

Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia

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

Volume 4, Issue 1

NEWSLETTER

Spring, 1997

Editorial

With the start of a new year (and with the fourth volume of its *Newsletter*), the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia enters another phase of its existence.

The Society has now accomplished all three of the major specific goals set when it was formed in 1994. First, Elizabeth Bishop is now firmly and definitively established as a Nova Scotian literary and historical presence in the public record of the province and elsewhere as a result of Society activities. Second, as reported in the *Newsletter*, the unique access to the Bowers-Hutchinson-Sutherland Family Fonds so generously granted by the Fonds' former owner, Phyllis Sutherland, to the Nova Scotian Bishop scholar, Sandra Barry, has resulted in the archival organization of the Fonds and the consequent publication of Sandra's *Elizabeth Bishop: An Archival Guide to Her Life in Nova Scotia*. Third, as noted in the last *Newsletter*, that Fonds has been purchased co-operatively by the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, by Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, and by the Society under an arrangement which secures public ownership while appropriately depositing the Fonds for purposes of research, exhibition and teaching with Acadia University.

The Society must now find other specific tasks to tackle. Certainly one of them is not only sustaining its present level of membership but

also increasing it, particularly perhaps in the Canadian academic community and especially among undergraduate and graduate students. A second task for the Society may be a deeper involvement with preserving and documenting the architectural and natural beauty of Great Village. A third task, I suggest, could involve the Society's widening its participation in and assistance with interpretations of Bishop's work which use other media than print, other arts than writing, and which, like Bishop's own work, concern not only the local but also the cosmopolitan. The Society is most eager to receive comments about or proposals for its future direction from members and non-members alike. You are invited to use the email address given on page eight of this *Newsletter*.

On June 7, as the formal Invitation printed on the following page indicates, the Society will be fulfilling part of the second task suggested above by assisting at the unveiling of two commemorative plaques in Great Village. One of the plaques designates Great Village School (the setting of Bishop's memoir, "Primer Class") as a Nova Scotia Provincial Heritage Property. The second plaque similarly designates the home of Bishop's Bulmer grandparents, which is now owned by Paul Tingley. Heritage classification, among other advantages, secures the architectural integrity of the structures and ensures that present and future lovers of Bishop's work will continue to be able to see both buildings as she saw them. The Society is deeply grateful to Paul Tingley

for his generous co-operation. Those who cannot travel to Great Village for the unveilings are offered in this *Newsletter* the next best thing: drawings of the School and the Bulmer house made by Brian Robinson, a charter member of the Society and Associate Professor of Geography at Saint Mary's University in Halifax.

Brian's drawings (themselves an example of the third task the Society might undertake in the future) lead naturally to the essay in this issue of the *Newsletter*. It is written by the

poet, critic and teacher, Jeffery Donaldson.

He is author of the poetry collection *Once Out of Nature* (McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1991, prefaced by Richard Howard) and of essays on, among others writers, James Merrill, Mark Strand and W.H. Auden. Jeffery is also Contributing Editor to the *Newsletter* and an Associate Professor of English at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. His essay considers some of the local and cosmopolitan aspects of Elizabeth Bishop's paintings.

Peter Sanger

An Invitation

Member or Non-Member You Are Invited

by

THE ELIZABETH BISHOP SOCIETY OF NOVA SCOTIA
and the
GREAT VILLAGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

