We wonder why no poet-dramatist has come along earlier to recreate our part in such a way. And we are convinced more than ever, if we needed convincing, that there are many such events in our history waiting for a skilled dramatist or poet or novelist to come and bring them to life for us.

- James Noonan
Chapter One

Introduction

James Reaney wants to keep up his Canadian identity. He loves the countryside where he was born and hopes to rebuild it from a blade of grass or an old fence post. Reaney proclaims his love and loyalty thus: “country, history, township history and Stratford Beacon – Heralds matters a great deal to me” (LGS 20). He continues with the same tone, “Canadians are thoughtful, patriots who see their whole nation in the local grain of sand. That feeling of the relaxed, decentralized belonging is the Canadian national identity and it is frequently confused by Britishers and Americans with lack of national character and faceless blur” (20).

Reaney becomes emotional when he says that it is “better to be a nation without a history as Bulgaria has. We have just enough. I can remember once at a party somebody sneering at one of the Reil Rebellions: only seven people killed. What on earth would he be satisfied with? Tamburlaine’s pyramid of human skulls?” (21). Reaney loved to look at the map of Canada when he was at school. His poems and plays are centred around places in history like Hudson Bay, the Northern Arctic islands, the Coast of Labrador and the Great Lakes. According to Reaney, “Literature, the Bible and Shakespeare tell you more about the potentialities of Canada than Canada does itself” (21). These books served him as the base for history and myth.
Reaney is an Academic poet and playwright who has made clear his disdain for the "Wordsworth High Schools and T.S. Eliot Colleges" (qtd. in Warkentin 8) of his own country, and a nationalist in poetry who moves as easily in the company of Byron and Blake as that of Isabella Valancy Crawford and Irving Layton. An advocate of Northrop Frye's view that literature is made out of other literature, he has, nevertheless, devoted himself to exploring the relationship between the "documents" of our human experience and the "myths" that shape literary experience (8). Many of his poems deal with the humblest aspects of rural and small town life. Yet, he can encompass the forty-three countries of Ontario in the forty-three fields of a Perth country farm, and all human joys and dread in the life of the geese who live in them. These paradoxes are merely the diverse expressions of the central purpose of uncommon firmness.

Reaney reveals that he has had an interest for regional history, local history and particular events in history to communicate his national thoughts in an article titled "A Hut in the Global Village" (1967). His description of several place names accords him the honour of a historian, patriot and national poet (52). In the same article, Reaney has expressed his wish that the literature of a nation should glorify and magnify the history of that nation:

A national literature might be priceless as a portable way of keeping hold of one's identity; a way that does not depend upon physical landscapes and archaic organizations. Rather the way the Jews could be for so many centuries a book; the way an English
man’s country can be seen as Milton and Shakespeare. The Metis world of Riel and Falcon seems one key. Once it was a pastoral world as in the Paulkane paintings in which man, beast, and landscape made a whole. The question is not how we get it again but how we get the unified feeling behind it back again. (53)

Like a historian, Reaney deals with the present social problems which affect the people of Canada. He keeps an eye on the present and addresses himself always to it as to a body of material ripe for the transforming and redeeming power of the imagination. He wants to show the present wearing the mask of tradition (documentary meets myth) so that it can be recognized. Reaney wrestles with the “Age of Dread” or “Angst” (qtd. in Dragland 215).

Reaney began writing when he was in his teens. He read papers on Edith Sitwell, Virginia Woolf and Evelyn Waugh to several college literary clubs. He made witty drawings for The Undergrad (1948) and won the Epstein prize for poetry and short story in 1948. He wrote for and published Canadian Poetry Magazine, The Canadian Forum, Northern Review, Contemporary Verse and Driftland. His short-story “The Box-Social” published in 1947 became a campus scandal which was picked up by the Globe and the Mail, which in turn, led to the publication of the story for a mass audience in New Liberty Magazine (1948).

Reaney published The Red Heart, a collection of forty-two lyrics, in 1949. The focus of the book is on the figure of a youthful artist coming to poetic terms
with a very particular environment. He imagines his life on earth as a continual retreat, but some day, he believes, he will be free to go back to the heaven he has lost. Reaney's myth making style finds an expression in "Suns and Planets", one of The Red Heart Poems. It poses two questions:

Suns and planets of the sky

When will you be ripe and die?

