

# ***Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia***

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

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Volume 3, Issue 1

**NEWSLETTER**

Spring, 1996

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## ***Editorial***

Starting last autumn, events which have occurred involving Bishop in Nova Scotia call to mind the ending of "Poem". On the one hand, some of the elms have been dismantled. On the other, "*spring freshets*" have appeared in the pastures around Great Village and abide, "*still standing.*"

The death of Mrs. Hazel Bowers this spring has led to the Bulmer-Bowers house, the house of Bishop's maternal grandparents where Mrs. Bowers lived for many years, being put up for sale. Providentially, a few months before Mrs. Bowers died, Ann Marie Duggan began to research and write an essay on the house which is published in this issue of the *Newsletter*. In the best of all possible worlds, the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia would be able to purchase the house, run it as a museum and maintain it as a centre for lovers and scholars of Bishop's work to visit. Unfortunately, the Society does not have the resources to do so. It has been unable to obtain help from public or private funding. The death of Mrs. Bowers also led to an auctioning of many of the objects in her home in early June. Most of those in attendance at the auction knew little or nothing of the fuller provenance of the objects they bid for, but fortunately a number of members of the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia were present and were able to secure a few books and documents of possible literary significance.

The Bulmer-Bowers-Hutchinson-Sutherland Family Fonds which was reported for sale in the last issue of this *Newsletter* still remains in its owner's hands. The Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia has been engaged in trying to raise money to make an offer for it during the last eight months. Several private individuals have made extraordinarily generous gifts or firm pledges. But the full amount still to be raised remains dismayingly elusive. In the present economic situation, neither government agencies nor Atlantic Canadian universities are able to assist. Recently, the Society was informed that Vassar will be sending an appraiser to Nova Scotia to examine the material. The Society will continue to make all possible efforts to raise funds to acquire the Fonds. Anyone who can help by contributing, by canvassing, by suggesting methods of raising money is most welcome to contact the Society. As Editor of the *Newsletter* and a director of the Society, I would be glad to discuss further details by phone (902) 893-6725 or Fax (902) 897-9399 or E-mail [smurphy@admin.nsac.ns.ca](mailto:smurphy@admin.nsac.ns.ca).

Many legitimate arguments could be made why the material in the Fonds should go to Vassar, but no argument can be made against the fact that a fonds and its immediate cultural context explain, verify and enhance each other. Once the Fonds has left Nova Scotia, both the material it contains and the cultural continuities of life, love and reverence which led to its assembling and

preservation are broken. Cultural knowledge, in the deepest sense, cannot be stored and indexed. Like Bishop's iris, it can only exist as "*crisp and shivering.*"

Peter Sanger

## ***News and Information***

### **Death of Mrs. Hazel Bowers**

With great sadness, local members of the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia learned of the death of Mrs. Hazel Bowers on April 20, at the age of 93. Mrs. Bowers (née Teed) lived in Great Village for 65 years. She was the most recent resident of the Bulmer-Bowers house, where Elizabeth Bishop's mother was raised and where Elizabeth Bishop spent part of her childhood and later made many visits, especially in the summer, until 1930.

Ann Marie Duggan, a director of the E.B.N.S. whose article on the Bulmer-Bowers residence appears elsewhere in this *Newsletter* writes: "Mrs. Bowers moved into the house with her late husband, Norman Bowers, the son of W.H. Bowers and the stepson of Grace Bulmer-Bowers, who was one of Elizabeth Bishop's maternal aunts. Mrs. Hazel Bowers taught school in Nova Scotia for 32 years. For nine years before her retirement she was Principal of the Great Village School which Elizabeth Bishop had attended in 1916-1917. She was active in many community organizations in Great Village and in Colchester County and received numerous community and organizational awards for her work.

When I approached Hazel six weeks before her death and asked for her co-operation in

doing an article on her home, she was most enthusiastic. I made several visits to see her, to speak with her, to take photographs and make sketches. Always, she made me welcome. I regret that there are many questions I will have no chance to ask her, for she was always illuminating and forthright in her replies.

Hazel told me that when she and Norman moved into the house it was badly in need of renovation. They raised it, put a foundation under it, added a metal clad storage shed at the back and built a staircase to the upper floor where previously there were only wooden steps. Over the years, the Bowers upgraded the plumbing, electrical and heating systems, but generally the house remains much the same as it was in Elizabeth Bishop's time. All those who value Bishop's work are fortunate that Hazel and Norman took good and sensitive care of their home over many decades."

