

COLOURFUL LIVES
Trudeau, Cockburn &
Gildiner—plus Nelvana

LRC

LITERARY REVIEW OF CANADA

\$6.50
Vol. 23, No. 1
January/February 2015

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Sending billions home

How immigrant workers' remittance payments reshape the world

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so why don't we?

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LRC design concept by Jackie Young/INK

FOUNDED IN 1991 BY P.A. DUTIL

The LRC is published 10 times a year by the Literary
Review of Canada Charitable Organization.

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

Individuals in Canada \$56/year plus GST/HST.
(Libraries and institutions in Canada \$68/year plus
GST/HST.) Outside Canada, please pay \$86/year for
individuals, or \$98 for libraries and institutions.

SUBSCRIPTIONS AND CIRCULATION

Literary Review of Canada

P.O. Box 8, Station K, Toronto ON M4P 2G1

literaryreview@cxcontact.com

tel: 416-932-5081 • reviewcanada.ca

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ISSN 1188-7494

The Literary Review of Canada is indexed in the
Canadian Literary Periodicals Index and the Canadian
Index and is distributed by Distcor and Magazines
Canada.

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FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the financial
support of the Government
of Canada through the
Canada Periodical Fund of
the Department of Canadian
Heritage.

We acknowledge the assistance
of the OMDC Magazine Fund,
an initiative of Ontario Media
Development Corporation.



Thoughtful Troubadour

A Canadian icon on his music, faith and turbulent times.

MARK D. DUNN

Rumours of Glory

Bruce Cockburn and Greg King

HarperCollins

532 pages, softcover

ISBN 9780061969126

ONE DAY A FRAMED PHOTOGRAPH OF A bespectacled guy with a big goofy grin appeared in the little guitar shop where I loitered after school. The man in the photo held a guitar, recently purchased at that very shop, and the shop owner—a patient guy with floppy hair and an 1980s squirrel-tail moustache—posed beside him, beaming. I interpreted the picture, and its prominence on the front counter, as the shop owner's evidence that music stores were sites of commerce, not just places in which to hang out and feign coolness. To personalize the matter further, I recognized the guitar in the picture as the one I had been eyeing for the better part of a year, the guitar I had been saving up to buy. A drummer friend who humoured these weekly visits to the guitar shop saw the picture too. "Who's that?" he said. "Bruce Cockburn," said shop owner. "Never heard of him," said my friend. "That's alright," said the guitar guy, his patience wavering. "He hasn't heard of you, either."

I had heard of Bruce Cockburn, although in those dark analog days I had not put a face to his song, which had been on near-constant rotation in my head since I first heard it months before. I studied the photograph with new interest and imagined the jangling, crystalline melody of "Wondering Where the Lions Are" coming from the very instrument out of which I had coaxed only a warbling D-chord. Two things were clear to me: the guitar I had been coveting was in the right hands, and I desperately needed to start practising.

Bruce Cockburn is a stealth artist. His work has been lauded around the world, purchased by millions and influenced generations of musicians, writers and thinkers. Yet it is surprising how many people have only just heard of the guy. But ask even a moderate Cockburn fan their favourite album and be prepared for a protracted mining operation of recall. It usually begins with the first Bruce Cockburn album they knew; then, of course, there's *Humans*, oh, and *Joy Will Find a Way*; what about *World of Wonders*? And *Night Vision*, the bluesy one

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with Alex Colville's painting on the cover. And *The Charity of Night*. And *Further Adventures Of*. And...

A simple question becomes an archaeological expedition that ends with the realization that Bruce Cockburn's body of work is bottomless, wider than the sky and the greater part of our musical landscape.

If this world of ours was rational and fair, the publication of Cockburn's much delayed and hungrily anticipated memoir would have been heralded by a parliamentary decree and a statutory holiday. Cockburn could have written a book of haiku about 19th-century penguin taxidermy and many people would have been grateful for it. Fortunately, in *Rumours of Glory*, co-authored with journalist Greg King, the songwriter has served up something of wider interest: simply, one of the strongest and most literate music memoirs published in recent memory.

Cockburn could have written a book of haiku about 19th-century penguin taxidermy and many people would have been grateful for it.

From the first pages, it is clear that Cockburn is no mind-scrambled rocker. Straight off, he confronts the most widely held Cockburn clichés, his Christianity, his activism and the "folksinger" label that have followed him throughout his career. In these areas, Cockburn questions the assumptions of modern life as he questions and challenges his personal beliefs and philosophical positions. It is a practice that continues throughout the book. The author's personal search extends beyond himself. His privileges and opportunities are contrasted with the challenges of life on Earth. "We are," he writes of the human experience, "on a great journey, through darkness and dawn, across time, though sometimes I fear that our journey is about to end. We must not succumb to fear or avarice; we must continue to embrace life, seek light, and gather in the charity of night." No matter its manifestation—in music, social justice, religious identity, sexuality—Cockburn's quest is spiritual. Matters of the spirit, belief and faith form the book's central concern. In this way, *Rumours of Glory* makes for a unique rock autobiography, one of ideas not accolades.

Bruce Cockburn has never been afraid to challenge his audience. There is no other writer who could craft a clingingly melodic tune to the lyrics, "Sinister cynical instrument / Who makes the gun into a sacrament— / The only response to the deification / Of tyranny by so-called 'developed' nations' / Idolatry of ideology." Gilbert and Sullivan

might have matched the cadence, but not the bare-bladed fearlessness of Cockburn's "Call It Democracy," a song that has sent many listeners to the dictionary, a song that contains as much political and economic insight as an introductory poli-sci course. Cockburn refers to the political songs for which he has become known and for which he is most frequently remembered—"Gavin's Woodpile," "Rocket Launcher" and "If a Tree Falls," for example—as "witnessing songs." While he is identified with these song types, Cockburn does not consider himself to be a protest singer. He writes,

It [the song] has to be art. There's an important line to be drawn between art and propaganda, a line easily blurred ... I want to paint sonic pictures of what I encounter, feel, and think is true ... The injustices that spike my visions are in the songs because they matter, because they have touched me.

Cockburn has redefined, and set a high standard for, what it means to be a socially engaged artist. This engagement is seen in the folk music world where activism grows naturally from the music and the music from social activism. But in popular music, politics is generally thought to polarize audiences and suppress record sales. There are exceptions, of course, examples of rock stars who strut their concerns on the world stage. In Cockburn's case, political engagement has become something of a brand. The singer jokes that this practice has given his long-suffering manager, Bernie Finkelstein, more than a little grief over the decades. Cockburn writes, "my memory of Bernie becomes two arms stretched heavenward surrounding one big pair of rolling eyes." Not only has Cockburn engaged the controversies of the world through his art, but he has also actively avoided many of the promotional activities required of popular musicians. From the beginning, he was hard-working, of course, releasing seven albums from 1970 to 1977, but instead of playing the talk show circuit, Cockburn and his then wife Kitty climbed into a camper to explore the continent. "Anything that touches me with a sense of meaning is likely to make its way into a song," he writes.

For Cockburn fans, *Rumours of Glory* is a necessary addition to the man's work, giving insight into the composition of all those gem-perfect songs and context into the events that inspired them. It is also simply a great book about the search for meaning and beauty in a world that is increasingly confusing. Like the music that runs through it, *Rumours of Glory* is an inspired offering of lucid reflection in turbulent times. LRC