Will a great wind sometime sweep

The dark branches where you weal [. . . ] (48)

The second question is elaborated by means of a metaphorical conceit in which the sky is an orchard of fruit, trees, with red, yellow, and gold pears, apples, and plums set against dark branches, as mythical images of Venus, Mars and Pluto respectively, waiting for the autumnal (Doomsday) destruction to come. The recurrent Canadian nature myth of the indifference of the Canadian wilderness to human values gets ironic treatment. It is the social, personal and regional record of a child's history of development when we realize a sense of deep offence at the sexuality of men and women, a theme which runs through much of the book which stems from the wretchedness of the child's experience, all of which would have been impossible had he never been born. "Reaney summons up the remembrance of things past and longs for the restoration of his happy childhood times. It is his confession that this school globe is a parcel of my past, a basket of pluperfect things" (qtd. in Lee 33).
Reaney’s maturity in his poetic career culminated in the publication of *A Suit of Nettles* (1958). In the following poems in this collection, namely “A Message to Winnipeg”, “The Dance of Death at London, Ontario” and “One-Man Masque”, we see the pattern has the opposite emphasis, as the myth changes to one of realistic depiction, however exaggerated of an actual historical society, and as pastoral themes are used to point up the absurdity and grotesqueness of the society in question. *A Suit of Nettles* was praised by Northrop Frye on two counts:

I will say only that I have never read a book of Canadian poetry with so little “dissociation of sensibility” in it. Where there was less separating of emotions and intellect, of the directly visualized and the erudite [. . .]. He has succeeded, as I think no poet has succeeded before, in bringing Southern Ontario. Surely one of the most inarticulate communities in human culture into a brilliant imaginative focus. (*BG* 90-91)

Reaney’s *Twelve Letters to a Small Town* (1962) records the cultural history of Canada and the biographical facts of the poet. According to Alvin Lee:

As readers of the ‘Letters’, we are involved with two poets, the one James Reaney at the age of thirty-five or thirty-six, when the book took final shape, the other his creation or persona, the imaginative adolescent student through whom we are invited to undergo the
particular experiences involved in this recreation of the history and myth of an actual place. (JR 40)

George Bowering admits that Reaney has begun in *Twelve Letters to a Small Town*, "to make myth from local materials rather than spooning it on from the golden bowl of literary materials" (48). Yet another point of view is elaborated by Colin Browne in his perceptive article, "Reaney's Twelve Letters: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Boy" (1983).

His intent is twofold: to celebrate the mythic, archetypal, and anagogic potential to be uncovered in the local; and to identify the local as a source of poetry and liberation for the colonized Canadian imagination. (104)

In *The Canadian Poet's Predicament* (1957), Reaney argues that Canadian poetry "represents a distinctive vision, but it cries out for more development, just as the poet's innermost self cries out for some ancestral pattern to go by" (118). Thus, *Twelve Letters to a Small Town* provide the flexible shapes of a pastoral fantasia which have transformed the historical facts into a structure of "pluperfect things" whose reality now belongs to the world of art.

Reaney's skill at play writing began with the publication of his first play, *The Sun and the Moon* (SM 1965). It is a social satire. The play is set at Millbank, a historical city, in Ontario, Canada. It deals with the moral, social and religious history of the people in 1935. In *The Sun and the Moon*, Reaney uses
melodrama, a convention he is fond of, to bring these influences to the surface and to heighten the comic and redemptive dimensions of the play: when an abortionist who falsely accuses the local parson of fathering her child, is thwarted by her own miscalculations, peace is restored to the chastened community, Reaney explores his myth of the Sun and the Moon with their marriage and reunion through the transformative process.

The themes of the libretto for the Chamber Opera Night Blooming Cereus (NBC 1960) are loneliness and reconciliation. It was performed at Hart House Theatre, Toronto in 1960, along with One Man Masque (OMM 1960) with Reaney himself as the performer – a short poetic fantasy dealing with the history and myth of birth, death and other stages of human life. Night Blooming Cereus involves a journey, a visit to limbo and return, and a lost child, and ends with a kind of nativity or epiphany that suggests the recovery of the golden world of pastoral and romance.

The following lines of the play, quoted by Richard Stingle, show Reaney’s skill at creating myth out of a flower which is an object in the natural cycle of history:

Above the village appears a vision of the Night-Blooming Cereus opening in slow beach crashing swarming splendour and glory, a blossom larger than airplanes or zeppelins, four times really the size of the village, three times the size of Toronto, twice the size of
Bethlehem and once the size of Eden. Then it fades as time comes back. (JR 334)

One Man Masque (OMM 1960) is a perfect example of Reaney’s experiment with satirical mythos. It represents a nightmare vision, an anatomy of human corruption. It is clear that the baby described in the play is generic Man as he pounds the darkness into guts, heart, and head and leads America, Eurasia, and Africa out of chaos. This play highlights the adoption of the dialectics of history and myth. The transformative dimension is made clear by Reaney himself:

