

**James Crerar Reaney**  
**1926-2008**



Dr. James C. Reaney, MA, PhD (University of Toronto), Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Western Ontario, died June 11, 2008, in London, Ontario, after a lengthy illness. He was 81.

Dr. Reaney was born on his family's farm in South Easthope near Stratford, Ontario, September 1, 1926. He grew up to become one of Canada's best known poets, playwrights, librettos, authors, and professors, enjoying literary success for over 50 years.

He studied English at University College, University of Toronto, where he received a MA in 1949. He taught English at the University of Manitoba from 1949 until 1956, after which time he returned to Toronto to complete a doctorate in 1958. His thesis, titled *The Influence of Spenser on Yeats*, was supervised by Northrop Frye whose work on literary criticism, symbolism and the structure of romance remained an important influence on Reaney's teaching and writing.

In 1960, he began his long career as a Professor of English at the University of Western Ontario. In the same year, he published the first issue of *Alphabet*, a literary magazine featuring poetry, stories, art, essays, and reviews. The semi-annual magazine was dedicated to 'the iconography of the imagination' and was in publication for 10 years.

In 1949, at age 23, while still finishing his studies, Reaney won his first of three Governor General's Awards for Literary Merit for the book of poetry *The Red Heart*. He received the same award in 1958 for *A Suit of Nettles* and a joint award for *Twelve Letters to a Small Town* and *The Killdeer and Other Plays* was received in 1962. Reaney published numerous other works which received critical acclaim and went on to influence the people and culture of Canada.

Reaney got much of his inspiration from the regional history of Southwestern Ontario, where he lived for most of his life. He is well known for the trilogy of plays he wrote about the 1880 Donnelly family massacre near Lucan, Ontario, named *Sticks and Stones*, *The St. Nicholas Hotel*, and *Handcuffs*. The trilogy first toured cross-Canada from Vancouver to Halifax in 1975. The plays continue to show regularly in Canada today and have been produced internationally. Reaney also wrote a non-fiction book about the events, *The Donnellys: A Tipperary Vendetta in Victorian Ontario*.

In addition, he coauthored (with musician John Beckwith) several operas, including *Night-Blooming Cereus* (1960), *The Shivaree* (1982) and *Crazy to Kill* (1988). His play *Colours in the Dark* was produced at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in 1967, and his adaptation of *Alice through the Looking-Glass* was staged in 1994 and 1996. *Sticks and Stones* was also staged there in 2005.

Reaney's creativity was not limited to the written word. A few months before his death, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario, mounted a show called *The Iconography of the Imagination*, comprised of fifty landscapes, drawings and sketches that Reaney had completed from the 1940s to the 1990s.

He became an officer of the Order of Canada in 1976 and a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1978. He also received honorary degrees from Carleton (D Litt 1975), McMaster (D Litt 1979), Brock (Doctor of Laws 1991) and Western (D Litt 1992).

The University of Western Ontario holds the James Reaney fonds, including records illustrating Reaney's academic, literary and theatrical activities.

At the time of his death, Reaney was survived by his wife, poet Colleen Thilbaudeau, two children, two grandchildren and two siblings.

*Credits to the University of Waterloo*