to

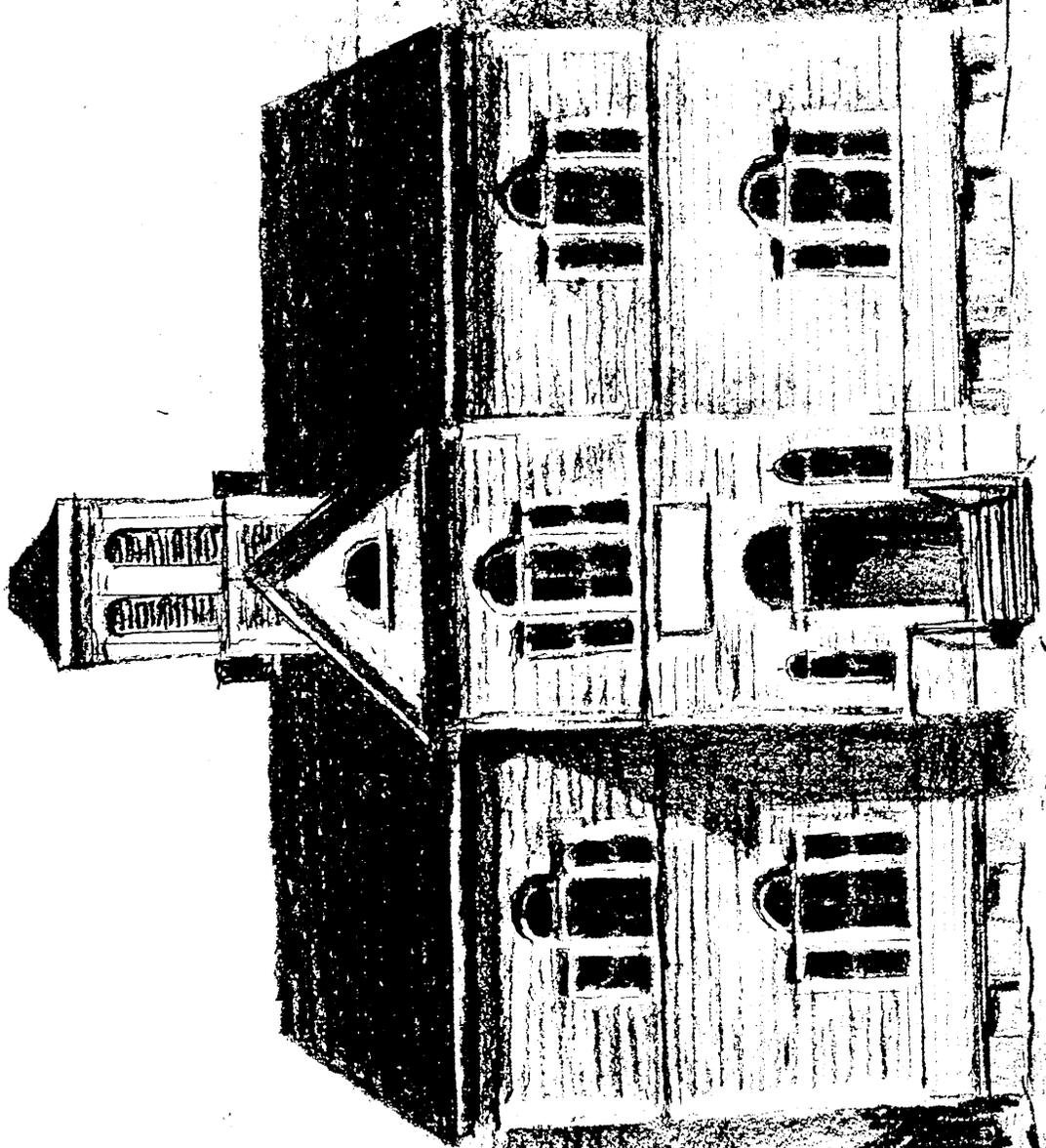
Great Village, Nova Scotia

on

June 7th, 1997

to attend the following

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|-----------|---|
| 2:00 p.m. | Annual Meeting of the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia in the Great Village School House. |
| 2:45 p.m. | Unveiling of a Plaque Designating the Great Village School as a Provincial Heritage Property. |
| 3:15 p.m. | Unveiling of a Plaque Designating the Great Village Home of Elizabeth Bishop as a Provincial Heritage Property. |
| 3:45 p.m. | Refreshments and Social Time in Great Village Legion Hall. |



1897

Handwritten signature or name, possibly 'D. B. ...'

**Small Good Pictures: Notes on Elizabeth
Bishop's *Exchanging Hats: Paintings***

(Ed. & Intro. by W. Benton. Pub. by Farrar,
Straus and Giroux, New York, 1996.
ISBN 0-374-15090-7)