The baby is given two “boneless wands or swords”, which he later recognizes as “the vorpal phallus” and “the magic tongue”, from which come, respectively, biological life and human civilization. The seeds in the generative organs are the teeming animal and human life of all history, a “jostling army” showing itself in hen home and palace, street crowds and history. (143)

Reaney founded and edited the magazine Alphabet (1960-71), a publication devoted to the iconography of imagination which reflected his own mythopoeic approach from the school of Frye. Its object was to study the iconography of imagination. Richard Stingle was the friend of Reaney and his article, “The Harpooners”, which forms part of the Alphabet, is the best guide to the activities of the so-called “mythopoeic poets” (11), who had gathered around
Frye and whose central point of agreement is not love of classical myth and literary conventions for their own sake, but belief in the process of the mind, lost in a sea of dread, to create the island of joyous order which is their nature as men to desire. Stingle writes:

> The fundamental assumptions of the myth-making consciousness is the ascending of the creative human forms over non-human ones, of form over chaos, of life over death. Human creativity does not project an illusion, as Marx would have it, but gives us the power to see in nature a human shape. (qtd. in Warkentin 11)

*Alphabet* was dedicated to the proposition that mankind answers “the terrors of the inner and outer world with a symbolic fruit and an iconic seabeast” (1-14) – that is, with metaphor, symbol, myth, the structures of the imagination which serve relationship or family and deny discontinuity. Reaney makes an interesting analogy in the Editorial to *Alphabet* No. 2, for the way *Alphabet’s* juxtaposition of myth and documentary, words and things, was meant to work:

> Take the face cards out of a card deck; then put a circular piece of cardboard near them. Curves and circles appear even in the Queen of Diamonds and the knave of spades. But place a triangular shape closely and the eye picks up corners and angularities even in the Queen of clubs. What every issue of Alphabet involves, then, is the placing of a definite geometric shape near some face cards.
Just as playing about with cubes and spheres can teach an artist and a critic a better sense of composition. Alphabet’s procedure can have the same result with iconography and symbolism. (2)

In *A Message to Winnipeg* (1959) the fusion of old and new modes is beautifully exemplified in the first lines of “Winnipeg Seen as a Body of Time and Space”, which at once constitute lyric evocation, historic narrative and dramatic question:

Winnipeg, what once you were. You were
Your grass was hair by the river ten feet tall,
Your arms were burr oaks and ash leap maples,
Your backbone was a crooked silver muddy river.
Your thoughts were ravens in flocks, your bones were snow,
Your legs were trails and your blood was a people
Who did what the stars did and the Sun. (62)

*A Message to Winnipeg* still ends in apocalypse as in myth:

Leave the burning city
Leave this burning town
Destruction cometh – a sucking cloud
Your towers will tumble down –
Child’s Restaurant will be consumed
Eaton’s and Hudson’s Bay
And the rivers dry away. (38)
Reaney made his remarkable debut in the theatre with *The Killdeer* (*KD 1960*). It won five awards at the 1960 Dominion Drama Festival and the third Governor General’s Award for Reaney on its publication in 1962. It deals with the social and moral and religious history of Canadians during 1930s. The themes are perverted sexual and familial patterns – oedipal attachments, adultery, murder, homosexuality and others – all come together in the figure of Mr. Manatee who stands for all social ills and evils. Reaney’s skill at translation or transformation is made clear as deprived being – perhaps a child – is somehow released into a new, free, and essentially intelligible world from one full of threatening and uncontrollable fears and evil forces.

Reaney in the first version of *The Killdeer* tried to give actual historical existence to the names of deprived child and false and true parents by setting the action in an Ontario small town and allotting symbolic roles to its inhabitants. The following statement by the hero Harry can be taken as the yoking of history into myth:

I must find my source soon or fall

I circle and circle in the dark and cannot sense

The next below where I must be born. (253)

Reaney’s *Masks of Childhood* includes two more plays titled *The Easter Egg* (*EE 1962*) and *Three Desks* (*TD 1967*). The theme of *The Easter Egg* is based on the cultural history of Christians in presenting gifts during Easter. The
mythic background of the play can be traced in the explanation given by Reaney in the Preface to *Masks of Childhood*. It is:

A grandmother gives a boy a glass Easter Egg; he is drowning in an evil world and the present could float him to a shore. Someone steals the egg and the boy goes under a wave of world-blindness and numbness. Fourteen years later the Easter egg is found again and [. . .]. (5)

Bethel, the stepmother of Kenneth, and her setting were taken from stories told at an academic party in Kingstown, stories about the past on a campus somewhat farthest east. Reaney is supplied with the ghost story of a girl tied to a fence for stealing a twig of small fruit in the nearby Garden Island. The owner of the gooseberries had the child brought up in Court for stealing one! Confinement beneath a cellar door rather than trying to the fence was the usual cruel punishment. The hero of the play Kenneth whose character came from actually seeing retarded children tied to Verandahs and hearing of “attic children”, of feeble minded relatives being secretly kept in specially constructed barn hideouts (6). Thus, we assume that Reaney’s characters are kept away as minority for some weakness relating to culture, intelligence and religion. Most plays are labelled as the myth of children.

