

Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia

Volume 8, Issue 2

Fall 2001

NEWSLETTER

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Special points of interest:

- Proceedings from 1998 Symposium at Acadia are published by Gaspereau Press—reviewed by Jonathan Ellis
- EBSNS in Great Village & English Dept at Acadia to host launch events for the proceedings
- Michiru Oguchi's Japanese translation of Bishop's poetry

Next Issue

- Article by Ann Marie Duggan on the purchase of the Great Village School Outhouse

EDITORIAL

BY SANDRA BARRY

The world is a mist. And then the world is minute and vast and clear.

Elizabeth Bishop
"Sandpiper"

Elizabeth Bishop's struggle with a sense of division • within and without; her life-long effort to acknowledge, explore and hold the immense paradoxes of life and death; and her preference for the ambiguous, equivocal and conditional (thus keeping absolutes at bay), serve us well in times like these, in light of the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Bishop was a master of complexity. Her art succeeds in bringing together the vivid particular with the profoundly philosophical and generates quintessential turbulence • chaotic form. Her art succeeds so well in this effort in part because as a person Bishop actively and humanely engaged inner and outer worlds, engaged with the "human situation" (her phrase), the interconnection between joy and sorrow.

Like many people in recent weeks, I have felt split between a sense that daily life and our usual preoccupations have become trivial and a need to hold onto those very habits and quotidian realms to keep from "falling off / the round, turning world / in to cold, blue-black space." Emerging as it did from Bishop's experiences of World War I and the mental illness of her mother, "In the Waiting Room" is an expression of this kind of split which, when we read it now, speaks to the very struggle we are engaged in: how

do we carry on when the world (inner and outer) loses cohesion.

