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**Review Article**  
**Poetry in Atlantic Canada**

We've come a long way since the struggling Loyalist, Joseph Stansbury, poetically warned against settlement in Nova Scotia. For him toil was "in vain" under "piercing, wet, and wintry skies," and shelter was "a sordid shed/Of birchen bark" which but "Expos'd [one] to every wind that blew." Unable to adapt himself to the rigours of the Maritimes, Stansbury eventually settled in New York, but was there poetically uninspired. Since then, poets as diverse as Joseph Howe, Oliver Goldsmith, Peter Fisher, John Hunter-Duvar, Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Alden Nowlan, and Milton Acorn have been inspired, with varying degrees of success, by or in spite of Canada's easternmost provinces. Poetic activity has always been lively in Atlantic Canada, and the past few years have witnessed the establishment of new presses, the publication of new poets, as well as the continuation of established poets and presses. This review considers and celebrates both. First, are four slim volumes, all published in 1980, the beginnings of a new venture by Breakwater called "Canada's Atlantic Poets." To reflect this title the first four collections are by four poets, one from each of the Atlantic provinces. Next is an anniversary edition from *The Fiddlehead*, long a support of the Maritimes' talent, with selections from sixteen poets associated with the magazine over its thirty-five years of publication. Last here, but in terms of excellence really first, is Douglas Lochhead's most recent publication, the long poem sequence, *High Marsh Road*. After an individual appraisal, the consideration of these volumes as a group should allow some generalizations about the state of poetry in Atlantic Canada today.

Boldly naming themselves "Canada's Atlantic Publisher" and claiming as their insignia a lighthouse rampant on a rock above waves, Breakwater has published four volumes within a regional—dare I say?—movement: Newfoundlander Des Walsh's *Seasonal Bravery*, nouveau New Brunswicker Jim Stewart's *So the Night World Spins*,

Islander Wayne Wright's *The Girl in the Brook*, and Nova Scotian Greg Cook's *Love From Backfields*. In my estimation the personal interest in the process of poetry and the diversity that the work of Cook and Stewart display elevate their work above that of Walsh and Wright. All these volumes have some merits, however, and repay a closer examination.

In his strong opening poem, "Moved By Seasons That Are Not Out of Hell," which supplies both title and structure to his volume, Des Walsh explains his dilemma and his grounding as a poet. Both are related to his position as a writer on the rocky island province of Newfoundland. On the one hand, his life is circumscribed and somewhat limited: "I have conquered everything here/I waited eight years to see." He goes on to talk of bearing his "boredom," and his reader must agree that there is often a sameness in Walsh's concerns and a lack of scope in the overall collection. On the other hand, the regional grounding is fruitful as well as numbingly familiar: "I must suffer on my own soil/where my pain has some relation/to love and seasonal bravery." When the emphasis is on "soil" rather than suffering, Walsh is more successful. All too often, however, the poems are personal and epigrammatic. Too much is withheld from the reader with too little to sustain real interest. Longing and loss are important to the one feeling them, but must be made to be important to anyone else. The overwhelming sameness of Walsh's concerns is anaesthetizing in its total effect, and the images are too often cliché: "Last night on the beach/we pulled love over us/like a warm blanket." A poet must also be careful of the comparisons suggested by his poetry, for they must always be to his advantage. Walsh's lines about "fit[ting] into each other tightly-/like a firm handshake," for instance, are but a pale imitation of Margaret Atwood's disturbing and double-edged hook-and-eye fit. At its best there is plenty of raw feeling in Walsh's writing, but next—because there still should be a next—he should explore wider and less exclusive experiences, looking outside as well as inside his own self.

Jim Stewart, for one, is certainly a poet with a maturer vision who explores a wider spectrum of subjects. As a transplanted Scotsman now living in New Brunswick, he adds depth to his poetry by comparing Celtic and Canadian legends. A glowing introduction by Allen Nowlan explains Stewart's background. The volume is divided into two parts—the first, titled "Myth and Music Poems," is inspired by and translates Scottish folklore and songs, while the second, titled "The Darkness Redefined," is inspired by and translates Stewart's Canadian experiences. In the first part he writes evocatively of "sil-kies" and "kelpies," and is visited by a legendary harpist, Rory Dall, and

a legendary fiddler, MacPherson, while "Rabbie" Burns is mentioned more than once. By way of transition Stewart compares the magical world of tradition and myth with our own belief-bereft time, concluding that now "prophet/has a different/spelling." He adds, however, "that silence/is never silent" and goes on to give voice to this silence in the second half of his volume. He is moved to song by the endless winters, the New Brunswick landscape, assembly-line inhumanity, an after-work diner, by love, marriage, and funerals. There is always a grace and delicacy in Stewart's language and a musicality in his lines, while he is also capable of a humour which reveals his understanding of his new home.

