

SANDRA MARTIN

P.K. Page Irwin
1916-2010



As elegant as she was curious, as vibrant as she was discreet, as prolific as she was experimental, P.K. Page, the poet, painter and prose writer - of every form imaginable - was a supremely creative person. "Dam it there," she said, jabbing one arm with a finger from the opposite hand, during an interview in her Victoria home in 2008, and "it comes out there. I can't not be doing something. I'm not a johnny-one-note."

At the time she was 91, although she could easily have passed for 75, with her casually waved hair and bright skin. She was wearing a chunky silver necklace, an azure silk blouse and loose fitting black trousers, as she sipped a drink and exchanged views on poetics, politics and personalities - the very model of vigorously engaged old age.

A sharp-eyed observer of the world and of her own species, she wrote more than 35 books, including two as recently as last November - a long poem called *Cullen* and a trilogy of fables for children called *The Sky Tree*. She won the Governor-General's Award for *The Metal and the Flower*, back in 1954 and was short-listed for the Griffin Poetry Prize in 2003 for *Planet Earth: Poems Selected and New*. The title poem had been selected two years previously to mark the United Nations International Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations and had been read aloud simultaneously in New York, the Antarctic and the South Pacific.

Under her married name, P.K. Irwin, she created a large oeuvre of paintings, from whimsical to metaphysical, minimalist to lush, which are now held by the National Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario and private collectors across the country.

After growing up as a British immigrant on the prairie, she led a bohemian life in Montreal during the Second World War, writing short stories, working on a literary magazine with poet and constitutional lawyer Frank Scott, and honing her modernist voice. In 1950, she married magazine and newspaper publisher Arthur Irwin -her "rock" - and embarked on a completely different kind of life as a diplomat's wife in Australia, Brazil, Mexico and Guatemala. In the decades when cultural nationalism was gestating in Canada, she was out of the loop living mainly abroad in exotic postings, but on her return, she settled in Victoria, once thought of as an outpost of Empire, and, after an awkward transition, found a secure and significant place in Canadian letters.

"She's a very important touchstone for writers," Michael Ondaatje said in 1991. "She's raucous and funny in person, but her head is another reality. She has a very odd-angled vision of the world, tragic and comic, the imagined world lying side by side with the real."

In an online blog, the writer and critic Rosemary Sullivan commented: "No poet had a more impeccable sense of timing. Somehow, when P.K. Page broke the syntax of a line - and you heard it best when she read her poems - something cracked in you and opened out to the light... She understood that the rhythm of poetry was profoundly tied to the rhythms of the human brain, touching something archaic, something primordial in us..."

The late literary critic Constance Rooke identified her, decades ago, as quite simply: "Canada's finest poet." Ms. Page had a plainer estimation of her own talents. "I don't think I am after fame although I would love to write one poem that is really, really good, but I don't think I will," she

confided two years ago. Obviously not suffering from megalomania, or what she called "the Irving Layton syndrome," she did allow that she had written "a couple of fairly good poems, but I would like to write a really good poem, but I can't force it."

Atlantic crossings

Patricia Kathleen Page was born in the middle of the First World War, the elder child of Lionel Frank Page, a soldier, and Rose Laura (née Whitehouse), a homemaker. Her father, who was born in England, had immigrated to Canada when he was about 19, after failing to get into the Royal Military Academy. He settled in Red Deer, Alta., where he acquired a piece of land and met Ms. Whitehouse, who had arrived from England to visit her brother, the local bank manager. The protective brother refused to let his sister marry Mr. Page because he had an overdraft, and she returned to England, secretly engaged. The First World War reunited the couple when he enlisted in the First Canadian Expeditionary Force and was shipped overseas. They married on his first leave, just before he was sent to the front lines, where he won three DSOs and was Mentioned in Despatches several times.

By war's end, her father was commanding officer of the 50th Battalion. He brought his family back to Canada in 1919 and eventually settled in Calgary, where she attended a private girls school that bored her prodigiously. That's when she began writing essays and poems for the school paper, "hiding behind her initials because my basketball-playing friends would have gone ape if they knew and I wouldn't have had a chance of having a date," she said later.

Fed up with school, she persuaded her parents to send her to England to live with a feminist aunt, as an alternative to university. Ms. Page, who was 17, spent a lot of time alone, going to theatre, museums and galleries, reading writers such as Virginia Woolf, and writing poetry. *The Moth* was published in *The Observer* in December, 1934.