It is through art of any form that humanity journeys paradox. In times like these art becomes even more necessary because art is essential communication • and there is a real danger in the world right now that we will cease to communicate genuinely with each other. Bishop's art "behooves the soul" to continue the journey.

~~~~~  
This issue of the EBSNS Newsletter is transitional. The editorial baton is being passed from the capable hands of Peter Sanger to the co-editorship of Brian Bartlett and Sandra Barry, both of Halifax. Jeffery Donaldson of Hamilton remains as a contributing editor, with the addition of Ross Leckie, whom we welcome aboard. (Ross is a poet, editor of *The Fiddlehead*, and a professor of literature and creative writing at UNB). Production matters are also in transition, moving from the Nova Scotia Agricultural College to, we hope, Saint Mary's University. However, the logistical details are still being finalized. It is the intention of the editors to change the format of the Newsletter. This issue's format changes are conditional, and are still under discussion. The Spring 2002 issue will inaugurate permanent changes. The editors welcome suggestions for both content and form.

This issue has received substantial assistance from Ann Marie Duggan, Brian Robinson and Cheryl Byrne. The editors extend heartfelt thanks for their contributions.

### EBSNS Membership

The EBSNS was formed in 1994 to celebrate the life and work of the poet Elizabeth Bishop. It publishes a bi-annual newsletter. In 1996, it also published ELIZABETH BISHOP: AN ARCHIVAL GUIDE TO HER LIFE IN NOVA SCOTIA, documenting Bishop and Bishop-related records in Nova Scotia. The EBSNS contributed to the purchase of an extensive family archive, which documents Bishop's Nova Scotia childhood and is housed at Acadia University Archives, Wolfville, N.S. The EBSNS holds its AGM in Great Village in early June. The EBSNS seeks through its various activities to reclaim Elizabeth Bishop as a Nova Scotia writer, thus enriching our literary and cultural heritage.

To become a member of the EBSNS please write to the address below and we'll send our brochure containing a membership form. Annual dues are \$8.00 or \$20.00 (CAD) for three years.

Annual dues entitle you to two issues of the newsletter and all other privileges of membership.

Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia  
P.O. Box 138  
Great Village, Nova Scotia  
B0M 1L0 Canada

# EBSNS

## ANNUAL

## GENERAL

## MEETING

The EBSNS held its AGM in the Great Village Legion on Saturday, June 9, 2001, at 2:00 p.m. The business was conducted by President Brian Robinson. Minutes of the 2000 AGM were read by out-going Secretary Terry White and approved. Treasurer Angus Chisholm reported in detail on the financial status of the society. As of June 2001, the EBSNS bank account had a balance of almost \$1,700.00. The Treasurer's Report was approved.

The President's Report provided a summary of the past year's events and activities and thanked Peter Sanger for his editorship of the Newsletter. The Nominating Committee report was given by Peter Sanger. The Executive and Board nominations were approved.

### EBSNS Executive:

President: Brian Robinson  
 Vice-President: Donna Smyth  
 Secretary: Sandra Barry  
 Treasurer: Angus Chisholm

### EBSNS Board:

|                 |                  |
|-----------------|------------------|
| Brian Bartlett  | Lois Bray        |
| Arthur Chisholm | Ann Marie Duggan |
| Joy Graham      | Meredith Layton  |
| Ruth Peppard    | Peter Sanger     |
| Deborah Stiles  | Paul Tingley     |
| Terry White     |                  |

Before adjournment, Meredith Layton offered thanks on behalf of the EBSNS to Peter Sanger for his term as editor of the Newsletter. Peter reflected on his editorship, pledged his continued participation in all society activities and offered some good advice to the incoming Newsletter editor (see "The Sanger Years").

The AGM was adjourned, and the gathering was treated to a lively presentation, "The Road to Londonderry." (below)

Following the presentation, a delicious refreshment was served. Anyone who has attended EBSNS events in Great Village will agree that the hospitality is second to none. And the EBSNS wishes to thank the Board members who so regularly organize this part of our meetings and events, which always bring them to such a pleasant and memorable close.

During the reception, producer Don Duchene of Nexus Media, Inc., Chester, NS, demonstrated the prototype of a website: "Elizabeth Bishop and Nova Scotia." This website, which is still in the development stage, can be accessed through the Nexus Media website: <http://www.nexusmedia.ca>

## ***"The Road to Londonderry"***

We decided to broaden the AGM presentation this year and place Bishop and Great Village into a wider historical and geographical context. Obviously, "The Road to Londonderry" was not entirely inspired by Bishop. As an industrial centre which hadn't survived its nineteenth century advantages—one of which was Great Village as its port—it doesn't seem to have much in common with the Bishop of "In the Village." However, its post-industrial early settlement was part of the colonization of the Minas Basin by Ulster folk. Brian Robinson and Pádraig Ó Sathail gave us

