

Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia

P.O. Box 138, Great Village, Nova Scotia B0M 1L0

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NEWSLETTER

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Editorial

This is the first issue of the Society's Newsletter. Other issues will be published semi-annually in the spring and fall and distributed free to members of the Society, or by subscription to institutions. Each issue will contain information about recent and forthcoming activities of the Society, together with, when possible, book reviews or notices of books and articles involving Elizabeth Bishop. Each issue will also offer at least one short article or scholarly essay about Bishop's personal connections with Nova Scotia or about the many, various literary, cultural, historical, geographical, or social aspects of the Canadian Atlantic region which affected Bishop's experience and influenced her prose and poetry.

In the present Newsletter, we are fortunate to be able to publish an essay written by Sandra Barry as preliminary to a more extensive and complex study of the number, timing and duration of visits made by Elizabeth Bishop to Great Village, Colchester County, Nova Scotia. Barry's essay offers a significant supplement to the careful Chronology recently given by Robert Giroux in his edition of Bishop's letters, *One Art* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1994: pp. xxiii-xxv).

For many Canadians and Americans, Bishop's subtle cross-cultural life and the art which meditated upon it are an occasion for gratitude, sensitive reading

and responsible scholarship. Defensive, dismissive or possessive chauvinisms, either Canadian or American (and it takes, unhappily, little effort to discover both) have more to do with the nature of those who preach them than with the essences of Bishop's art. Such people resemble those travellers in speeding automobiles who seemingly transcend but are accurately rebuked by the ironies of "Manners."

Brett Millier's *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (University of California Press, 1993) enables one to confirm that at least fourteen of Bishop's poems owe sometimes a little, usually a very great deal to her experience of Atlantic Canada. Among them, of course, are some of her finest, "The Moose", "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance", "At the Fishhouses", "Cape Breton", "Manners", "Sestina", "First Death in Nova Scotia", "Filling Station", and "Poem." In addition, six, or nearly one-third, of the pieces published in *The Collected Prose* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1984), including her prose masterpiece, "In the Village," are set in Great Village. These facts are obvious. They are not aggressively stated here. They simply should be taken into account, along with many other facts concerning Bishop not involving Nova Scotia, as ones which it might be helpful to ponder when one reads Bishop's work.

The Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova

Scotia, through this Newsletter and its other activities, hopes to be able to add to the joy and knowledge of those who love Bishop's art. If a narrower definition of the Society's intent be needed, it might be said that its purpose is to celebrate, explore and annotate the full implications of the following lines from Lowell's unfinished poem:

Dear Elizabeth
Half New-Englander, half fugitive
Nova Scotian, wholly Atlantic sea-bound
Unable to settle anywhere, or live
Our usual roaring sublime.

Peter Sanger

News and Information

The Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia was formally registered according to the Nova Scotia Societies Act in spring, 1994. Formation of the Society followed nearly two years of consultation among those in the Maritimes familiar with Bishop's work and her family's life in Great Village. Most fortunately, the Honourable John MacEachern, Minister of Education and Culture for Nova Scotia, took a particular interest in the formation of the Society. So also did Carman Carroll, the Provincial Archivist of Nova Scotia, and Allison Bishop, Head of the Cultural Affairs Division of the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture.

The Society received a major grant from the Nova Scotia Cultural Affairs Division which has enabled Sandra Barry, a Nova Scotia Bishop scholar, to begin a full archival inventory of a Bishop fond of books, photographs, paintings and documents held by Mrs. Phyllis Sutherland of Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia.

Mrs. Sutherland, the daughter of Grace Bulmer Bowers to whom Bishop dedicated "The Moose", is Bishop's first cousin. Bishop frequently corresponded with and visited her. The Society is honoured to announce that Mrs. Sutherland has agreed to become its first honorary patron.

At present, the business of the Society is being conducted by *ad hoc* officers: Alan Bray (Chair), Meredith Layton (Vice Chair), Arthur Chisholm (Secretary) and Lois Bray (Treasurer), all of whom are residents of Great Village. In addition, on the interim Board of Directors are Sandra Barry, Peter Sanger and Terrence White.