Reaney’s *Three Desks* (*TD* 1967) is a macabre and farcical treatment of the childishness and hostility that can affect the life of an academic community,
in this case, a small liberal—Arts College on Prairies. It is historical in the sense that it was directly generated by the Manitoba experience of Reaney when he arrived there in 1949. Its central acting area is office 101 of the long-gone downtown temporary buildings of the university of Manitoba (imperfectly disguised here as Rupertsland College, where a fierce battle is waged between forces of educational good and evil closely related to those of the July eclogue of *A Suit of Nettles*. Reaney's professor Niles is like the Anser of his satirical poem: "pah! If they like nothing, then teach them that. The self must be free" (qtd. in Warkentin 89). Later, Reaney developed a contrapuntal action that moves the audience's attention from the office and its inhabitants to the school world composed of the young folk who look up and are not fed; these are portrayed by members of the college glee club, rehearsing their songs, writing exams, arguing and making love, and their life takes place around the fringes of the interior action.

The misery of Reaney's young teacher as he first tries to learn to educate others, and then discovers he must fight to protect what he has just acquired, is never allowed to remain personal; we are always forced to see it in the context of the society within which these teachers have to operate. It is civic history and moral history and therefore ultimately dramatic. According to Stewart Reaney, "*Three Desks* is a heroic myth, narrating the epic conflict between a civilization in decline, and a rising force of superstitious evil ignorance" (*PCD* 48).
Reaney's *Colours in the Dark* (*CD* 1967) shows his surer command of the free dramatic form towards which all his plays tend. The central protagonist – the boy hero, poet, Canadian citizen, Christ-figure – explains to his children at the end of a birthday party game of blind-man's buff how he gained the wondrous power of knowing the names and meanings of things even when he is blinded. He leads us on a voyage of discovery through his life – and ours – in search of that interior power of creation which Reaney believes is the true "academy". Thus, the play shows the dialectics of children's myth. It also narrates the whole history of a life, the history and myth of the world through the medium of the Bible, and illustrates impersonal thoughts on life and death.

Reaney's later relations with adult actors is made clear in several of his articles: "Ten Years at Play" (1969), "Kids and Crossovers" (1976) and "Your Plays are like Movies – Ciemascope Ones" (1979). In his sabbatical year (1968-69) in Victoria, B.C., Reaney worked on a play based on the murder of the Donnellys in Lucan, Ontario, a story that had fascinated him in his childhood and intermittently since then. On his return to London, he devoted himself to research in the archives at Western and to writing and rewriting *The Donnellys*, the play that finally turned into a trilogy. *Sticks and Stones* appeared in 1973. *The St. Nicholas Hotel* followed in 1974 and won for Reaney the Chalmers Award in 1975 and an honorary D. Litt. from Carleton University. *Handcuffs*, which completed the trilogy was performed in 1975.
In *The Donnellys (Don)*, it is clear that Reaney has not simply recorded the history of the Donnellys of Lucan, Ontario but he has transferred that history into a work of art and has created out of the soil of Southern Western Ontario he knows so well a story that has universal appeal. As James Noonan rightly comments:

> As we watch the magic of the play on stage we keep recalling that these horrendous events actually happened here in Canada, in Ontario in Middlesex country, in the township Biddulph in and around the small town of Lucan, (present population 1300) eighteen miles north of London, just Off the Queens Highway Number Seven. (Foreword 3)

The NDWT Company took *The Donnellys* on a national tour in 1975, an account of which is given by Reaney in *14 Barrels from Sea to Sea* (1977). *14 Barrels* is the story of something unusual in Canadian theatre history, the story of a national tour of a Canadian drama, from London to St. Boniface to Burnaby to Fredericton to Halifax to Hamilton to Port Parry and back again. Reaney brings all his skills to bear in his first major work of prose to describe a Canada that is watching and rediscovering itself in the Canada that was of the Donnellys (11). There is a passage in *14 Barrels from Sea to Sea* that shows “the symbolic relationship of life and art for Reaney” (qtd. in Conlogue 219). It has to do with his meeting, at the Winnipeg stop of the national tour of *The Donnellys*, of two families whose ancestors had come from Biddulph, the
Donnelly country. Reaney talks of his difficulty in shaping the ideas of the Donnelly Trilogy in his book titled 14 Barrels from Sea to Sea:

Only a fellow researcher could understand the excitement I felt at meeting these people; previously they had been just a scrap of paper in the Chancery Court files under B for Blackwell vs Brown; now in Row S of the Salle Pauline Boutal the verbal universe dissolves into human figures and faces telling are things that enable me to go back into the patterns I am weaving in the world of words and adjust here, shade more there. (42)

On the Company’s return, it performed Baldoon (Bal 1976). It is historical in the sense that the events portrayed are based on fact – on actual occurrences that took place on the 19th century settlement of Baldoon near Wallaceburg, Ontario. It focuses attention on the history of colonial settlement, superstition on witchcraft and magic, jealousy and other ambitions. The play is a fine study in cultural and religious history, as we find a strong contrast between two principal religions and cultures found in Southern Ontario during the early 19th century. There were arguments between the Roman Catholics and the Presbyterians of the Methodist Church. Reaney has transformed this historical fact into the myth of Baldoon mystery through artistic alchemy.

Reaney then performed The Dismissal (Dil 1979). It deals with a student strike that took place in 1895 at the University of Toronto, which set up shock
waves continued till 1906 with a total restructuring of the University. It is academic history as it concentrates on the students’ and teachers’ role in the University, political history as appointments were based on political influences, history of provincial skirmish as being administered by non-Canadian faculty and autocracy as it curtailed the right of freedom of speech and expression and personal victimization because of the deceitfulness of Mackenzie king. These events, and their ramifications, form the historical basis for The Dismissal. The transforming power of these historical events into mythic significance of universal appeal is the magic presentation of Reaney.

*Listen to the Wind (LW 1966)*, the best play of Reaney appeared in 1966. The basic components of his play are “four children and four chairs”. With these elements Reaney composes two interlocking dramas. The outer play is about a dying boy trying to grow up while he can. Owen’s hereditary illness is an emblem both of the universal human affliction of fear, and the essentially social form it takes in his amicable will-less father and the beautiful, willful mother who have both in effect abandoned him. It creates different eras in history the worlds of 1936, Perth Country, and 1870, Caresfoot Court.

dramatic design of the early plays. *Canadian Brothers or The Prophecy Fulfilled* (1983) extended Reaney's adaptation of John Richardson's novels that he had begun with *Wacousta*. In the *Canadian Brothers*, the Pontiac Wars of the 1760s are recalled in detail. He also wrote *Some Critics are Music Teachers* (1982), an essay contributed to a festschrift for Frye, in which he makes clear the importance to him of the contrapuntal criticism of his early teacher. *The Art of Swearing* (1984) is a satirical poem of narrations drawn from his own experiences. They also serve the basis for the children's story *Take the Big Picture* (1986). His earlier venture in this genre was *The Boy with an R in his Hand* (1965).

*The Boy with an R in his Hand (BRH 1965)* is a novel written by Reaney for children. It tells the story of two orphan brothers who arrive in York from the Red River settlement in 1826 and quickly become involved with the complex politics of Upper Canada. Joel, the elder brother, aligns himself with the Family Compact and his overbearing, stuffy uncle, while Alec, more imaginative and courageous, becomes an apprentice to William Lyon Mackenzie at the Colonial Advocate. "He learns the art of type-setting and from that moment on his progress in the skill of type-setting was [. . .] like a house on fire" (Preface 9). This is a satisfying, fast-moving story-full of incident and detail about colonial life. It climaxes with the wrecking of Mackenzie's printshop and press by a band of young Tories acting with the implicit approval of the government, at the end of which, Alec finds a single capital R, his souvenir of life as a printer's
apprentice. It is recommended for ages nine and up, as a piece of Canadiana which enlivens history for the young reader. Reaney in the introduction to this novel states, "what is history to us was daily life for boys like Alec Buchanan or Alec. Sometimes it takes fiction to make historical fact come alive and bring home to us the fact that flesh and blood ancestors made us what we are today" (9).

When we read Canadian literature, we realise how diverse Canadian culture is – how marked by politics and religion, how influenced by differences of language and geography. Though Canada is a secular state, religion is everywhere in its history and language. The biases of religion, class, gender, race-noted or unnoted, conscious or unconscious – these all conditioned the way people viewed the world. In Canada, they helped to shape the expectations of the new society and its patterns of expression.

The term “literature” in Canada poses a problem. Canadian literature is not bound by citizenship. There were writers before there was a “Canada” and there have been immigrants and long-term visitors since for whom Canada has been home. It is not restricted to Canadian settings. Neither does it imply some single national thesis. There are exiles and expatriates whose work still connects with writings in Canada; and there are many Canadian born writers. Literature in Canada grows from these social attitudes held in common, as well as from historical antecedents and extra national models. Totems and headdresses also
appear routinely as tokens of Canadian writers and image-makers have drawn separately on Indian and Inuit motifs to declare the distinctiveness of things Canadian.