the where of these early trans-Atlantic links back to the Londonderry of the north coast of Ireland.

Deborah Stiles presented some insight into what might be too easily dismissed in the seeming "ghost town" of Bishop's epithet. And Sandra Barry provided the literal link between Londonderry "Junction" (as Bishop called it) and Great Village in a reading from Bishop's unpublished reminiscence "The Proud Villagers." It is hoped that this semi-Bishop approach will show that there is more to Bishop's portrayal of the area than "the literal small backwater" of "Poem." In that context, the Society was pleased to welcome Londonderry's historian, Truman Matheson.

-Brian Robinson

"and while I waited I read"...

*Divisions of the Heart: Elizabeth Bishop and the Art of Memory and Place*

(Ed. & Intro. by Gwendolyn Davies, Sandra Barry and Peter Sanger. Published by Gaspereau Press, 2001)

by Jonathan Ellis\*

September rain falls on the house.

In the failing light, the old grandmother

sits in the kitchen with the child

beside the Little Marvel Stove,

reading the jokes from the almanac,

laughing and talking to hide her tears.

("Sestina")

As September rain falls on my own house two weeks after the events of September 11, it is hard not to think of Elizabeth Bishop: particularly as the child of "Sestina", continually drawing another "inscrutable house." For if the images of Lower Manhattan were shocking, so too were the children's drawings a few days afterwards, rigid buildings under attack by toy planes, flames falling down like tears. These sketches in crayon are to my mind the most eloquent expressions yet of what actually happened. Instead of reaching for the clumsy language of militarism and war favoured by most politicians, the kids of Manhattan actually offer us a more human picture of tragedy with all the confusion and detail left in. Bishop's poem, with its busy child crayoning in its own drawing of loss and survival, suggests obvious parallels. Rather than feel sorry for herself, the grandmother reads jokes from the almanac, hiding her tears with laughter. Watching this scene, the child acts similarly, expressing anxiety while at the same time drawing a line (or should that be "a winding pathway") around it. Art, as Bishop continually insists, can help us to place disaster if never quite control it. To borrow Seamus Heaney's words: "For all her caution

about over-stating its prerogatives and possibilities, she does continually manage to advance poetry beyond the point where it has been helping us to enjoy life to that even more profoundly verifying point where it helps us also to endure it."<sup>1</sup>

Heaney's words influence me today as I sit down to consider the most recent collection of essays to be published on Bishop's work, the beautifully presented *Divisions of the Heart: Elizabeth Bishop and the Art of Memory and Place*. The book's editors, Sandra Barry, Gwendolyn Davies and Peter Sanger, helpfully separate the contributions into two main parts: "Place/Memory" and "The Art of Division." The first of these divides represents a biographical approach to Bishop's writing, the second a more theoretical one, yet as Barry cautions in the preface: "Categories function only as suggestive guidelines and the essays in the first section often directly engage the essays in the second." One can see this conversation at work within the body and footnotes of almost every essay, as noises off regularly echo and enlarge each writer's words. Another kind of dialogue is also in play with Bishop's first critics, many of whom were also her friends. Laura Jehn Menides' piece on Bishop's sense of humour, for example, reminds me of Robert Lowell's assessment of *The Complete Poems* where he celebrates "a tone of large, grave tenderness and sorrowing amusement."<sup>2</sup> Camille Roman's attention "not only to the 'said', but also to the 'unsaid'" tacitly acknowledges Octavio Paz's observation that "poetry is not in what words say but in what is said between them."<sup>3</sup> The cross-contamination of ideas and phrases bridges the divide between different generations and voices, strengthening the sense of a community of readers behind this project, "uninterruptedly/ talking in Eternity" like the Grandparents' voices in "The Moose." The chatter of readers responding to poems and stories is one of the most marvellous aspects of this book. Its editors and contributors have wisely rejected the temptation to repudiate everything that has gone before it. Artificial divisions of approach and emphasis are there to be side-stepped and skipped over, they seem to be saying, prior

influences to be accepted and used. The silent presence of Lowell, Paz and others paradoxically make this the freshest of volumes on Bishop's work for a good while. A diversity of opinions and positions are generously given a seat on the bus, regardless of whether it is fashionable to do so.