The Post Office  
is on strike,  
Air Canada  
is on strike.  
The Muses won't negotiate.

I'm going downstairs  
for a double scotch.  
Canadian literature will have to wait.

The poetry in the next volume of this series, Wayne Wright's *The Girl in the Brook*, is uneven; forced, precious images often follow flashes of original humour or lines of delicate beauty. Both the uncertain attempts of the apprentice and the more accomplished work of the practised poet seem to be collected together in one volume. Wright reveals one of the central problems of the book when, in the simple and powerful "To My Father, Dying Young," he says, "I'm not talking like a poet now." And he's a much better writer for it! He needs to forget any false conception of how a poet should or should not speak and just write with feeling, following his instinct, for in poems such as this, instinct leads him to true poetry. At his best Wright's wit sparkles: "When the Tao is present in the universe/trading cards of the poets/go even up with cards of the hockey player:/so a Vosnesensky gets you Lafleur/or Tretiak one of us." And his language captivates:

Last night you were lassie back from London  
Last night you were only lovable  
But see today tall God how that has fled:  
and I do not know the exact  
space where it happened...  
I was fresh as dolphin script  
when my heart surfaced in another meridian  
so much stronger and wetter than my last pride or  
sigh or anything I've guessed or drawn in the dress of the  
sea.

The same poet is, unfortunately, capable of forced rhymes and rhythms ("Equal Odds") and poor puns ("Measuring the Beach as Slender"): "A collector:/not of shells/but Shelleys." "Breakwater" links the requisite sea imagery to the contemplation of the contemporary void: "lithographs of vacancy" etched with little originality. At his worst Wright is capable of suggesting the incongruity of "a storm/getting dressed," but at his best he spins haunting images in sensuous language. He needs more clarity and a wider range of concerns, but the promise is there in full measure.

Past promise seems to be largely realized in the next volume, Greg Cook's *Love from Backfields*. An unpretentious writer, Cook is securely rooted in his timescape and landframe. Farm, forest, and fish wharf all find a place here. Cook has the sensibility of a man of the land and captures in print rural Nova Scotia, as far as that is possible. His words are simple and well chosen, the forms clear and direct. People or past events often prompt poems—thus the powerful lines to his mother, stepfather, uncle, brother, son, and daughter. In "Great-grandmother," for instance, repetition suggests the woman's rhythmical rocking, while in "An Altar to Loneliness" natural images reflect personal anguish and are then softened by reminiscence: "Fish head flesh and backbone rot/weather in a nest of white/The fish net is rent/like my grandmother's kitchen hair net." "Ah, Son" and "Ah, Daughter," with great feeling and command of the means, address offspring approaching maturity. There is also a surprising range and variety in this volume, from a delicate love lyric such as "Love Moving Through Backfields" to a poem expressing an active social conscience, "Bad Name (My own dissimulation)." One is even reminded of A.M. Klein's portrait ability (no mean comparison), when reading Cook's clear and suggestive delineations in "Portraits from Hardscratch." Powerful images from his own past appear, a struggling tar-stuck bird in "Friend," and images from a farther past, a wartime soldier's waiting in "Notes and Then Some." The latter is a found poem, a careful balancing of lines from a soldier's letters home to his mother, and even the predictable conclusion is well handled. Again, in the anti-war poem "Down on the Farm" simple poetics create a powerful effect: "The war I was born" polluted and destroyed land, natural resources, and people. Cook is a fine craftsman, as "The Gone Barn" illustrates. Here the condition of land, habitation, and inhabitants reflect each other. The image progression and the juxtaposition of word order works well:

The curtain of her window drops in place.  
He stands at the top of the backfield,

the gone barn between him and the house,  
 he between the sun and the gone barn  
 so completely there in his view tonight  
 he sees the old gold set in the high loft gone window.

Cook understands and writes of such universal subjects as familial ties, love, friendship, farming, fishing, hunting, and carpentry. Whether splitting wood or seeking the perfect Christmas tree, he is also a consummate poet. In "My Language Preference" he even sets out his poetic credo with the aid of woodworking images:

I prefer carpenter's talk.  
 Artificer  
 of blue-printed quality  
 disposition, direction;  
 of clear forms, dimensions;  
 of precise manners  
 —he is a joiner.

And so is Cook, in the best sense—as a master of fit and form.