The Society will be holding a general meeting to discuss the election of permanent officers and to consider long-range plans on October 19 in Great Village. At present, one of the Society's major short-term goals is the organization of an event to be held in Great Village in early June, 1995, during which Dr. Thomas Travisano, editor of "The Elizabeth Bishop Bulletin" will deliver the first Elizabeth Bishop Memorial Lecture and conduct a seminar upon Bishop's work.

Membership in the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia is available for \$8.00 per year or \$20.00 for three years (Canadian funds). Either membership entitles the holder to take full voting part in the Society's deliberations and to receive the Newsletter for free. A subscription to the Newsletter, without membership, may be obtained for \$5.00 per year. Cheques should be payable to the **Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia** and forwarded to the address given at the head of this Newsletter.

Elizabeth Bishop "In the Village": Chronology 1911-1930 by Sandra Barry

Although the evidence in Elizabeth Bishop's poetry and prose confirms otherwise, Bishop critics generally conclude in spite of it that Bishop's time in Great Village, Nova Scotia, was limited to the period 1916-1917, followed by summer visits until 1923. In her recent biography of Bishop, Brett Millier provides the most extensive (though still incomplete) narrative of Bishop's Great Village years yet to be found in the scholarly literature:

Elizabeth spent a few months at intervals in Great Village before 1916, sometimes with her mother and sometimes without; she was there continuously from spring 1916 until September 1917 and then spent two months of each summer there from 1918 until 1923.¹

In fact, Bishop's early residence in and visits to Great Village extended over a much longer period of time, encompassing virtually the first nineteen years of her life. Bishop's childhood was, arguably, the most difficult and complex period in her artistic development, affecting both her personal psychology and her poetics. That Bishop incorporated so many experiences and memories from this time into her poetry and prose should induce critics to afford her childhood factually accurate and historically sensitive treatment. Bishop remained publicly reticent about her childhood throughout her life, but her oeuvre reveals clearly how vital a motive force it was to her personally and artistically.²

The following narrative is derived from a larger chronicle documenting Bishop's maternal family history, compiled from a wide variety of primary sources, including Bishop's published and unpublished writings, probate and other government records, hospital medical records, private family archives, the Truro Daily News and oral history.³ This prolegomenon to a Chronology only suggests the complexity of those early years and experiences and their impact on Elizabeth Bishop's art. It does not purport to turn literary history, even literary biography, into a mere register of facts; but to provide an accurate foundation upon which the life and work of the poet can be assessed.

Elizabeth Bishop was born on 8 February 1911, in Worcester, Massachusetts, the only child of William and Gertrude Bishop (née Bulmer). On 13 October 1911, her father died of Bright's disease. One of Bishop's earliest memories, at least one about which she made a record, was of learning to walk in her maternal grandmother's kitchen in Great Village when she was two:

I can remember this blur of plants and my grandmother holding out her arms. I must have toddled. It seems to me it's a memory. It's very hazy. I told my grandmother years and years later and she said, "Yes, you did learn to walk while your mother was visiting someone." But you walk when you're one, don't you?⁴

This memory places Bishop in Great Village in 1913 (if she was in fact one, in 1912). In light of the toing and froing between Boston and Great Village of her mother and aunts during the first two decades of the

twentieth century, there is every reason to credit such a remarkable recollection. That the widowed Gertrude Bulmer Bishop took her only child to see her beloved parents soon after her husband's death is pure common sense.⁵ Bishop's own memories reveal a grieving, at times preoccupied widow; but one who took her child on swan boat rides in the Boston Public Gardens; to Duxbury to see Mrs. Tewksbury⁶; to Marblehead for holidays (and who was quite capable of helping the victims of the Salem Fire of 1914 -- it must be remembered that Gertrude was a professional nurse)⁷; and to Great Village. When the memory fragments are gathered together, the picture of these earliest years (1912-1914) appears full of activity. Gertrude Bulmer Bishop may have deeply grieved for her husband, but during these years she performed the task of administrator of his not inconsiderable estate (William died intestate), and, more significantly, she was a constant presence in her daughter's life. The logistics of travelling with a toddler, moreover, were not themselves inconsiderable, the implication being that Gertrude was fully able to negotiate them.