After a year of freedom in England, absorbing all the cultural things "that were in my soul when I was born - must have been because I had damn little knowledge of them," she became homesick for Canada when she spotted a prairie crocus among all the roses and delphiniums at the Chelsea Flower Show. By now her parents had left Calgary and the foothills she loved and moved to Saint John, a town that she found claustrophobic because "the forest came right down on you."

Her father, by now a major-general in the Canadian army, gave her a typewriter and she enrolled in a business school. Between 1935 and 1941, she wrote more than 300 poems, several plays and short stories and the first draft of *The Sun and The Moon*, a romantic novel which she later published under the pseudonym Judith Cape.

When she told her father that she wanted to be a writer and to live in Montreal, he offered her \$85 a month - a princely sum, and one he could probably not afford - because he had faith in her creativity and her talent. She rented a room in a boarding house on Sherbrooke Street close to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and worked as a filing clerk and other "stupid jobs."

But it was not all drudgery and deprivation, despite the war. At a party she met one of the editors of *Preview*, a poetry magazine that had been founded early in 1942 by Patrick Anderson and Frank Scott, the poet, constitutional lawyer and social democrat. She quickly became a member of the editorial board, along with the poet A.M. Klein, and found herself "walking in fairly deep water" and "growing up awfully fast." She was "suddenly being flung headlong into Marxism and reading all the Russians in one fell swoop and trying to catch up, and at the same time very, very interested in art. It was heady stuff, I can tell you."

The *Preview* poets were perceptive critics of her work and under their guidance she dropped her mannered Georgian style, embraced modernism and indulged her covert visual side. She published her socially progressive poem *The Stenographers* in the July, 1942, issue of the magazine and was awarded the Oscar Blumenthal Award by Poetry magazine in Chicago for five poems that were published in the August, 1944, edition. Her work also appeared in *Unit of Five*, a collection that introduced the work of Louis Dudek, Ronald Hambleton, Raymond Souster and James Wreford.

By then, she and Frank Scott were lovers. This affair, which lasted approximately three years, was the pivotal romantic attachment of her life until she married magazine publisher Arthur Irwin in 1950. Eventually Ms. Page realized that, much as Mr. Scott loved her, he was not going to separate from his wife, the painter Marian Dale Scott.

"I couldn't go on any longer. It was an impossibly restrictive, uptight society. I couldn't talk about it and I finally thought if I don't get out of here I am going to have a breakdown." She went home to her family in Halifax in May, 1944, where her father, at 59, was commander-in-chief of Allied Command. A few days later, he died from a massive heart attack. She was 27, doubly devastated, and responsible for taking care of her widowed mother.

Beginning again

After getting her mother "cozied down" in Victoria, on the opposite side of the country, she thought she "could begin again." In 1946, the same year that the Ryerson Press published *As Ten As Twenty*, her first collection of poetry, her mother gave her an encouraging push by saying: "You shouldn't be here. In the morning I shall expect to see two or three letters applying for jobs in the East."

That is why Ms. Page applied for a job working as a scriptwriter on documentary films at the National Film Board, which was then located in Ottawa. The NFB was in turmoil, as indeed was all of Ottawa and much of the country, in the aftermath of cipher clerk Igor Gouzenko's defection from the Soviet embassy. When the left-leaning film board came under suspicion, the government appointed Arthur Irwin, legendary Maclean's editor and publisher, commissioner with a mandate to clean out the (imaginary, as it turned out) Communists and rebuild the NFB's image.

Coincidentally, Ms. Page had decided to leave the agency, wanting a change after nearly four years of writing scripts. Mr. Irwin invited her to dinner to see if he could persuade her to stay. He failed, but they became friends. On one excursion to the Gatineau, he turned to her and said "take

my hand" because the ground was rough. Nearly 60 years later, she could still "feel the steadiness of his hand in mine," and how it "was symbolic of something big," something larger and more significant than mere safety. They married that December. He was 52, a widower with three grown children and an extremely successful career; she was single, 34, and wanting to follow her muse.