The interrogation or deconstruction of the canon is a part of a critical movement underway since the 1960s and loosely labelled “post-modernism or post-structuralism”, the ways of thought so labelled are distinguished by profound skepticism, questioning what literary studies should deal with, how that study should be conducted, whether it should be a separate discipline (Johnson 28). These various schools of thought reject traditional disciplinary boundaries, and draw on the psychology of Lacan, the linguistics of de Saussure, the philosophy of Wittgenstein, Ricoeur and Derrida, and frequently on the political theories of Marx or on “the politics of identity” which valorize the perceptions of groups previously marginalized by class, gender, ethnicity, colonial status, or sexual performance, as is the case with cultural studies, feminism, Afro-centrism, subaltern studies, gay and lesbian studies or gender studies although it would be a mistake to characterize the views of any of these groups as monolithic.

The community play in Canada employed history and demonstrated through community-oriented theatre. History was drawn from civic and historical pageantry. Artists such as James Reaney, Rick Salutin and David Fennario in the 1970s and the 1980s produced such plays. “Local pride is one of
the things that the community play is designed to foster” (Little 70). *The Shivaree* (1965) and other community plays produced in Canada have engaged their audiences as participants in historical pageants, processions and parades that have preceded and punctuated them. The history on which the play most frequently draws is less the traditional official or national history of the “acts of great men, than an explicitly revisionist and localist social history, often popular history, in which Mackenzie, for example, can cite what the history books don’t tell you” (qtd. in Collen 56).

Reaney can be compared with many other Canadian writers whose writings bear the stamp of regionalism and social problems. Ringwood’s *Still Stands the House*, a one-act play and the full-length *Dark Harvest* both published in 1945, are tragedies that have strong claims to being Canadian classics. *Still Stands the House* is a grim and powerful metaphor of Canadian life in the Depression years when drought turned much of the prairies into dust bowl. The blizzards of winter and the droughts of summer are Ringwood’s images of a derangement in Nature mirroring the disorder within the human world of the Warren household. Ringwood’s student George Ryga, another Canadian writer, has praised her “for creating a deeper awareness of the richness of Canadian mythology” (qtd. in Benson and Conolly 64-65).

John Herbert’s prison drama *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* (1967) speaks directly to issues relating to homosexuality and the brutality of prison life and “it
is primarily concerned with human relationships and how four young men come to terms with the injustices of their childhood, denial of love, and consequent degradation like Reaney’s Owen in the play *Listen to the Wind*” (qtd. in Stuart 8). George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1969) is based on an actual incident, reported in a Vancouver newspaper, about the murder of an Indian girl whose body was found in a Vancouver slum rooming house. But by the play’s conclusion Ryga has skilfully led the audience to question the morality of the legal system that condemns Rita Joe which “resembles the fate met by the Donnellys of Reaney” (qtd. in Wasserman 80). Ryga has attempted to identify – and to create – the archetypes and context of a Canadian mythology urging the importance of the past.

Another collection of Walker’s plays, was published in 1984 with Tyrone M. Power as their central character. The three comic murder and mystery plays in the collection – *Gossip, Filthy Rich,* and *The Art of War* – form a natural trilogy, although they do not achieve the coherence of David French’s *Mercer* trilogy or James Reaney’s *Donnellys* trilogy because *The Art of War* is on an altogether higher plane of seriousness and intelligence. Michael Cook’s *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust* (1973) has a contemporary setting and offers an unflinching portrayal of Newfoundland life.

Sharon Pollock is another playwright identified with Calgary. Her regional interest, however, encompasses much of Western Canada, and the
subject matter of her plays. Her early plays show a strong interest in political issues, particularly as reflected in Canadian historical events. Walsh (1973) for example, “criticizes the hypocrisy and cruelty of the governments of John A. Macdonald in forcing Sioux chief Sitting Bull and his people out of Canada in 1881” (qtd. in Robert 75).

