

## **W.O. MITCHELL SEES THE WIND by Ken McGoogan Calgary Herald, 1998**

Some Canadian writers, Peter Gzowski told a Calgary audience, "are more honored." There are "some who are richer, some who have sold more books, and some who are better known around the world." Gzowski paused, then delivered a punch line that drew extended applause from a full house of 800 at PanCanadian WordFest: "But there is no writer in this country who is better loved than W.O. Mitchell."

The celebrated CBC broadcaster, who has been a fan of the Calgary author since the 1950s, came from Toronto last October to lead this tribute to the Grand Old Man of Prairie Fiction. Mitchell, who died Wednesday at 83 after a long battle with cancer, was well-represented on that occasion by his feisty wife, Merna, and by what his son, Orm, described as "a dozen or so members of the Mitchell clan."

An unprecedented outpouring of affection and respect ensued as one literary figure after another took the stage to talk about how Mitchell had touched their lives -- everyone from publisher Douglas Gibson to Saskatchewan authors Sandra Birdsell and David Carpenter to theatre director Rick McNair and musician James Keelaghan.

For one observer, the tribute brought back the spring of 1990, when Edmonton fiction writer Merna Summers congratulated Mitchell for having won a Writers' Guild of Alberta award for *According To Jake And The Kid*. Summers spoke of the legacy one generation of writers leaves for the next, and confessed, "I didn't know you were allowed to put gophers in stories until I discovered that Mitchell had done it."

When the grand old author stood to speak, the audience of writers rose as one and fervently applauded until there wasn't a dry eye in the place.

By then, Mitchell had been back home in Calgary for four years. He'd been writing out of a small office at the University of Calgary and producing books at an astonishing rate: *Ladybug*,

*Ladybug* (1988), *According To Jake And The Kid* (1989), *Roses Are Difficult Here* (1990). As books editor at the *Calgary Herald*, I'd interviewed him several times. I'd described him in print as "scratchy-voiced, salty-tongued, dishevelled, a waver of arms, an unrepentant ranter -- surely his own best character."

Yet I'd never seen behind the persona, never discovered what links the author of that graceful classic *Who Has Seen The Wind* with the public performer who once got a blue-chip audience of 1,000 laughing uproariously at scatological passages which most of its members, individually, would have condemned as outrageous, vulgar -- utterly unacceptable.

Early on, I'd learned in interviews, Mitchell was friendly and forthcoming -- indeed, recklessly honest. But just try to pin him down. He eluded probing questions with such style that he would leave his interviewer wondering how he did it, and wanting almost to see him do it again. Evanescence personified.

The visit I remember best was the one I undertook not to find out what Mitchell was up to -- the evidence lay before me -- but rather to glimpse the man behind the kaleidoscopic public image. "He is a serious novelist," Gibson had told me. "But he is also W.O. Mitchell, character. And that character is not put on."

Author Pierre Berton had elaborated. "There's only one Bill Mitchell," he'd declared, talking of how he and Mitchell became friends in the 1940s. "But he was less

of a character then than he is now. I think he's been building that character like he builds his fictional characters. And his persona has been sandpapered and honed and polished by his platform presence over the years. Back then, he was a little more rough hewn."

These were signposts -- although I hadn't realized it when Mitchell's wife, Merna, ushered me into their home and hollered at her husband to come downstairs, the man from the *Calgary Herald* had arrived. Two hours later, with Mitchell under a full head of steam and clearly prepared to ramble into the evening, Merna would surface with broad hints about Mitchell's getting back to work on his novel, until even the most regretful of leave-takers would be forced to beat a reluctant retreat.

In between, Mitchell was Mitchell -- discursive, rambling, impossible, his conversation sprinkled with unprintable expletives and lengthy asides aimed at benefiting the careers of those he loves. Mitchell also had arguments to make, scores to settle -- but then, how could it have been otherwise? The man had been a national figure for decades. A national figure based in Calgary.

No, he's not a native son, exactly, having entered the world in Weyburn, Sask. But W.O. Mitchell, novelist, playwright and raconteur extraordinaire, had spent more time in Calgary and environs than anywhere else. True, from 1979 to 1986, Mitchell worked as writer-in-residence at the University of Windsor. But even then, he'd return home to spend part of each summer at a lakeside cottage a day's drive from Calgary. And often he was here in this city, at home in a comfortable two-storey house facing onto a park in the southwest.