By the time he left the NFB in 1953 to become a diplomat for the Canadian government, she had written a second volume of poetry, *The Metal and the Flower*. She heard the news that it had won the Governor-General's Award in Australia where her husband was the high commissioner. Just at the time when the Canada Council began its program of support for artists and writers in this country and Ms. Page was beginning to earn recognition for her work, she was living abroad, trapped in protocol and endless receptions. For the next decade she was the ambassador's wife in Brazil, Mexico and Guatemala, until her husband retired from the diplomatic service in 1964 and they returned to Canada, settling in Victoria where Mr. Irwin became publisher of the Victoria Times (now the Times-Colonist).

Although, even by her own admission she wrote some "quite good poems" including *Arras* in Australia, the opposite was true when she lived in Brazil from 1957-59 in the "pink palace" that was the Canadian ambassador's residence on the outskirts of Rio. There her literary muse went silent, a condition she mourned in *A Brazilian Journal*, her travel diaries. "What to do about writing?" she worried. "Is it all dead?"

As a "cool, collected, fair" Canadian she was drawn like a moth to the "hot, uncollected, unfair" Brazilians, the steamy heat, the vibrant colours, the seductive music, the expressive people and the mystery of an unfamiliar country and language. Always an imagistic poet, she began to respond to her new situation as a visual artist, creating Matisse-like pictures of interiors and landscapes. "It didn't take the place of writing," she said later, but the "wound was greatly staunches by a drawing pen." To reflect this new form of expression she used her married name, P.K. Irwin, as her painter's signature.

Brazil resolved another creative impasse. Ms. Page longed to have children - "it practically broke my bloody heart," she said later. After years of frustration, she was told by a gynecologist in Brazil that a surgical intervention would probably fix her infertility problem. By then though, "Arthur was 60 and I was 42 and we were living a false life" on the diplomatic circuit. And so, she declined the offer. "From that moment on, having made the decision myself, I was at peace." Perhaps, but when asked many years later if she had any regrets, the only one she mentioned was not having children. And then with a flash of her customary verve she said: "I don't spend much time regretting. My life is fairly active. I've always got something going on. What is the purpose of living if I am not making the most of what is given to me."

Finally back on Canadian soil, in a city in which she had last lived with her widowed mother two decades earlier, Ms. Page began writing poetry again although it took a while for the local literary community, then dominated by the late poet Robin Skelton, to accept her as one of their own.

A freer form

She always attributed the return of her poetic voice to hearing English speech rhythms again, but being released from the girdle of diplomatic life must also have eased her into a freer, more colloquial and more visionary form.

After living past 101, Mr. Irwin died in Victoria on Aug. 9, 1999. At the time Ms. Page told The Toronto Star: "He's the centre of my life and I will be bereft without him." Ever the realist, she added, "He had to go," referring to her husband's several infirmities. "I can only feel infinite relief for him." In the decade since his death, Ms. Page lived on in their home in remarkably robust health, creativity and self-education, studying Carl Jung, the lateral thinker Edward de Bono and Sufism and reading the poet Rumi.

At a mere 86, Ms. Page travelled to Toronto in 2003 to hear the judges for the Griffin Poetry Prize commend her poems as "elegant, rigorous" and "fresh." Although they gave the prize to Margaret Avison, they declared that Ms. Page's poems were "daring in scope, meticulous in accomplishment, and boldly moral."

Before the public readings she found herself in need of a safety pin and borrowed one from Prudence Emery, then publicist for the awards. Some months later, Ms. Emery visited the poet at her home in Victoria and was delighted to receive a link necklace fashioned from safety pins. "Compound interest," Ms. Page announced with her wry smile and a slight lifting of her eyebrows.

In the last several months, her short-term memory was becoming sporadic, a sad diminution of a beautiful mind. And yet she remained mostly knowing, cheerful and curious, acknowledging in a letter to a friend that she was "breaking up," but "undramatically and slowly. Quite weird, the end of life. Never knowing if you are going to wake up dead. Unknown territory."

P.K. Page

Patricia Kathleen (P.K.) Page was born in Swanage, Dorset, on Nov. 23, 1916. She died at home in Victoria early in the morning of Jan. 14, 2010. Ms. Page, who was 93, leaves her brother Michael, three stepchildren and her extended family.

Written by Sandra Martin

Published in the Globe and Mail

"Literacy icon's poems were 'daring in scope, meticulous...and boldly moral'"

January 16, 2010

(Author's title given as of the time of writing)