One of my favourite finds here is a joyous image of Amy Clampitt, friend of one of the book's contributors, Jeffrey Donaldson. In a moving discussion of the literary rooms within rooms that lie inside "Sestina", Donaldson sets off on a very Bishopesque digression:

I was with the late American poet Amy Clampitt, who came to visit Hamilton, Ontario, in 1991, and upon arrival, in the drive through town, squealed with delight at seeing an ESSO sign that recalled Bishop's "Filling Station", the sort of sign that no longer appears in the United States. It must have made her feel immediately at home here. Clampitt found herself returning geographically to a place already opened in her mind by the poems she had come to love. (p. 140)

I found myself copying Clampitt's squeal of delight on several occasions, surprised at the appearance of critical perspectives which seemed to have disappeared over the past decade. By which I mean an aesthetic reading of poems and stories for their own sake rather than for any kind of ideological message or subtext. The categories and jargon that have to some extent obscured Bishop's voice are more or less absent from this book. We are left largely alone with the poems, an experience that makes us, like Clampitt, "feel immediately at home here."

At the risk of re-inscribing divisions again, I would like to sketch out some of the main reading strategies taken in this book. The first can perhaps be characterised as 'the sandpiper approach', eyes fixed on the details of the poem to the exclusion of much else, no "detail too small" for the reader's examination. This is certainly the method favoured by Bishop herself, dismissive of the poem as a vehicle of any sort, political

or otherwise. The second strategy of reading might be called the 'roaring world approach' through which historical contexts and questions are more foregrounded, detail sublimated for the so-called larger picture. Many monographs of Bishop's work take such a position, from Margaret Dickie's focus on gay poetics to Camille Roman's study of the Cold War, from Renée Curry's analysis of race to Sally Bishop Shigley's interest in French Feminism.

My own preference for 'the sandpiper approach' seems to be shared by the book's editors, though there is a deliberate attempt to also include practitioners of 'the roaring world' school of thought. Of these, Gary Fountain's clever use of postcolonial theory is particularly astute, as is Laura Menides' aforementioned essay on the tears *and* laughter underpinning Bishop's view of life. I was less convinced by Crystal Bacon's focus on "encoded lesbian identity", especially when her argument is based on the assumption that because "Insomnia" is "so short, something... seems to be missing." For similar reasons, I found Barbara Comins' emphasis on "the lesbian American poet Elizabeth Bishop" (nobody ever introduces Seamus Heaney as 'the heterosexual Irish poet') too reductive, resting as it does on the dubious notion that within every trope of secrecy lies "closely kept lesbian desires." Lesbian readings of Bishop's work, in my opinion, do not seem to have moved on from Adrienne Rich's review of *The Complete Poems* in 1983 when she spoke of poems like "Cootchie" and "Songs for a Colored Singer" in terms of marginality and outsiderhood. Neither Bacon nor Comins shift the debate forward.

In no order of preference and with due apologies to all the sandpiper-critics missed out, I would like at this point to draw attention to two or three of the many memorable essays in this book.

My first is Peter Sanger's analysis of Bishop's childhood experiences and her imaginative use of them: a spark-filled piece of wonder, full of tiny nuggets of insight. Sanger seems to take a pan to the bottom of Bishop's aesthetic, dredging it for the grains of her Nova Scotian heritage. Al-

myths and adult poems breaks down. One example of this is the link Sanger makes between A. A. Milne's "saga" of lost houses in the Hundred Acre Wood and Bishop's own list of lost property in "One Art." Such parallels provoke further questions, some trivial, others serious, much in the spirit of Bishop's own interrogations.

My second choice is Brian Bartlett's analysis of Bishop's coasts and shorelines, if only for the following line on her relationship to other maritime writers: "She's clearly no Melville or Conrad." Yes, exactly, but why has nobody ever said so before? Lorrie Goldensohn's essay on "the homeless eye" in Bishop's paintings is characteristically erudite and rewarding, though in downgrading the achievement of these paintings in her conclusion she somewhat undermines her previous argument. Neil Besner's lyric re-reading of "Santarém" as a poem literally about language is wonderfully unfashionable and very convincing. And so the list continues: Jeffrey Donaldson's masterclass in intertextuality, Sandra Barry's moving and informed example of archive study, Brian Robinson's elegant argument (and drawings too), Michael Happy's philosophical reach...