The quest for coherence and codes of myth can be found in the criticism of Northrop Frye (b 1912), a University of Toronto professor, specializing in Shakespeare and Blake, and whose later career was turned to an elucidation of the mythological and verbal structures of the Bible (The Great Code, 1982). Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism (1957) – isolating the cycles of rhetorical strategy he identified with literary genre like tragedy, comedy, irony, romance – substantially influenced a generation of writers, particularly Reaney, who had been the student of Frye. His essays on Canadian Culture, in The Bush Garden (1971) and elsewhere – drawing on Jung (1875-1961), Frazer (1854-1941) and his own training in theology – lodged Canadian criticism for some years in a belief in the disorder of wilderness. An influential phrase was his suggestion, perhaps most applicable to the literature of Ontario, that Canadian writing expressed a “garrison mentality” (228). Frye’s belief is that literature is not about life but about other literature: that is, it records the cultural heritage by re-enacting the patterns of previous writings. This version of cultural expression was linear because cyclical; it accepted European culture as the ideological frame of reference. Such criticism directly influenced the poems, plays, critical essays
and publishing enterprises like, the magazine *Alphabet* (1960-70) of James Reaney.

Reaney has long lived in Western Ontario, and has repeatedly adapted the archetypal patterns apparent in Frye’s literary taxonomy to the persons and places of local history and culture. Some of Reaney’s poems and essays declare the formative influence of popular culture on people’s imaginations, and celebrate the environment by using regional speech to name local flora and fauna. At another level the local stories take on the structure of the past but grow into themselves by means of such structures. *A Suit of Nettles* (1958) adopts the form of Spenser’s (1552-99) “The Shepherds Calendar”; the 1972 play *The Easter Egg* adapts Christian ritual to domestic circumstances; a children’s play employs the epic catalogue, using the simple incantations of the numbers of parents, grandparents and other ancestors each child has, to assert how history and cultural inheritance become individualized in every life. Reaney’s impulse thus is not to repeat history but to reinterpret it, celebrating not the Europeanness of archetype but the archetypal fascination of one’s own history and experience, and the power of myth to reconstruct it in terms that carry contemporary meaning.

Reaney’s place in the tradition of English and Canadian literature has been a matter of critical debate among others and of continuing interest to himself. Critics have labelled him differently. Louis Dudek, for instance, calls him a
"Colonial" and to Frank Davey he is a "rationalist and internationalist". Germaine Warkentin and Dudek consider him "A symbolist", and according to Stan Dragland, he is "a poet with a myth of coherence who is yet able to say something in an age of the random [ . . . ]" (qtd. in Stingle 198) and to many he is "a rabid nationalist" (198).

There is a single structural principle common to all of Reaney's creative thought, whether in poetry, drama, critical writing, or teaching. He is always preoccupied with a process of transformation or translation in which unlikely things are unexpectedly revealed and they are transformed from the voiceless chaos of human experience into the eloquence of metaphor.

Reaney wrote an introduction (1972) to a new reprint of the Collected Poems of Isabella Valancy Crawford (1972), a poet whose early mythologizing of nature and its opposing forces had long interested him. Reaney held that the most exciting literary image of the nineteenth century is the following from Isabella Crawford:

Love [ . . . ] has its own sun, its own peculiar sky
All one great daffodil on which to lie
The Sun, the moon, the stars, all seen at once. (54)

Reaney, in the "preface" to the Killdeer (1971), talks of the immortal, magic captivating charm of dramas in general:

Plays are like human bodies; they
have heads, hearts, bowels, joints,
belly buttons land hair: privates,
senses of an organism, a pulsating
dance in and out of forms [. . . ]. (8)

Profiles in Canadian Drama (1952) by Stewart Reaney provides a mine of information about Reaney’s children’s plays and plays for adults. The plays for children form a complex capsule definition of Reaney’s drama. At once moving and self-mocking, the ritual chant expressed his Blakean compression or expansion of the universe into a Bon Ami Can. The transformation of the cleaning instructions into Scripture goes further than it might as a “found poem”. Instead, there is a discovery and acceptance of the theatre in our lives, in which the structure of the artifact becomes the structure of the drama. They offer us marionettes and myths, Canada and community, family and education. When we think of Listen to the Wind, we are all children in Canada somewhere, thinking about putting on a play like Owen, the boy-hero (14-15).

The critical reviews furnished below provide us with a deep insight into Reaney’s poems and plays. One of the earlier critical studies on Reaney, James Reaney (1968) by Alwin A. Lee is directed towards Reaney’s poetry and his dramatic writings. According to Lee, Reaney’s writings have their main impetus in an intense desire to make literary sense out of a particular locale, by setting against its grotesque, destructive aspects of a vision - of what in one poem is
called “pluperfect things” – the fleeting moments of happiness in the life of a marionette, an artifact of golden wallpaper, or the brief, precarious marriage of a lover, son and a human heart. He has utilized his imaginative construct to create a mythopoeic tradition in classical English poetry (9).