William Ormond Mitchell was born into a middle-class family March 13, 1914, and spent his "litmus years" in Weyburn. "The whole context of the early years, the round billiard table of the Regina plains, the Prairies, was very, very important to me both as a person and an artist." At age 12, Mitchell contracted tuberculosis of the wrist and his parents sent him to the warmth of St. Petersburg, Fla., to finish high school. He found the geography overwhelming: "If you have been used to just the rudiments of sky, just the horizon, and no trees unplanted by man, and then you go to the lush subtropics, as I did. . . ." He shook his head.

In Florida, he developed an interest in acting: "I had the lead in the senior play, and was marked by a teacher, Emily Murray, for greater things. In later years, I did end up working with a little theatre in Seattle. And my first writing was for stage." Meanwhile, each summer, Mitchell returned to Saskatchewan. "I worked at a great number of things, but the thing that saved us all in the West was harvest time. Then you'd go to work for a dollar a day, sleep in the hen house. And the result was, I knew a great many farm labourers."

In 1931, Mitchell enrolled at the University of Manitoba, intending to become a neurosurgeon. But his wrist made this career a bad bet. He switched majors, won the university's gold medal in philosophy and promptly dropped out. He took a writing course at the University of Washington in Seattle, then hopped a freight to Montreal. From there he worked his way to Europe on a tramp steamer. In France, he worked as a high diver in a carnival show.

Back in Canada, Mitchell sold classified ads for the *Calgary Herald* and worked as a department store Santa Claus. In Edmonton, while selling World Book

Encyclopedia door to door, Mitchell met his future wife, Merna Hirtle. She introduced him to "a Professor Salter."

The author "was never a student of his. But he talked me into going back to university and taking teacher training. He looked over my shoulder during the next two years or so. I worked on *Who Has Seen The Wind* (begun in 1937). It was growing. And then I married Merna, and I went to my first school in Castor, Alberta. And I worked on the book all that year. Then, the following year, I was principal at New Dayton, south of Lethbridge. I worked on it in my spare time. And then we moved to High River.

"By this time, besides working on *Who Has Seen The Wind*, I was doing short stories. And I had scored with *Liberty*, *New York* and *Maclean's*. I'd made, the last year, double from short stories what I'd made as principal of New Dayton High School. And we'd saved up 500 bucks, so we moved to High River and I totally committed myself to writing."

Years later, Mitchell's second son, Hugh, would tell his father a revealing anecdote about the period. "He'd come home after school, and around the corner from the kitchen was my office. And somebody would say, 'Who's in there with your old man?' And Huey was embarrassed because there was no one in there with his old man. It was me, reading aloud what I had done, to listen for sharps and flats. And to capture the voice. Because the sound of a unique voice is really what character is. But in a long-winded way, I'm getting to the fact that acting and writing are extremely, extremely close arts."

Mitchell completed *Who Has Seen The Wind* in 1946. Excerpts appeared that year in *Atlantic Monthly* and *Best American Short Stories*. The novel was published in 1947, and was a critical and commercial hit. "I knew then that I was going to go up on that trapeze again quickly, for a long haul and that I would do both short stories and a novel."

*Maclean's* magazine invited Mitchell to Toronto to become fiction editor. He accepted and while there became friends with author Pierre Berton, then managing editor. "Mitchell didn't have much money," Berton said. "None of us did. He used to buy all his clothes from the Crippled Civilians or the Salvation Army. And they never quite matched. He'd buy a brown suit with the trousers coming from one suit and the jacket from another so they would be slightly off color. He was an eccentric."

Drawing on what he'd learned from his summer jobs on the Prairies, Mitchell started writing short stories for *Maclean's* about two characters named *Jake and the Kid*. In 1949, to CBC-Radio, he sold the idea of a radio series based on those characters. Between 1950 and 1958, CBC broadcast more than 300 episodes of *Jake And The Kid*. Mitchell not only wrote the scripts, but at one point acted in them: "They couldn't find anybody else," Berton said, "and he played the part of a gopher or a prairie dog or something."

Berton considered *Jake And The Kid* one of Mitchell's great triumphs. "And who is to say that the radio series wasn't as important as any novel he might have written at the time? Certainly, it had 10 times or 100 times the audience, and made him a nationally known figure much more than *Who Has Seen The Wind* or any of the other novels he has written."