In June 1914 Gertrude suffered a "mental attack" and was hospitalized (in Massachusetts) for about three months.⁸ The exact nature of this illness is unknown. Her Nova Scotia Hospital case file records that Gertrude was at this time "not suicidal or homicidal, but morbid and depressed." She emerged from the hospital "practically well." It is likely that during this time Elizabeth was cared for by two maternal aunts, Maud Shepherdson and Grace Bulmer, who were living in Boston.

In late April 1915 Gertrude and Elizabeth returned to Great Village. Evidence from the Truro Daily News and Bishop's prose-poem memoir "In the Village" reveals that

Elizabeth probably remained in Great Village continuously until October 1917. Her mother, however, made two trips to Boston during these years, one in November 1915 and another in May 1916. Hence Bishop's most accurately remembered, though necessarily telescoped, chronology in "In the Village": "First she had come home, with her child. Then she had gone away again, alone, and left the child. Then she had come home. Then she had gone away again, with her sister; and now she was home again."⁹ Gertrude became increasingly ill during the early months of 1916; her final breakdown occurred in June and she was admitted, voluntarily, to the Nova Scotia Hospital in Dartmouth. She remained there until her death in 1934. The five-year-old Elizabeth witnessed her mother's tragic and violent breakdown, the single most devastating event of her childhood. Although Elizabeth Bishop never saw her mother again, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop remained a continuous 'absent presence' in her daughter's life and work.

Bishop attended Great Village School in the autumn and winter of 1916-1917, the experience provoking one of her most delightful memoirs, "Primer Class." She was ill for a few weeks in January-February 1917, but appears to have been otherwise healthy. Her paternal grandparents, the John Bishops, arrived in September 1917 and took Bishop back with them to Worcester. According to the Truro Daily News, "Mr. and Mrs. Bishop and Mrs. George Shepherdson [Maud]...have returned to their homes in the States. They were accompanied by little Miss Elizabeth Bishop who will spend the winter with her relatives."¹⁰ Bishop lived with her paternal grandparents until May 1918 (she records this experience in "The Country Mouse") when, due to serious illness, she went to live with her Aunt Maud in Revere, MA. There is no

record of Bishop visiting Great Village in 1918 (illness likely prevented her doing so), but in 1919 she recommenced her yearly visits to Nova Scotia, at first with either Aunt Maud or Aunt Grace and then, by 1926, on her own.

Bishop visited Great Village every year from 1919 until 1930, the Truro Daily News nearly always announcing her arrival and departure in the inimitable, gossipy manner of the small-town newspaper. Bishop's Bulmer grandparents, moreover, made several visits to their daughter Maud in Revere (and later Cliftondale), in effect bring the Mountain (Great Village) to Mohammed (Bishop). In December 1929-January 1930 Bishop spent Christmas in Great Village.' This visit was her last before she entered Vassar, and marked the beginning of a sixteen-year absence from Nova Scotia. It did not, however, mean the end of communication with her maternal family. Three days before Bishop's nineteenth birthday her beloved maternal grandfather died (5 February 1930). Her grandmother moved to Montreal to live with her youngest daughter Mary Bulmer Ross. In August 1930 Elizabeth Bulmer wrote to Arthur ("Uncle Neddy") in Great Village, "...we have George and Maud and Elizabeth and we have a very pleasant time[,] he [George] gave us a car ride every day..."¹¹ Bishop's grandmother died on 9 April 1931. Bishop's contact with her maternal family, through correspondence, telephone calls and visits, remained continuous until her death on 6 October 1979. Bishop's last visit to Nova Scotia occurred in May 1979, when she received an honorary degree from Dalhousie University.