Other poetic masters and associates are collected together in *The Fiddlehead* (Spring, 1980) anniversary edition which commemorates thirty-five years of publishing. I label some contributors 'masters' and others merely 'associates' because of the means of selection, which leads to a disparity in quality. The anthology, *Reflections On A Hill Behind A Town*, includes poems by "founders, editors and close associates of *The Fiddlehead*" who are still active poets. All have undoubtedly contributed much to this vital publishing venture over the years; all, however, have not written poetry of unquestioned excellence. So you find poetry by Alfred Bailey, Alden Nowlan, and M. Travis Lane given equal recognition to poetry by John P. Zanes, Michael Brian Oliver, and Peter Thomas. The ostensible reason for this method of selection was the necessity for some limiting criterion so that the poets chosen could be "substantially represented." The result, then, is not as consistent as might be the celebration of poetry that *The Fiddlehead* does and should stand for. The people behind the press and quarterly are sometimes the best *The Fiddlehead* has published—but not always.

Fredericton, still with the spiritual presence of Roberts and Carman discernible, has long been a significant centre for Canadian poetry, and *The Fiddlehead* is perhaps just the most recent manifestation of this significance. Many nationally recognized poets got their start with, or at least a boost from, *The Fiddlehead*. Still, the regional nature of this volume is proudly emphasized. It is noted that twelve of the sixteen poets included are still residents of New Brunswick. One

has strayed as far as Newfoundland, while two others visit regularly from Saskatchewan and Maine. Peter Thomas, after a few years in Wales, has seen the error of his ways and is returning to Fredericton—should, in fact, already be back. Most of the poets give some hint of their regional association, although there is no gratuitous geographical ornamentation. Most also reach beyond New Brunswick's borders and have an awareness of time as well as place. The best example is the title poem by Alfred Bailey which describes in sensitive and personal detail the scene and seasons of the University of New Brunswick, with which *The Fiddlehead* is associated:

I have to go up that hill again this morning  
 as I have gone up it these thirty years  
 in wrack of storm and drift,  
 in the heat of summer  
 with the smell of sweet  
 hay floating off a patch  
 we never were able to find...  
 It was our task we thought  
 to praise endurance and foresight,  
 things done in mercy and grandeur,  
 not forgetting error and misdirection and  
 hoping to avoid the like in after times,  
 that knowledge was in itself a good  
 and would bear issue  
 in season, as did the earth around us  
 and keep us whole.

As one would expect, Bailey's poems are thoughtful, erudite, and well worth the reading. So are those by Elizabeth Brewster, which make an appropriately circular return to her first book of poems, *East Coast*. Long concerned with place in her poetry, Brewster, who sees her westering movement as an analogy to her travel through life, here returns to her original sources in poems such as "Boredom in Victoria" and the obviously resonant "West Coast, Canada":

Here I am at last  
 on the shores of the Pacific.  
 This is it, this is West  
 as far as I can go.  
 To go farther  
 is to arrive finally at East.

There are too many poets to mention here individually, but two more distinguish themselves for me from the rest: one long a favourite, the other but newly discovered. Alden Nowlan's slight anecdotal lyrics are a joy and a revelation. They avoid sentimentality while sympathet-

ically capturing various moments of human contact. "Helen's Scar," for instance, explores the distortions of memory and the issue of responsibility, when a cousin displays a scar, the result of a long-ago tussle in a plum tree. The scar is a daily reminder of the encounter for Helen, but the author and apparent inflictor of the wound cannot even remember the plum tree. "Between What Matters and What Seems to Matter" explores the universality of human contact—a touch, a hug—when the poet visits a home for the retarded and holds and is held by a young woman. Randall Maggs writes similarly captivating poems, deceptively simple and conversational in style. "After the Stampede" and "The Empty Barn" recall the reality of the aftermath of small-town celebrations, while "Wonder Woman Meets White Fang" and "The Ruby in his Sword" delicately capture the wonders of parenting.

Almost as significant as the poetry in this volume are the greatly diversified prose selections which introduce each poet's work. Some deal specifically with the poems anthologized and can be either illuminating or ill-advised, while others are extremely informative in their discussion of the founding and maintaining of *The Fiddlehead* over the years. Some are personal (Alden Nowlan's description of the American little magazine "sub-culture" in which part of him existed in the 1950's and his marvelous portrait of a younger Fred Cogswell with a necktie bearing (baring?) "a picture of a bubble dancer."); some are humorous (Robert Gibbs's "Letter Found in a Cupboard" with its reminiscences of juvenile poetic definition); and some are academic and pontifical (Kent Thompson's disquisition against modern poetry). *Reflections On A Hill Behind A Town*, then, reflects as well on the little journal that began thirty-five years ago as on its founders' "college on the summit." Many of the best, if not all of the best, contributors are included, and it admirably demonstrates the powerful attraction of New Brunswick for her poetic offspring.

