

# Wesley McNair: Poet

Award-winning North Sutton man stakes out "the territory around us"

IN 1976 Wesley McNair of North Sutton, the 1984 winner of the prestigious Devins Award for Poetry, had finished all the degree work he would ever do: a B.A. from Keene State in 1963, and an M.A. and an M. Litt. in 1965 and 1975 from Bread Loaf. He was about to leave for a year in Chile as a senior Fulbright lecturer in American studies.

A former high school teacher, a professor at Colby-Sawyer College since 1968, McNair had been writing fiction, and then poetry, seriously since the mid-1960s. His poetry had appeared in many periodicals, including such reputable "little magazines" as *Prairie Schooner* and *Poetry Northwest*. Still, by 1976, McNair was uncertain of his talent and "at the crossroads," as he put it.

"I needed to have somebody tell me if my poems breathed, or if I was wasting my time," he said. Some friends knew the distinguished editor and poet Donald Hall, who had recently returned to his family farm in Wilmot, and they offered to intro-

duce McNair to Hall. It was to be the most important experience in McNair's life as a poet.

"I was sort of a prematurely aging fellow desperate," McNair recalled. "I was very nervous about it. After I met him and we talked a bit, I just sheepishly pulled this thing (a small batch of poems) out of my coat and dropped it on his kitchen table. He said he would look at it.

"It turned out that he wrote me immediately. He's that way anyway. So I went to see him again; he had some drinks and a really good time. He told me he was dazzled by my poetry. . . . I'm sure he knew I needed that. I figured I'd just been to Hollywood!

"Then later he wrote me a letter and said that he wanted to make sure I knew he was serious. That it wasn't just the alcohol. He said that whenever I was ready with a full collection, he would take it to Harper & Row (where he was chief poetry consultant)," McNair remembered.

When McNair returned from Chile with a full collection of poems, Hall did recommend the manuscript to Harper. But then, starting in 1979, McNair entered what he calls a "long period of limbo." His editor at Harper left for another company, and as a result the manuscript was not published. The manuscript—through several more revisions—was an unpublished finalist in the Pittsburgh Poetry Series and the Walt Whitman Award contest. Then Carnegie-Mellon University wanted to publish it, but had to wait for delayed grant money.

Through it all, Hall remained a friend and mentor. With Hall's encouragement, McNair's work was appearing now in the finest of places—*Harvard Magazine*, *Poetry*, the *Atlantic*. But McNair began to despair of ever publishing a book. It was only this last year, when *Faces of Americans in 1853* won the Devins Award, that his work was fully recognized as the superb and original poetry that it is.

That comes from too much translation, probably, so you get that voice that doesn't seem to belong to the speaker at all."

With roots in Whitman and Frost, McNair is attracted to the tradition of the popular poet who speaks in the words and tones people use. "The poem shouldn't be something you put a necktie on," he said. "It should be something you put in your back pocket."

Like each poem in it, *Faces of Americans* is a carefully formed book. It depicts a journey into both the poet's and the nation's past. As McNair explains, the book begins with "the narrator feeling dislodged, and then he moves backwards to try to find out more about the present. Finally, . . . there's a connection with this Rufus Porter figure who makes the tone of the book change and the reentry into the present possible. . . . There's a kind of charitable vision toward the end of the book."

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McNair was competing against 360 previously screened manuscripts submitted by writers from across America. Of these, 186 were poetry. After surviving the screening processes, McNair's manuscript went to editor and author David Wagoner, who served as judge for the award this year. "McNair writes with apparent artlessness," Wagoner said, "but actually with a very well-concealed and well-controlled skill while maintaining throughout this book the tones, rhythms, and accents of American speech. He is clear and simple, yet original: a rare combination."

One of the most original qualities of *Faces of Americans* is that McNair does not write for an exclusive priesthood of poets and insiders. "I feel honored," he explained, "if someone who doesn't know what poems are, likes the poem. I want poets to like them also. But it's important to me to have the poems accessible, at least on some level. Not long ago somebody cut out a poem of mine and hung it in the post office. And although I feel embarrassed about it, I really liked that a lot too.