**Sandra Barry's *An Archival Guide to Her Life in Nova Scotia* (ISBN 0-88999-628-8, 1996: \$25.00 Canadian, postage included. Published by and available from The Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia.)**

For five years, Sandra Barry has dedicated her scholarly activities to the analysis and explanation of Elizabeth Bishop's connections with Nova Scotia. Just before the Bishop symposium held in Key West in 1993, her work, particularly that involving material owned by Bishop's first cousin, Mrs. Phyllis Sutherland of Tatamagouche, came to the attention of several people interested in Bishop who live in Great Village and its surrounding area. As a result, the Elizabeth Bishop Society was formed in spring, 1994, with one of its main objectives being the support and

dissemination of Barry's research.

*An Archival Guide...*, prefaced by Gary Fountain, is far more than the usual archival finding-guide. Only a little over 60 of its 226 pages are, indeed, devoted to itemizations and descriptions of those letters, family papers, photographs, oil and water-colour paintings, for example, which are part of the Bulmer-Bowers-Hutchinson-Sutherland Family Fonds. Among other matters, the bulk of the book offers the most detailed available analysis of the Bulmer-Hutchinson side of Bishop's family history; it includes an essay on the significance of Great Village in Bishop's life and work; it reproduces ten photographs (including one on the cover), which have not been published before, of Bishop as a child, of her closest relatives (including her mother) and of Great Village before the First World War; and the book ends with a bibliographical survey of publications which contain particular reference to Bishop's Nova Scotian background.

Barry's book must be seen as providing essential fresh contextual information for many of Elizabeth Bishop's poems, stories and essays. It sets new definitions for an accurate and synthesizing approach to the reading of Bishop's work. It recovers facts which are deeply radicated throughout her poetry and prose, and it freshens those nuances of reference, experience and feeling which animate Bishop's work with the "minute and vast and clear."

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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. The E.B.S.N.S. Newsletter is published twice yearly in the Spring and Fall. Publishing history: 1(1), Fall 1994; 2(1), Spring 1995; 2(2), Fall 1995; 3(1), Spring 1996.

Subscription is by membership in the Society or \$5.00 Canadian per year, made payable to the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia.

Editor: Peter Sanger  
Associate Contributing Editors:  
Jeffery Donaldson, John Barnstead  
Editorial Assistant: Sandra Murphy,  
Humanities Dept., NSAC, Truro, N.S. B2N 5E3  
Phone: (902) 893-6725  
Fax: (902) 897-9399  
E-mail: smurphy@admin.nsac.ns.ca

***"The front room is empty": Elizabeth Bishop's House in Great Village, with Drawings***

by Ann Marie Duggan

*(Editor's note: Ann Marie Duggan was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where she also presently lives. She has recently received a Master of Architecture degree from the Technical University of Nova Scotia. Her thesis is a design for a Visitor's Center in Great Village which would be a study and lodging center for Bishop scholars, enabling them to use a Bishop archive within one of its chief cultural and physiographical contexts. Ms. Duggan is a charter member and a director of the E.B.N.S.)*

The Bulmer-Bowers house is located in the heart of Great Village. As one goes through the village, heading towards Bass River, it is the third house on the left after one crosses the bridge over the Great Village River. The house faces the northeast at the intersection of the Old Post Road and the main highway. Almost opposite the Bulmer-Bowers house, across the intersection, is the St. James United Church. On the north side

of the Old Post Road is the site where William Bulmer (Bishop's grandfather) and Arthur Bulmer (Bishop's uncle) respectively operated tanning and tinsmithing businesses. Just past the house, the road takes an almost ninety degree turn which means that Layton's Store, which is next door, has its back turned towards the northwest side of the Bulmer-Bowers house. This main road in Bishop's time was dirt and at a lower level than the house, though it is as close today as it was in Bishop time (approx. 15 ft.). At one time, a low picket fence separated the house from the road. At the rear is a view over the marshes and the Bay of Fundy.

The exact date when the house was built is not known. It is believed that its original location was on Mount Pleasant (also known as Scrabble Hill) on the outskirts of Great Village where it served as a stage coach inn for traffic to and from Amherst, Nova Scotia. When it was moved is also unknown.

A deed dated 1874 records the sale of property (land and house) by Hibbert McLellan of Londonderry (a shoemaker) to William Brown Bulmer (a tanner). The land on which the current house now stands was given in the 1874 deed as one eighth of an acre and valued at \$450.00.

William Brown Bulmer and Elizabeth (Hutchinson) Bulmer were Elizabeth Bishop's maternal grandparents. After the death of her father and the hospitalization of her mother, Bishop came to live with them in Great Village during the years of 1915 to 1917, returning for visits every year until 1930. After William Bulmer died in 1930 and Elizabeth Bulmer died in 1931, Norman and Hazel Bowers bought the house.