Virtually all the major critical and biographical monographs written about Elizabeth Bishop provide a synoptic chronology of her childhood years.

Abridgement, however, serves only to foreshorten the panorama of Bishop's Great Village experience of time, family and place. A detailed chronology will not explain Bishop's life and work, but it will help scholars and readers to understand the aetiology of her art and her own deep commitment to and practice of meticulous observation and truth-telling. Establishing an accurate record of Bishop's childhood in Great Village is essential in order to provide the proper context for both her early artistic development and her maturation as a poet.

Notes

1. Brett Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*. Berkely: University of California Press, 1993, p. 19. Most critics gloss over these years affording this period in Bishop's life mere passing comment. For example, in the introduction to Bishop's selected letters, Robert Giroux abbreviates Bishop's Great Village years to one entry in a complex, three-page chronology: "1916 Lived in Great Village, Nova Scotia, with the Bulmers, her mother's family. Attended primary school. For the last time saw her mother when she entered a mental hospital." *One Art: Elizabeth Bishop Letters*, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994, p. xxiii. Gary Fountain's forthcoming book *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994, will go some distance towards restoring the chronology of Bishop's Great Village childhood, but only a complete (and factually accurate) account will do justice to the portrait of the artist as a young child.
2. In a 1978 interview with Elizabeth Spires, Bishop declared:

Everybody does [write about childhood]. You can't help it, I suppose. You are fearfully observant then. You notice all kinds of things but there's no way of putting them all together. My memories of some of those days are so much clearer than things that happened in 1950, say. I don't think one should make a cult of writing about childhood, however. I've always tried to avoid it.

Interview with Spires, "The Art of Poetry XXVII," *Paris Review* 23 (Summer 1981), pp. 73-74. The paradoxical nature of these statements reveals just how problematic the issue of childhood was for Bishop. The aesthetic significance of her childhood experiences may be debatable, but the degree of their impact must certainly be beyond question.

3. A preliminary version of this chronology (covering the years 1915 to 1923) was published in S. Barry, "The Art of Remembering: The Influence of Great Village, Nova Scotia, on the Life and Works of Elizabeth Bishop," *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 11 1 (1991), pp. 2-37.

4. Interview with Spires, p. 74. In this same interview Bishop stated: "I went to an analyst for a couple of years off and on in the forties....She said it was amazing that I would remember things that happened to me when I was two. It's very rare, but apparently writers often do." (p. 74) Whether Bishop recorded any more of these earliest memories is not known. Nor is it known which of them found their way directly or indirectly into her work.

5. It is not yet known whether William

and Gertrude Bishop ever visited Great Village together, either before or after the birth of their daughter. A family photograph shows William and Elizabeth Bulmer holding their infant granddaughter Elizabeth (ca. late 1911-1912), but this portrait was probably taken in Worcester during one of their visits.

6. Millier, pp. 4 and 253.

7. Bishop's memories of this event were traumatic and enduring and emerged years later in an unpublished draft of an anguished poem, "A Drunkard," where she writes, "Mama didn't hear / me calling her." It would be unfair to Gertrude Bulmer Bishop, however, to hypothesize that she deliberately ignored or abandoned her three-year-old daughter. The poem fragment must be seen as one piece of a complex puzzle--the jigsaw of the mother-daughter relationship--which Bishop was putting together throughout her life. Perhaps the reason Bishop never finished the poem (besides the fact that it is too intensely personal--even "confessional") was her sense that she was speaking ill of the dead by implicitly casting aspersions on her mother's memory.

8. Nova Scotia Hospital, Gertrude Bishop case file. Permission to quote from the xerox photocopy of this file is given by Phyllis Sutherland (niece of Mrs. Bishop).

9. Elizabeth Bishop, *The Collected Prose*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1984, p. 252.

10. *Truro Daily News*, 11 October 1917, p. 8, col. 3, John and Sarah Bishop (née Foster) both died in 1923.

11. Letter from Elizabeth Hutchinson to Arthur Bulmer, [13] August 1930. Bulmer-Bowers-Sutherland family fond [private archive].