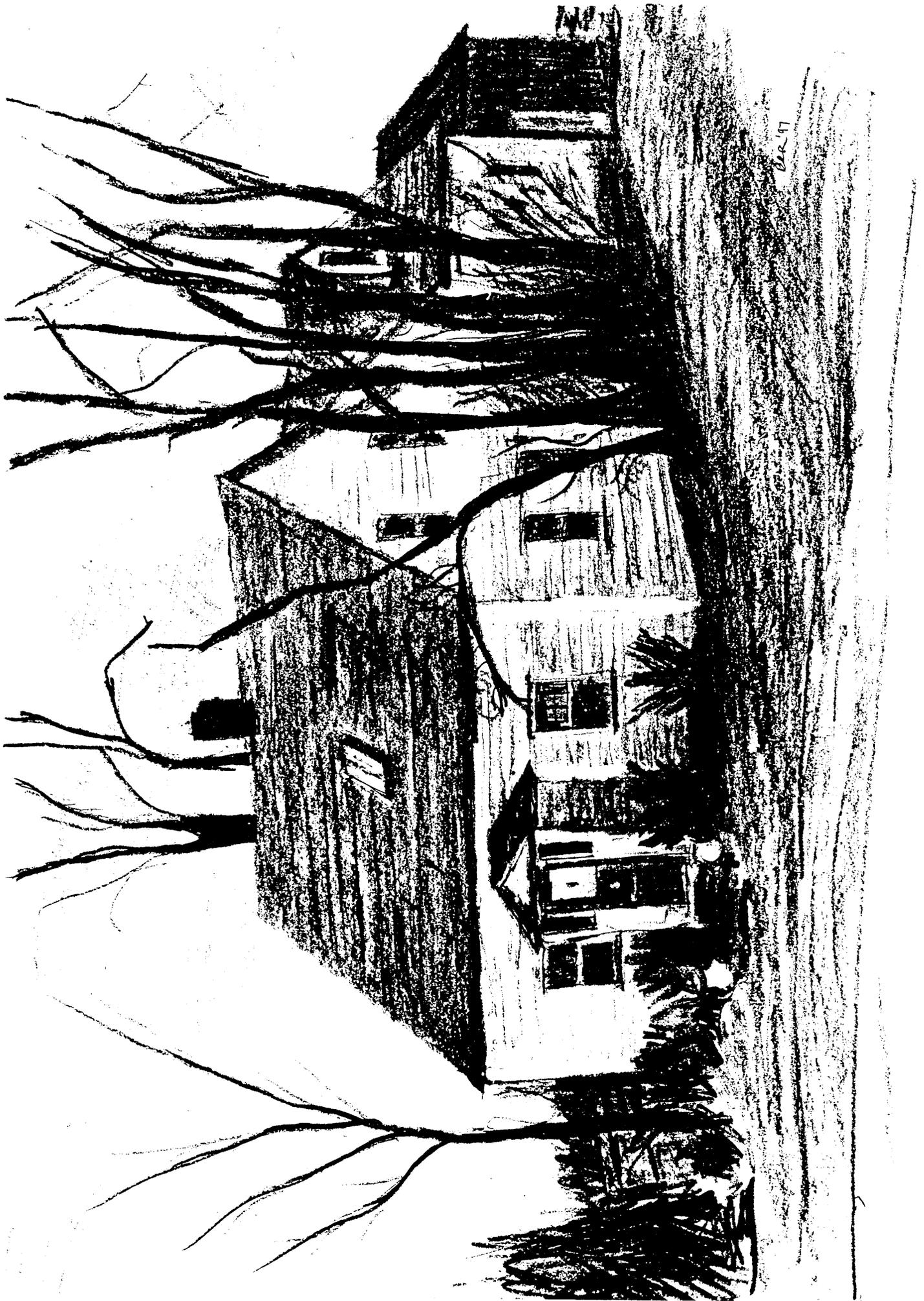
by Jeffery Donaldson

How fitting for Canadian readers that the frontispiece for this collection of Elizabeth Bishop's paintings should show a detail of "Nova Scotia Landscape." Even more interesting is that the scene depicted is not unlike the one Bishop's speaker suddenly recognizes as Nova Scotia in her late work "Poem." The frontispiece too is almost the size of an old style dollar bill; it shows mustard-coloured fields, foggy shrubs, pine trees scattered about, a church to the left, a whimsical, meandering line of fence posts (one brush-stroke each), a flat, half-hidden house and barn, a boat house at the edge of some dotty, blue water in the foreground (almost certainly sea, and not the lake the editor, William Benton, believes it to be) and two empty boats floating there, a yellow one and a black one (the first, a South Shore dory, the second, a make-and-break-engined punt).