"I want the subject matter to feel un-literary," McNair continued. "I like popular modes of expression—Country and Western music, for example. I want to talk to people. So I start with the territory around us. . . . I want the poem to feel as if it's based on something everybody knows about. I also like in poetry, though, a little bit of shock: How can this poem be about that?"

Anything is grist for McNair's mill. He writes about television, country people and landscapes, American history, art and artists, comics, gas stations, dumps, fat people, beggars, you name it.

"I really don't like playing the poet," McNair added. "Poetry today has a certain manner to it, kind of ghostly, disembodied.

WHAT DOES THE poet find on his journey to talk to us about? Above all he finds the continual dismantling of our world, myths, and ideals by time and change. Such change may be represented by the momentary world as it whirls past us in our cars, or it may be the consuming flames that "take the air like sails" as they destroy a barn in Enfield whose windows stare "into the space of another century," or it may be the neighbor who eternally "redeems" his property by backhoe.

"The poem itself holds the world together," McNair commented, "even as the world is coming apart. This gets to the idea finally of what form in poetry is for, what it's about. There's a form, and there's a formlessness that's teasing about the edges of the poem too." McNair's poems stand as continuance against the erosions of man, death, decay. His movement into the personal and national past is a quest for the significant event that, once captured, makes the otherwise unretrievable past live again.

Early in his book the poet learns that the forces of time and dissolution are not merely out there, but in direct contact with oneself. In "Leaving the Country House to the Landlord, Five Years Later," McNair recalls the experience of being turned out of a house his family loved. Even as his family packs and leaves, the landlord (here the destroyer) and his family are moving in and radically altering the landscape and house.

*When he puts his chain saw once  
into our shade tree, it twists and falls.  
Its branches look up startled  
from the ground.*

Like a recurring dream, the poem gives the event a certain permanence and meaning.

*And the dream goes on. It will not  
stop. I can't awaken.  
We are still moving out of the old cape.  
In the front yard another tree  
has foundered. It leans on one side like  
an exhausted fish.*

This destruction of a personal idyll is no more avoidable than any other of the stern necessities of change and time.

Meanwhile, the landlord

judges in his baseball cap the calves  
of the boy, how well they know  
a motor. . . .

and when he shouts

commands that drift sleepy as bubbles,  
inaudible above the raging saw,  
we both can hear them say:

"You are awake. And what you've  
dreamed  
are your five gentle years."

There is a strong elegiac element in McNair's book—remembrances of people and things past, of loss and death. And it is his sense of loss that sends the poet back in time.

"MEMORY IS WHAT creates the identity of the individual, a region, and also a nation," McNair said. "The things we remember, determine who we are. It is interesting to me to go back to the things, as kind of hieroglyphs, out of which my identity was created . . . then to explore them and find out what they mean. And as it is interesting on a personal level, it is also interesting on a regional and national level as well. I ended up examining the past of a region which I could find in the present, and the past of a nation too in which that region existed. It is a deliberate effort to explore the way the event in the past shapes the present."

On his journey, McNair discovered not only the tragic, but the comic as well, particularly as he examines old and new American myths. In part two of his book, his sense of humor is in full play. Take for example "Hair on Television":

*On the soap opera the doctor  
explains to the young woman with  
cancer*

*that each day is beautiful.*

*Hair lifts from their heads  
like clouds, like something to eat.*

*It is the hair of the married couple  
getting in touch with their real  
feelings . . .*

*the hair of young people on the beach  
drinking Cokes and falling in love.*

*And the man who took the laxative  
and waters his garden*

*next day with the hose wears the hair  
so dark and wavy even his grand-*

*children are amazed,  
and the woman who never dreamed  
minipads*

*could be so convenient wears it.*

*For the hair is changing people's lives.  
It is growing like wheat above the faces*

*of game show contestants . . .*

*and the news teams bringing all the  
news faster*

*and faster, and the new breed of  
cops . . .*

*proud to be among the literally mil-  
lions of Americans everywhere  
who have tried the hair, compared the  
hair, and will never go back  
to life before the active, the caring, the  
successful, the incredible hair.*