Likewise unable to remain remote from New Brunswick is Douglas Lochhead, again kicking the mud of the Tantramar from his boots. He settles down in Sackville and calls it the centre of the Maritimes. "The world comes to us" says Lochhead and writes his most outstanding poetry ever. This is not the place to discuss the vagaries of the Governor General's awards, but Lochhead's *High Marsh Road* (Toronto: Anson-Cartwright, 1980) should at least have been a co-winner for poetry. As an individual work of poetry, it is impressive; as a part of a larger poetic phenomenon responding to the contemporary political climate in Canada and emphasizing a vital pride of place, it is extremely important.

*High Marsh Road* is subtitled "Lines for a Diary" and follows the

poet out into the Tantramar Marsh along the High Marsh Road: "this is the place. the marsh. to/keep beginning from such horizons." A "realistic approach to publishers" led Lochhead to include in his book only entries from September 1 to December 31, rather than the original 365 entries. There is a certain simplicity in the lines, reflecting the bare essentials of the landscape—lots of sky with an uncomplicated foreground, an horizon which is very evident. At one point Lochhead exclaims, "simplify, simplify," while at another he affirms, "the first step;...simplify." Although over the years Lochhead has experimented with many different poetic forms, the long poem which allows more scope and freedom is "the way [he] see[s] things now." Lochhead says with obvious delight that "no other book has given me greater pleasure to put together." *High Marsh Road* is a highly personal and uncompromising book. Says Lochhead: "I was telling the truth, I was telling things it would be natural in a diary to disclose," and then adds with characteristic honesty, "but do you disclose a diary?" Given Lochhead's manner of disclosure, I would unhesitatingly answer, yes. Hints of an affair, apparently as much imagined as experienced, lead into and augment observations on art, aging, politics, creativity, and life in general. The simplicity of the landscape is balanced by the simplicity that derives from these notes for a diary—"brief accounts, often epigrammatic statements." Some entries flow into the next, while others start afresh. Letters ("dear x"), undelivered and undeliverable, are scattered throughout. There is thus both continuity and fragmentation. The Marsh, the letters, and the diary pattern all structure the book, with form reflecting both landscape and intention.

*High Marsh Road* is a very daring book. Not only is there the usual poetic dilemma of capturing in print the perfection of imaginings ("the real round of the saying never forms"), but the diary format can also ensnare the poet: "the poem unleashes a series of locks,/traps and tripwires." Revelations beyond the intent of the revealer can turn the "poet as hunter" into the suicidal hunted. This latter-day Roberts, recalling his Maritimes' forebear, is not content to remain above the Marsh and remember, for he must go down, burrow beneath the soil, and experience again and again. While Roberts "us[ed] his telescope," Lochhead "search[es] the/same dykes for details." And this, in large measure, is the difference in Canada between the nineteenth century and now, this uncompromising desire to delve beneath the surfaces and wrestle with the earthy realities: "the mind/is not enough." Reading answers in the letters and language of the land, Lochhead moves from despair to defiance: "reading the ciphers across the barren./the codifier, the sweeping calligraphy/of the Tantramar wind." Never



easy, such study does reveal answers, and Lochhead translates for us: "these words are messages for those/who would receive them." If receptive, then, one will be greatly rewarded for an examination of this poet's diary.

*High Marsh Road* is also, as I suggested earlier, part of a larger poetic phenomenon. For over thirty years now critics have recognized the significance of the long poem form in Canada. Dorothy Livesay suggested twenty years ago that "our narratives reflect our environment profoundly; they are subtly used to cast light on the landscape;" while more recently Robert Kroetsch, Eli Mandel, and Michael Ondaatje all point to an intimate link between the landscape and the long form, now looser and more open-ended. There seems to be a growing awareness of the necessary suitability of structure for poetic content or purpose. On the West Coast, on the Prairies, in Central Canada, and in Atlantic Canada, poets are exulting in their various landscapes. More than just a raising of the regional flag, however, these poets are struggling with questions of form and structure. What are the right words, and what are the right ways of using the words so that structure and subject authentically balance? Across the country there seems to be a similar concentration on the here, the how, and the relationship between the two. Indeed, many argue that this poetry is only being written now because there are finally forms to suit the landscape. Greg Cook, Wayne Wright, and above all Douglas Lochhead are among the leaders in this respect "down East."

Such is the state of poetry today in Atlantic Canada. Toil is not, as for Stansbury, "in vain." New poets, established poets. New presses, established presses. While emphasizing the primacy of place, still a vital role in a national process. As Douglas Lochhead says proudly, specifying his Maritimes, "this is my place."