

OPTIC HEART

A BIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET AVISON
Volume One: 1918-1977



David A. Kent

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David Kent's superb biography of Margaret Avison is a landmark in Canadian literary and cultural studies. Based on unparalleled research into the poet's life and work, every chapter brims with psychological and literary insights, and the biography as a whole displays a breathtaking command and integration of contexts and details—all couched in a highly readable style that will appeal to general as well as specialist readers. Margaret Avison has long awaited a biographer able to capture and convey the richness and complexity of her intellectual, religious, and spiritual life, and in David Kent, she has found him. Without question *Optic Heart* will remain the definitive biography of one of Canada's very finest poets. 📖 D.M.R. Bentley, Western University

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Northrop Frye
Victoria University Library

As an undergraduate at Victoria College, [Avison's brother] Ted became friends with Northrop Frye, who sometimes joined the family for Sunday dinner. Avison sketches one such visit in her autobiography:

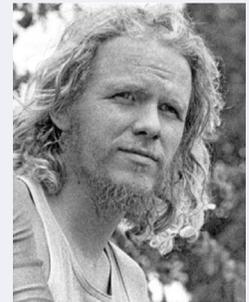
Northrop Frye had a small, piquant face, a big cloud of fair hair around his head. He was very shy. Before dinner he sat on the piano bench with his back to any threat of social interaction, thumbed through several music books, found some of Mother's Bach preludes and fugues and proceeded to play them from the first to whichever one he'd reached when Mother summoned us all to dinner. (*I Am Here*, 61-2)

Norrie Frye would later be an important person in Avison's academic and creative life. *Optic Heart*, p. 46



Denise Levertov
Courtesy of New Directions

On 10 July 1967 Avison responded to a request by Denise Levertov for a poem to include in the War Resistance League calendar, a fundraiser for the pacifist organization that was protesting American involvement in the Vietnam War. Avison described the poem as "hasty, so scrappable if out of range still." She also told Levertov it was "good to see your name on the announcements of Expo's poetry meeting Sept 6-10—no more was needed to make me try to play in as a visitor to Expo on those days." The poem in question was probably "Janitor Working on a Threshold" from *The Dumbfounding*, which appears on October 21 of the 1968 Peace Calendar. *Optic Heart*, p. 329



bpNichol
Photo by David Hynlinsky

[I]n 1963, as a stack-boy in the library, his job was to "reshelve returned volumes from endless carts brought down from the front desk." In this role he encountered Avison in the lower level of the library where she had a study carrel as she worked on her graduate course assignments. To her, bp, then only about twenty years old, was refreshing fun, and she certainly welcomed some distraction from academic demands. She knew that in graduate school "enjoyment must be part of work, or it's essentially a waste of time" (*I Am Here*, 154-5). For bp, Avison was already an established poet: "she was a tremendous influence. When I got into *Winter Sun* and read those poems—once again it was an education to the ear." *Optic Heart*, p. 291