McNair is equally capable of poking fun at himself, as in "The Bald Spot," or at all of us and himself at the same time, as in "The Thugs of Old Comics." The thugs look up from their prison (as Superman clears one more tall building), crying "We're trapped!" and

*thinking, like you, how it all gets down  
to the same old shit: no fun, no dough,  
no power to rise out of their bodies.*

"It's easy to write gags," McNair said of a certain kind of "wise acre poetry" being written today. "But if the humor doesn't have a good deal of complication, I doubt it's worth using it. It has to go

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## The Faces of Americans in 1853

for Sacvan

Let us analyze the American. . . . The American head is generally large, which the phrenologists attribute to increased development of the brain. There are all varieties of face, though the oval predominates. . . . The facial features are, for the most part, more sharply chiselled with us than with any other people.

—“Are We a Good-Looking People?” (1853)

When you turned  
to the farmhand who hailed you  
from the field you could see the face  
of the American.

Everyone had the face.  
There was an appreciation  
for the way each chin perfected  
an oval.

All day in his shop  
the blacksmith  
swung his hammer laughing  
at the nondescript faces of Europe.

At night in her home  
the mother  
admired the heads  
of her children, already large.

As far away  
as Kansas  
their chiselled features rose  
up from the horizon.

Indians who looked down at the faces  
of those they had killed  
with their arrows  
wept at their mistake.

## Mina Bell's Cows

O where are Mina Bell's cows who gave no milk  
and grazed on her dead husband's farm?  
Each day she walked with them into the field,  
loving their swayback dreaminess more  
than the quickness of any dog or chicken.  
Each night she brought them grain in the dim barn,  
holding their breath in her hands.  
O when the lightning struck Daisy and Bets,

her son dug such great holes in the yard  
She could not bear to watch him.  
And when the baby, April, growing old  
and wayward, fell down the hay chute,  
Mina just sat in the kitchen, crying "Ape,  
Ape," as if she called all three cows,  
her walleyed girls who never would come home.

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## A Dream of Herman

for Diane

I was driving the old Dodge wagon  
again, with Coke cans rolling  
to the front at stop signs,  
and you rubbing the dash  
every so often to thank the car  
for not needing the spare tire  
we hadn't fixed. We were on a trip  
that felt like going to your father's camp, only  
we never got there and didn't care.  
It was a beautiful day, just enough wind  
coming into the back to make the kids  
squint with pure pleasure  
as it scribbled their hair, and your mother  
patted them, saying what a nice ride it was  
in the odd, small voice  
she used only for your father.  
It was then in the rearview mirror I saw him,  
wearing the brown cardigan he always wore  
and putting on the shining bell  
of his saxophone as if just back  
from an intermission. You were smiling,  
and suddenly I saw the reason  
we were traveling together  
and did not want to stop  
was Herman, who just sat there  
in the cargo space, breathing the scale  
until the whole family sat back  
in their seats, and then he lifted his sax  
and opened one more song as wide  
and delicate as the floating trees.

beyond the gag. . . . Humor is good if it  
can introduce a richness of tone. I want  
people to laugh, but even if you're laughing  
at the people in the poem, sooner or later  
through humor, you begin to enter their  
situation with sympathy."

**T**HE THIRD PART of McNair's  
book takes us into America's past,  
especially when the poetry turns to early  
artists like Edward Hicks, Fitz Hugh Lane,  
and Rufus Porter. The title poem, "The  
Faces of Americans in 1853," addresses the

arrogance and narcissism in our past, just  
as earlier poems examined those qualities in  
our time. But McNair understands the  
dream of early Americans that caused them  
to see themselves as beautiful New Men  
destined to shape the future, and he can at  
once disparage yet sympathize with the  
idealism of a painter like Hicks whose bear  
"feels foolish/to be wearing claws," and  
whose unearthly leopards and wolves only  
snatch at dreams of their bodily powers.  
Likewise, McNair writes with under-  
standing of Fitz Hugh Lane's obsession to  
gain the perfect perspective, to seek some  
spiritual truth in nature, even though his

