books


b. Interviews/Articles/Essays/Sections of Books


- - -. "Out of the Silence and Across the Distance". Queens Quarterly 78 (Winter 1971): 579-91.


3. Miscellaneous

a. Canadian Literature and its Background.


b. Canadian Poetry


II. JUDITH WRIGHT

1. Primary Sources

a. Poetry


The Other Half. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1966.


b. Short Story


c. Literary Criticism


d. Children’s Books


e. Family History


f. Conservation

2. Secondary Sources

a. Books


b. Essays/Articles/Section of Books


Mares, F.H. "Judith Wright and Australian Poetry". *Durham University Journal* 50(2) 1958: 76-84.


Shapcott, T. "Judith Wright - Her Year". *The Bulletin* 14 Nov. 1964: 34.


3. Miscellaneous

a. Australian Literature and its Background.


b. Australian Poetry


III. GENERAL

1. Commonwealth Literature


2. General References


