

Preface

A great mystery lies at the heart of every life. Biography, as it approaches the mystery in search of understanding, should go carefully and reverently. At best it can offer intuitions, flashes of insight. The writer is, after all, describing a geography of the soul, an entire universe, equipped only with the crude instruments that come to hand.

Biography fails when the researcher, blithely unaware of his own prejudices, sets forth in pursuit of knowledge of his subject. An ocean of facts can be coloured by opinions and values, and by the selectivity implicit in the author's subconscious perceptions of the shape of reality. In the process a great deal of truth can be lost. The sympathetic, the hostile, or the ambivalent biographer faces the identical problem, for the truth of a life is deep and difficult to grasp.

Some lives offer us a plenitude of meaning, communicated to us through their creative works and their own self-reflections. Kurelek's autobiography, *Someone With Me*, and those of his art books containing autobiographical elements, tell us much about him. And yet a person writing about himself can remain unaware of the full significance of his own labours, his sacrifices, his greatness, and his weakness. In this regard, biography can be of some assistance, as long as we keep in mind the essential mystery. I have tried to express here a sense of the person he was, impelled by a profound respect for him while retaining, I hope, a certain healthy caution about my own interpretations. Though I came to know him personally only during the final year of his life, everything about the conversations we shared, and about his presence, amply confirmed his writings. In this book, my own small piece of a much larger mosaic, I have frequently

quoted from his autobiography in the hope that his own words, combined with his art, will impart a greater sense of who he was.

He was an intensely private man, introverted, shy, self-effacing. And yet he could be astonishingly candid when relating details about his interior wounds, sins, and his long struggle for mental and spiritual health. A person who dares to enter the public arena in such a naked condition exposes himself to attack and misinterpretation. This was the risk Kurelek knowingly took in his desire that his sufferings might be an encouragement for others. He spoke as a witness, as a sign of contradiction and a sign of hope, at a period of history when it seemed that people were no longer interested in the truths that had rescued him.

That he was a great artist is beyond doubt. That he was a man of prophetic gifts is often denied, when it is not ignored altogether. It should be remembered that the artist and the prophet are human beings — with all the frailty this implies — called to deliver a word to a people who do not hear, do not see. Such lives are often heroic, and especially so when the subject is at once an artist and a prophet. William Kurelek's struggle to reconcile those two absolutes has left an indelible mark upon his times.