According to Mitchell, Berton was taking book, betting that this quintessential westerner would remain in Toronto like everybody else who moved there.

But Mitchell said that after two and a half years, "Merna came to me and said, 'Let's go back to the hills.' And I said, 'Let's stay another year and get some more fat on our bones.' And she said, 'Suit yourself, but I'm taking the little boys and moving back at Easter, and you can come when you like.' So we returned. We had our home in High River."

There is an apparent gap between *Who Has Seen The Wind* and Mitchell's next major novel, *The Vanishing Point*, published in 1973. That gap gave birth to the novelist-in-hiding thesis. But Mitchell was writing steadily -- not only *Jake And the Kid*, but film documentaries, feature articles and plays. He published a second novel, *The Kite*; and yet another novel, *The Alien*, appeared serially in Maclean's and later evolved into *The Vanishing Point*.

"I was still writing every day, every week, every month," Mitchell said. "But this was at a time when I had to do applied art, too. And, in fact, it wasn't a slow period. That's the way it goes. And it's only in the last 15 years that I have been able to address myself by choice to play-writing, to film and to the novel. I couldn't do it (financially) before."

Gibson, the publisher, put it this way: "Bill Mitchell fought through the hardest thing that can ever happen to an author. The only thing that's worse than having a first book that's a bomb is having a first book that's a towering success." Every time Mitchell sat down to write another novel, he felt *Who Has Seen The Wind* hanging over his shoulder. This remained true until 1981, Gibson said, when Mitchell published *How I Spent My Summer Holidays*. The novel, Gibson declared on the dust jacket, "is to *Who Has Seen The Wind* as *Huckleberry Finn* is to *Tom Sawyer*."

Mitchell produced several more novels, though none received the critical acclaim of *Summer Holidays*. Meanwhile, he also wrote plays, best known among them being *The Kite*, *Back To Beulah* and *The Black Bonspiel Of Wullie MacCrimmon*.

"W.O. as playwright is just a damn nuisance," Gibson once said, his tongue firmly in cheek. "Because if he's writing plays, he's not writing novels for me to publish." Gibson admitted that Mitchell's plays are enormously successful: "Across the country, if you put on a W.O. Mitchell play you get full houses."

"When writing a play," Mitchell said, "you're only half finished when you leave the typewriter. And then it's bounced against a director, and then there's the read-through with the kids. And you can stand apart from it better than you can from a novel. By the time you get to the dress rehearsal or the opening, you can sit in the audience and say, 'Hey, that guy's not a bad playwright.' You're that far removed from it. So it's less painful, it's collaborative. And the trick with play-writing is to hold back, and leave room for a fine director and fine actors to make their contributions."

Several people at the WordFest tribute last October drew attention to Mitchell as teacher. Besides his stint at the University of Windsor, Mitchell spent several years as head of the writing program at the Banff Centre. Alistair Macleod, a short-story writer who taught with Mitchell in Windsor, once described the novelist as an inspirational teacher: "Sometimes you get writers who are very good themselves but they are very selfish with their time or they're not interested in encouraging other, younger writers. And he's a very, very exceptional individual in that way."

L.R. (Bunny) Wright, the Edgar award-winning author of 14 novels, said Wednesday she studied with Mitchell during the mid-'70s: "This is so sad. Suddenly there's a big void." The books are still there, she said, "but for us to lose him as a teacher is a really big blow. He knew how to help other writers to find their voices, and that's a really special gift."

What about Mitchell as performer? Did the energy he expended as an entertainer, doing public readings in the tradition of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, cost him as an artist? "I don't think so," Macleod said. "Because what you do is you write first, and the writing is a very quiet and a very private act. Then when you go on stage to give a performance, as he calls it, you move from being a private person to a public person. And I think the writing is done in a very private, perhaps anguished way. And then when he gives the performance, he becomes almost someone else. So I don't think there's a contradiction at all."

Pierre Berton lauded Mitchell as performer: "The thing is, he's very, very good at it. . . . He has been preserved now on film and in television, and I think the time will come when people look back and say, 'My God, we produced a public performer named Bill Mitchell.' "

So there is no agreement -- no single image captures the man. Novelist, playwright, teacher, performer? Mitchell was all these things. Which was the face behind the mask? Turns out that's the wrong question. But the author himself both asked and answered a better one: *Who Has Seen The Wind?* W.O. Mitchell, that's who.