Though you can't help but wonder if anyone, particularly a Nova Scotian, will recognize the place, as the speaker of "Poem" says *she* does, you feel at the same time that this is the sort of ideal Nova Scotia, in all its intimacy and charm, that you might paint from memory, with each of the province's symbolic parts whimsically rendered, the water and the few boats, the touching autumn meadow, the church and farmhouse kept respectfully, though not inaccessibly, apart. More than anything else in this book "Nova Scotia Landscape" (page 17) gives an impression of Bishop's unaffected artistic practice. In particular, in this connection, what drew my

attention at first is not the scene itself (for the frontispiece shows only the right side of the picture), but the whole canvas (or in this case, sheet of paper) that Bishop used for her watercolour, including the inch or two of margin that surrounds the rectangular space of the picture itself. In that margin, we see a random collage of tested brush strokes, the water's blue, the pine trees' green (one or two strokes each), just touched to the paper where Bishop weighed their watery thickness before making pictures of water and pine trees out of them. I love the thought that she was making gifts of these pictures and that part of what is given is the unabashed testing of her materials, like sending the drafts along with the finished poem. Nothing is hidden, there are no disguised effects, and the raw materials, fresh-squiggled from the tube, are laid bare as a kind of legend or key to the picture itself. It's hard not to think of "Poem" again: personal memory and the painter's materials for it are so compressed they've turned into each other... how live, how touching in detail -- the little that we get for free.

Exchanging Hats is something less than free at the bookstore (at \$56.00 Canadian), but the book as a whole makes a more affordable point: we only get things for free when they become a part of who we are. Wandering through this collection of Bishop's known paintings (there are 41 of them at present), you have the sense of an imaginative sensibility liberated into the observed details of ordinary life, the familiar houses on your street, the chair and table you happen to be looking at, the fireplace you sit by. Bishop reveals in these pages a strong interest in the minutiae of her daily world, stoves, tables, chairs, lamps, chandeliers, ornaments, fireplace fixtures and flower arrangements. Like Manuelzinho's daily account books whose columns become



17-20

honey-combed with zeros and so break away into starry patterns and dream books, these parts of a familiar world fall into childlike, whimsical arrangements that are clarifying and transfiguring.

At the top of the painting "Red Stove and Flowers" (page 67) Bishop has written, "May the Future's Happy Hours Bring you Beans & Rice & Flowers -- April 27th, 1955. Elizabeth." Below the print are the beans and the rice themselves on a stove, with the flowers disproportionately large beside them. The editor, William Benton, describes this painting as "one of the very few pictures composed as an explicit symbolic statement." It may be an extreme example of Bishop's manner, but perhaps all the more useful for that. It confirms the feeling that as you look through Bishop's painted world what you find yourself letting go of almost immediately is the sense that you are looking, say, at an actual observed arrangement in a room, or an actual street scene. Bishop offers us not a world out there, but a set of interiorized, imaginative glimpses, a world made out of the painter's sensibility, for which her familiar materials are but an occasion. These materials become so much symbolic furniture, a laying clear of the contents of the mind, creating ideal arrangements, but casually, capriciously discovered and disclosed. Bishop once wrote in a letter that

I have that continuous uncomfortable feeling of "things" in the head, like icebergs or rocks or awkwardly shaped pieces of furniture -- it's as if all the nouns were there but the verbs were lacking -- if you know what I mean. I can't help

having the feeling that if they are joggled around hard enough and long enough some kind of electricity will occur, just by friction, that will arrange everything.

This is the very character of her painting as well. "Interior with Extension Cord" (page 43) shows a cabinet, beside a door, beside a stool, beside a table with a lamp on it. "Interior with Calder Mobile" (page 65) depicts a chair with side table, beside a Franklin stove, beside a kettle, beside a bin of chopped wood, with the Calder mobile hanging above it. The objects are laid out, carefully observed, with a generous space between each of them, as though they were parts of a grammatical sentence, signs in a familiar but inscrutable hieroglyphic. In the spaces between, you feel that a kind of potential energy is released that will arrange everything.