The style of the house is Classical Revival,

but in a vernacular form. The main part of the house is a rectangular, gable-roofed structure. However, the original form has become more complex as a result of extensions (the kitchen ell and a shed), entry porches and dormers. This "additive form" is not unique in Nova Scotia nor in Great Village. Quite commonly an original homestead was first built and then successive additions were constructed as the need arose. Often, as in the case of the Bulmer house, the latest addition does not even have a foundation. There seems to be a progression of construction from the most rooted to the less rooted. But even with its various parts, the whole Bulmer-Bowers house is an harmonious ensemble.

The front facade is visually balanced and, in fact, symmetrical (except for the skylight). There is a central porch, with a door flanked by sidelights, and a window on each side of the porch, creating what is termed a three-bay pattern. At the center of the roof is a chimney. Great pains have been taken to locate it there: within the house it is actually off center. The chimney is sloped in the attic to exit the roof ridge.

It is evident that the builder's intentions were to emphasize the vertical aspects of the house. Use of steep pitches and vertically proportioned windows draws the eye upwards, making a 1 1/2 storey structure seem much taller.

No other facades of the house are symmetrical, although the two gable ends of its main part appear to be so. Upon closer examination, the distances between all the windows and to corner boards can be seen to vary. Furthermore, the windows on each facade are of different sizes and their numbers of panes are not consistent. The most common type of window is a six over six, but the front facade

windows are eight over eight. There are four entryways (five including the basement entrance), and each door has its own style.

The house is of wood frame construction clad in five inch (exposed) wooden clapboards, painted white. Perhaps Arthur Bulmer, a local tinsmith, was responsible for cladding the roof with its present tin shingles.

Upon entering the front porch one is embraced by the flanking curved walls and the low ceiling height (6' - 9"). The curved walls are used to create a link between the width of the exterior porch and the width of the interior hallway. The hallway leads straight to the back door. As one follows the hallway towards the rear, the den is on the left and the living room is on the right.

In her unpublished reminiscence of Great Village, Elizabeth Bishop describes what she calls the "parlour" in these words: "The parlour was almost square, with four large square windows, two on either side of the corner of the house." Today there is no room which fits this description. Though the den and the dining room could be considered "almost square", the living room is definitely rectangular, and there are no rooms with two windows on either corner. Either Bishop has misremembered or was not being literal.

Further down the hall is the dining room on the left and on the right a steep staircase leads to the upper floor. Further on to the right is the pantry. Eventually one arrives in the kitchen. Behind the kitchen, a present day utility space incorporates an entrance to the two-level shed behind the house and accommodates the hatch to the basement. The two additions from the kitchen to the shed are not at right angles to the main part of the house creating a few strangely angled walls which make measuring difficult.

The basement (which did not exist in Bishop's time) is a plethora of structural design. The foundation is concrete with a two foot sill running around the outside. The original part of the house is reinforced with floor joists made of half rounded logs upon which the bark still remains. Everything (furnace, hot water tank, etc.) in the basement is elevated due to flooding from the Great Village River nearby. The ceiling height is 6' - 0" +/-.

The upper level of the house contains four bedrooms, a full bathroom and a storage area. Some question exists as to where Elizabeth slept. Hazel Bowers told me that Elizabeth slept in the "north room", the bedroom at the front of the house facing St. James church. However, Elizabeth Bishop describes another room: "That winter I had a very narrow bed in what we called the 'little room'. It had only a skylight in the sloping roof to light it, and the skylight was right over the narrow bed...My mother was in the big room across the whole end of the hall - right next to mine." From this description, it is clear that she was in the center bedroom at the front of the house. However, she does write "that winter," which implies that she may have slept elsewhere at other times.

The sloping roof on this upper floor forces one to stay towards the center of each ridge line. Two dormers (one shed and one pitched) create extra space. Between the original part of the house and the addition above the kitchen, there is a change in floor level with one high step up.

The house is deceptively small judged by its front facade, because one cannot from the facade see the length of the additions behind. The master bedroom (Bishop's mother's room) is especially large because it runs the whole width of the main part of the house. There is little interior ornamentation except for some

wainscoting below a few windows and a bowed head over most doorways. Generally the interior and exterior features are simple and unadorned. The house is simply a good example of its utilitarian economical style.

In 1961, Elizabeth Bishop composed an "Autobiographical Sketch" which states in part: "I am very interested in architecture, and in Petropolis I have the good fortune to live in (I think) one of the best examples of contemporary Brazilian work, a house by Sergio Bernardes. I am also fortunate in numbering among my friends and acquaintances most of the best contemporary architects, artists and some writers". She was sensitive to architecture and knowledgeable about it. She travelled far and wide and experienced a variety of housing environments. One way she documented these experiences was through painting. In several of her paintings she depicts interior and exterior views of houses and other buildings. Two such paintings with depictions of architectural interest, for example, are now part of book jacket designs for her *Collected Prose* and *Complete Poems*.