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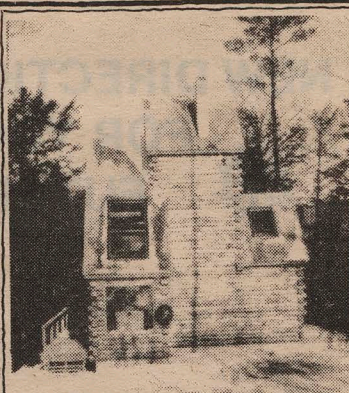
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drive blinds him to earlier America's imperialism and pogroms.

Yet such idealism and blind obsession never appear to limit McNair himself as an artist. To him, the poetic vocation seems to be truth-telling, the direct and honest confrontation with the good and the bad he finds in our history and our lives. That is not to say that the poet does not dream, but that his imagination, above all, sees. The poet is perhaps more like another historical figure we meet, Rufus Porter—the inventor, dreamer, odd-jobs-man, teacher, and artist who makes his home where he is, "feeling so damned free/ in my own mind," unfettered by social codes and accepted limits.

It is this Porter figure who makes the affirmations of the final part of McNair's prize-winning book possible. McNair said of this section's title poem "Where I Live," "it's about a certain kind of vision that happens outside of a code, which allows contradiction and mismatch (such as a colonial house with a picture window and a lavender window box). . . . Maybe that kind of poem happens as a result of the earlier ones . . . becoming aware of what the visions were in the past, and treating them with respect, but seeing what you have to give up to have a (codified) vision; seeing what people lose when they shape the world in their vision."

McNair comes to live in this place that allows for contradiction, this place where our codes break down and are supplanted by something more alive and intricate than the codes.

*Beyond the landscaped streets,  
beyond the last colonial gas station  
and unsolved by zoning  
is a road. It will take you  
to old farmhouses and trees  
with car-tire swings.  
Signs will announce hairdressing  
and nightcrawlers.  
The timothy grass will run beside you  
and the way to where I live.*

**M**CNAIR has nearly completed a second book of poetry. But he is not rushing it. Meanwhile, his poems appear in nationally prominent periodicals. "The most important thing is having the patience to finally arrive at the end of a poem," he said. "I have a process of selection of my own. I wait a long time until the thing is ready. It is really not hot-house poetry. It takes a long time to get that deep form. For a long time I thought that I was a screw-up because it took so long . . . and I wasn't a poet at all. People I knew cranked out poems left and right. . . . But it takes a while to write good poems, if they're going to hold up.

His long-range aspiration is more formidable. It is above all to be "a very good poet, the best I can be, to have a real range of tone . . . and to express all the emotional life that it's possible for me to express." Perhaps McNair will achieve that formidable goal. For along with Donald Hall, other eminent poets and critics believe in McNair's work and promise. Gerald Costanzo, poetry editor at Carnegie-Mellon Press (a former Devins winner himself) has said that *Faces of Americans* is the best book to win the award in ages. And renowned Frost scholar James Cox of Dartmouth, to take just one further example, speaks of the "wonderful breath of humor running or breathing through (McNair's) imaginative grasp of life." Of McNair's book in progress, Cox said that the poems "are so delicate and at the same time so strong, which is what poetry has to be and what it truly is." McNair, Cox added, can "visualize . . . meaning in what is nothing less than vision itself." ■

By Bob Begiebing

*Bob Begiebing is a teacher and freelance writer who lives in Newfields, N.H.*

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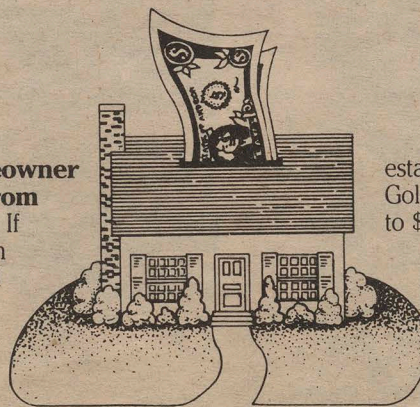
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