Bishop did not consider herself a painter *per se*. "From time to time I paint a small gouache or watercolor and give them to friends ... They are not art -- NOT AT ALL," she once wrote in a letter. What seems to be utterly lacking in these works is that sense of professional stress, of "oh dear, I'm painting a picture ... what will it mean?" She disliked the I'm-a-poet-writing-a-poem-practice of sitting at a writer's desk. Like Emily Dickinson, who might compose a lyric on the back of an envelope and include it in a basket of baked bread, Bishop painted or drew on whatever materials were at hand, letter-writing vellum or hotel stationery, and then did not keep track of where she'd sent her paintings, or who had what. This has presented some difficulty for archivists who have wanted to collect and preserve the work, but that does not seem to

have been Bishop's concern. The paintings were gifts after all.

Bishop described herself as a "genuine primitive," and would no doubt have blushed at the thought of revealing influences or belonging to a particular school. Her endearing modesties aside, there is a sense of shared style and significant painterly influence in the work to be celebrated. Her "Sleeping Figure" (page 11), "Grave with Floral Wreaths" (page 29), and "Pansies" (page 75) call to mind the swimming textures in certain Bonnard lithographs, and her "Brazilian Landscape" (page 63) has something of Bonnard's florabundance and colour detailing. You might think of some of Vuillard's muted interiors when looking at "Table with Plaid Cloth" (page 15). I find myself drawn to the several building facades in the collection (remembering her Prince Edward Island Bishop grandfather was a builder and contractor whose firm built the Boston Public Library), with their bold, predominantly flat, two-dimensional surfaces and thick outlines like street scenes. When I look at something like "41 Charles Street" (page 3), the first painting in the collection, I think of the clean, precise urban landscapes of Michel Delacroix in Paris, with their infinitely intricate house fronts laid out like so many doll houses from an older, vanished world. "Landscape with Grey Hills" (page 81) offers a wonderful collage of effects, a sense of Degas' pastel hills, something of Paul Klee's simplicity of invention in the cabin in the middle distance, with two delightful twists of Bonnardian smoke coming out of the chimneys. At the same time, Bishop's unique signature in these pictures is unmistakable. Part of what makes the work seem distinctly hers is exactly this sense of unabashed playfulness and experimentation. Bishop was not shy about

testing colours, material textures, angles of perception and framing effects. It is the child's unselfconscious creative instinct that we are brought back to here, the kind of "infant sight" whose loss is mourned in the poem "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance." In that poem, the infant sight is the saving grace of the New Testament saviour, whose vision embodies the advent of a new reality. There is the vision of a new reality here, in the paintings, though Bishop would have found "vision" "too serious a word," as she says in "Poem." Something more like a "look," the kind of look we associate with reverie or day dream, a way of seeing, a shifting about of furniture in the mind -- as one might rearrange pieces in a doll house -- our saving grace as the best of kind of interior decoration in the end.

Bishop may have been shy about the seriousness of her work, but we learn quickly that her infant sight is not to be taken lightly -- or not only lightly. It has nothing to do with technical immaturity or with a lack of experience or of having been unscarred by the life lived. With the several watercolours in the middle of the book -- one depicting plain tombstones lined up for sale at a street corner (page 31), another of funeral wreaths on rickety stands reminding you more of an infant's unsteady gait than the grave (page 29) -- you feel yourself at the centre of Bishop's sensibility. What is expressed here instead is the infant sight that lies ahead of us, at the other end of experience: a child's willingness to give a shape, at once whimsical and concrete, to what she feels, and to take what lies at hand and make a gift of it. A way of seeing that most of us have still to accomplish or grow into. Bishop writes at the top of a picture: "May the Future's Happy Hours Bring you Beans & Rice & Flowers." And

there they are, the beans and the rice and the flowers, just as they are promised. These paintings are a revelation.

**Elizabeth Bishop: An Archival Guide
to Her Life in Nova Scotia**

by Sandra Barry

*Published by The Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia, 1996,
226 p, \$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 in Nova Scotia.

Send order with cheque or money order to:

Alan Bray, Treasurer, EBSNS
P.O. Box 138
Great Village, Nova Scotia
B0M 1L0

Membership in the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia is available for \$8 per year or \$20 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.

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Editor: Peter Sanger

Associate Contributing Editors:

Jeffery Donaldson, John Barnstead

Editorial Assistant: Sandra Murphy, Humanities Dept., NSAC, Truro, NS B2N 5E3

Phone: (902) 893-6725

Fax: (902) 897-9399

Email: smurphy@cadmin.nsac.ns.ca

Contributions to the Newsletter, or suggestions for its contents or Society activities are most welcome. Please contact Peter Sanger.