Her interest in architecture is also evident elsewhere in her work. In 1955 Bishop helped to translate a book about modern Brazilian architecture, Henrique Mindlin's *Modern Architecture in Brazil*. In her poem "The End of March," Bishop describes her "proto-dream-house" or her "crypto-dream-house":

....that crooked box  
set up on pilings, shingled green,  
a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener  
.....  
I'd like to retire there and do nothing,  
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms.

In her story, "The Sea and Its Shore", Bishop describes a beach house: "This house was

very interesting. It was of wood, with a pitched roof, about four by four by six feet, set on pegs stuck in the sand. There was no window, no door set in the door frame, and nothing at all inside...As a house, it was more like an idea of a house than a real one. It could have stood at either end of a scale of ideas of houses. It could have been a child's perfect playhouse, or an adult's ideal house - since everything that makes most houses nuisances had been done away with. It was a shelter, but not for living in, for thinking in. It was, to the ordinary house, what the ceremonial thinking cap is to the ordinary hat..."

In the poem "One Art", Bishop writes of losing "three loved houses". Brett Millier has described what is probably one of these houses, located at Key West: "It is a large squarish, two-storey building with a wide porch extending its width and height, supported by three somewhat frail-looking and very tall posts. All of its rooms are off a central hallway, which runs the length of the house, shotgun style..." In its simplicity and comfortable utilitarianism that house is a fitting companion not only for the beach house of "The Sea and Its Shore" but also for Bishop's Great Village home.

Bishop spent a lifetime moving from place to place. Understandably, whenever she was able to settle down for any extended time, she placed great value on the houses in which she lived. Probably as a consequence of the ever present possibility of loss, the need to describe and express the importance of place formed such a significant part of her creative work. Such was certainly the case with the Bulmer-Bowers house. Its rooms, which Bishop remembered in "In the Village" to have been filled with voices and suddenly silent, now exist recoverably because of her words.

*(Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Barbara McLellan, Hazel Bower's house attendant, for her assistance. Sandra Barry generously gave me editing advice and Brian Robinson exercised his photographic skills and held the other end of the measuring tape. Hazel Bower's nephew and heir, Clayton Teed, and his wife, Helen, most graciously gave me permission to continue research after Mrs. Bower's death. Their assistance enabled this article to be completed. Finally, I wish to thank the late Mrs. Bowers. Without her gentle encouragement, the project of describing the home she loved could not have been possible.)*

### **Add to Your Bishop Collection!**

#### **Expulsion From Paradise: Elizabeth Bishop 1927 - 1957**

by Thomas Travisano

The First Elizabeth Bishop Memorial Lecture: Presented in Great Village on June 9, 1995. This lecture contains material about Bishop's childhood and adolescence not yet available elsewhere.

**Price: \$10.00 Canadian (Postage Paid)**

The remittance payable to: Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia, P.O. Box 138, Great Village, N.S. BOM 1L0

### **ELIZABETH BISHOP: AN ARCHIVAL GUIDE TO HER LIFE IN NOVA SCOTIA**

by Sandra Barry

*Published by The Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia, 1996, 226p,  
\$25.00 (no GST), postage included*

The EBSNS is proud to offer this description and analysis of the Bishop and Bishop-related archival material which is held in institutions and private collections in Nova Scotia. Designed as a reference and research tool, the guide provides information which will be of unique interest and use to researchers and students, as well as all serious readers of Nova Scotia's unofficial poet laureate. The guide contains several pages of previously unpublished photographs of Elizabeth Bishop, her family and Great Village.

This guide is a limited edition. For Canadian and U.S. orders the price is \$25.00 (in respective funds). There is no GST and postage is included.

Send order form with cheque or money order to:

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## *The Literary Society*

In the early 1900's the Great Village Literary Society was formed. Rev. and Mrs. W.M. Crawford were active in the Organization and fortunately Mr. Crawford's successor, Rev. A.L. Fraser, brought to the Group a literary interest and knowledge which assured its continuance. Writing of the Society later in a small magazine, published in Toronto, Mr. Fraser called it "A literary society which, considering its annual programme of reading and quality of work done...its sheer power of survival, was quite unique."

The Society met fortnightly in the homes of the members, to spend the evening reading and discussing great literature. A winter each was spent on Keats, Ruskin, Mrs. Browning, Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, and two winters on Browning and Tennyson.

Again in words of Dr. Fraser, "We found the little club worth while. We had college graduates, teachers, doctors of medicine, housewives, merchants, school girls. It gave color to their lives, and there are people from Halifax, N.S., to Vancouver, B.C., to recall with pleasure and profit the discovery of great lines and the hearing of great music."

The Society did not long continue after Mr. Fraser left in 1914, but for ten years at least, each winter the Group had lived with great writers.

(From *The History of Great Village, Nova Scotia*. Published by Great Village Women's Institute, Great Village, 1960)