In *Reaney Collected* (1973), another critical treatise, edited by Germaine Warkentin, Margaret Atwood finds in Reaney’s work:

The songs of Innocence come after the songs of Experience. We can take a number of figures or images from the earlier poems and follow them through the corpus, watching how the Lost Child gets found in Night-Blooming Cereus, how the sinister Orphan gets changed into the harmless comic-strip Little Orphan Annie, how the baby doomed from before birth is allowed more latitude (though he can be the Christ Child as parody dwarf, he can also be the real Christ child or magic baby; and how the collection of random objects is permitted to have universal significance (116-17). Reaney’s best has an unmistakable quality. Both stylistic and thematic, and a strength that is present only when a poet is touching something fundamental. His works – articulate the primitive forms of the human imagination, they flesh out the soul, they dramatize – like Blake’s “Mental Traveller” – the stances of the self in relation to the universe. (117)
Selected Essays and Criticism (1978), edited by Louis Dudek, has reference to Reaney’s adherence to Frye’s systematization – his key to all Mythologies, “which leads to a very definite meaning and application, namely a revolutionary Christianity, a radical humanism and a reassertion of Christian values” (332). Reaney’s plays, like the Mother lode itself, gravitate towards a Christian affirmation. It is made clear by the following passage from Listen to the Wind: “A messenger of Hope, comes every night to me, / And offers for short life, eternal liberty” (135). Another passage from Colours in the Dark echoes the Christian prophecy:

Leave the burning city
Leave this burning town
Destruction cometh – a sucking cloud
Your towers will tumble down . . . (106)

Another compilation of critical articles, Educated Doodle: Some Notes on One-Man Masque (1982) edited by Jay Macpherson holds the view:

Reaney’s scheme is much more than a simple linear sequence along particular romance lines; it contains an encyclopaedic range of literary types and forms. And in imaginatively exploiting Frye’s two grammars of poetic myth, it also bridges them, rather as the Living Creatures of the Old Testament to the inner eye become the Four Evangelists of the New. (96)
Reaney’s interest in transforming Canadian history into myth is made clear in the article “An Interview with James Reaney” (1982) by Catherine Ross. Reaney has revealed that Geography Match was written just to teach the kids about the geography of the country and its history. “One ought to have to keep in touch with an underlying legend or myth or pattern that makes the whole thing work dynamically” (14).

Richard Perkyns, in his critical analysis to the Major Plays of the Canadian Theatre (1984), is confident that the plays of James Reaney are “fulfilling those hopes of what Canadian theater can become, and inspiring many others to realize its potential. His combination of history, legend and romance has helped to create a distinctive Canadian mythology” (63).

Ray Conlogue another critic in his article “Donnellys Resurface to Capture the Imagination” (1989), asserts the dramatic excellence of The Donnellys, “if this were the United States, The Donnelly Trilogy would by now have been transformed into a film, like The Milagro Beanfield War – A story that it resembles in many ways, except for being about a hundred times better written” (13).

Gerald Parker, in his critical review, How to Play: The Theatre of James Reaney” (1991), refers to the Reaney’s characters’ “sense of being in a play, that is, in part, the sense of existing somewhere [and some time] – at the intersection of history and myth, caught in the double activity of living and telling one’s story.” (250)
In “Alchemy in Ontario: Reaney’s Twelve Letters to a small Town” (1996) an article, by Wanda Campbell, is “[. . . ] the unifying power of the imagination”, or what Stan Dragland calls “the myth of coherence” (115), may be in doubt, but, according to a character in Reaney’s play *Colours in the Dark*, a world without it seems too dismal to contemplate:

> Then if a flower is not like a star, and nothing is like anything else then – all the spring goes out of me. I used to take such pleasure in little things – images, stones, pebbles, leaves, grasses, sedges – the grass is like a pen, its nib filled with seed – but it all seems – lies. I can’t go on. There seems no reason to go on living or thinking. (65)

Reaney has been a source of inspiration to many writers. His *Toy Box* theories become a subject of imitation. Jerry Prager, an actor – turned Canadian writer discusses Reaney’s influences on him in *The Encyclopaedia of Canadian Theatre* (2003), for the composition of the play *Rosaline and Benvolio* (2002). He says:

> I find that Reaney’s dazzling display of imagery is always grounded in deeply real moments, that are then swept up into the great maelstrom of his imagination before touching down in human territory somewhere else with equally devastating effect.
He adds further, "it was Frye that Reaney inspired me to read, not Shakespeare, and his extensive use of historical research to shape the flow of action has shored me against my ruins" (http://Canadianshakespeares.ca/a_rosaline.cfm).

In the poems and plays of Reaney, he has devoted himself to exploring the relationship between the past history of our human experience and the myths that shape literary experience. And the present study seeks evidence for the existence of the dialectics of history and myth in the plays of Reaney as exemplified in the transformation of history into myth and drama.