Art, the sandpiper poets and critics seem to tell us, can help to bridge the divisions of the heart even if they are subsequently separated again. In our literal and figurative waiting rooms, outside of which another war may soon be on, such lessons are always relevant. This is a brave and rewarding book for the best and worst of times. We do well to listen to the poet who inspired it and the poets and readers who make us return anew to the marvellous tact and wisdom of her poems, paintings and stories.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Seamus Heaney. *The Redress of Poetry*. London: Faber and Faber, 1995, p.185.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Lowell. "On *The Complete Poems*", in Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (eds.), *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983, p. 206.

<sup>3</sup>Octavio Paz. "Elizabeth Bishop, or The Power of Retience", in Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (eds.), *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983, p. 211.

Jonathan Ellis has just recently received his doctorate from the University of Hull, England. His special interest is obviously the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. He attended the 1999 conference in Ouro Preto, Brazil, and visited Great Village in the same year.

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# ELIZABETH BISHOP SOCIETY OF NOVA SCOTIA

UPCOMING EVENTS:

## BOOK LAUNCH

*'Division of the Heart': Elizabeth Bishop and the Art of  
Memory and Place*

Saturday, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2001

2:00 p.m.

Great Village Legion  
Great Village, N.S.

## RECEPTION

To mark the publication of

*'Division of the Heart': Elizabeth Bishop and the Art of  
Memory and Place*

Friday, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2001

4:00-5:30 p.m.

Kirkconnell Room  
Vaughan Library  
Acadia University  
Wolfville, N.S.

**ALL WELCOME !!**

10 NEW ESSAYS

### DIVISIONS OF THE HEART: ELIZABETH BISHOP AND THE ART OF MEMORY AND PLACE

SANDRA BARRY, GWEN DAVIES & PETER SANGER, EDS.

SCHOLARLY ESSAYS / LITERARY CRITICISM  
SEPTEMBER 2001 RELEASE

\$32.05 / 1 \$64.05 / 5-8 / 500 pp  
TRADE PAPER / THROUGH BINDING



*Elizabeth Bishop*

In the fall of 1998, Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, hosted a symposium on the life and work of Pulitzer-prize-winning writer Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979). This book collects 25 of the essays that were presented at the conference, as well as over 40 black and white reproductions of photographs relating to Bishop's life.

Contributors include: Crystal Bacon, Marian Banzerman, Sandra Barry, Brian Bartlett, Neil Besner, Theodore Colson, Barbara Comins, Gwen Davies, Jeffery Donaldson, Patricia Dwyer, Lillian Falk, Andre Furtini, Gary Fountain, Glen Robert Gill, Lorrie Goldensolhn, Michael Happy, Kathleen Johnson, Ross Leckie, Elizabeth McKim, Laura Jean Mirandas, Sara Meyer, Roger Moore, Brian Robinson, Camille Roman, Peter Sanger, and Anne Stevenson.

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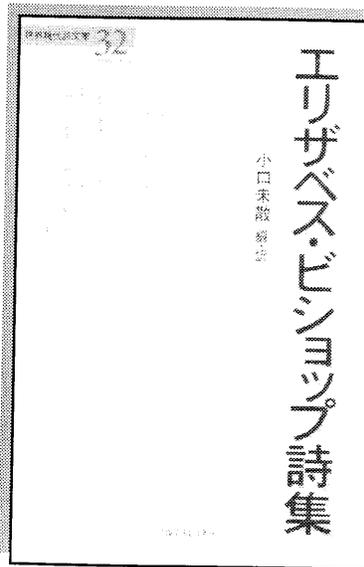
JAPANESE TRANSLATION  
OF BISHOP POEMS

Elizabeth Bishop has been translated and published in many languages, including Italian, German, Polish, Swedish and Portuguese.

Bishop herself engaged in the art of translation in several languages, including French, Spanish and Portuguese.

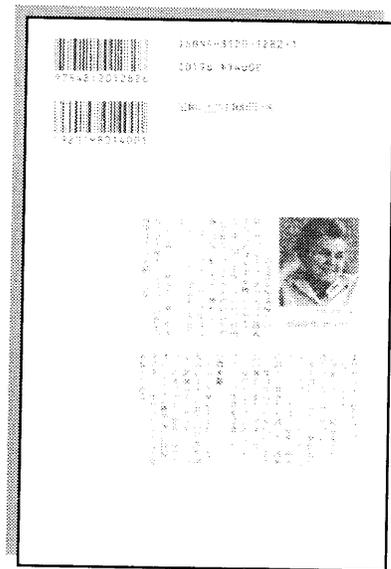
**Michiru Oguchi's book,  
Elizabeth Bishop:  
Shi-Shū (Poems).**

is the first extensive translation of Bishop's poetry into Japanese. Published as part of the World Poets Today series. Michiru's book will open a whole new readership for Bishop's enduring art.



To obtain a copy of Michiru's book contact:

Doyo Bijutusha Shuppan Hanbai  
(Saturday Arts Publications)  
3-31-8 Shinjuku-ku,  
Nishi-Waseda  
169-0051, Tokyo, Japan  
Tel: 03-5285-0730  
Fax: 03-5285-0732



Michiru Oguchi  
2-3-4 Higashi-Fushimi  
Nishi-Tokyo shi  
202-0021 Japan  
Tel & Fax: 0424-68-5662

*Rare and Commonplace Flowers*, by Carmen L. Oliveira (translated from the Portuguese by Neil K. Besner), foreword by Lloyd Schwartz

*Rare and Commonplace Flowers*—a Brazilian bestseller—tells the story of two women. Elizabeth Bishop, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning American poet, sought artistic inspiration in Brazil. There she met and fell in love with Lota de Macedo Soares, a self-trained Brazilian architect. This dual biography—brilliantly researched, and written in a lively, novelistic style—follows their relationship from 1951 to 1967, the time when the two lived together in Brazil. The fact that these two women had an intimate relationship caused an uproar when it first came to public notice.

The relationship started out happily, yet ended tragically. In 1961, Soares became increasingly obsessed with building and administering Flamengo Park, Rio de Janeiro's equivalent to New York City's Central Park. Though she had been the driving force behind the park's inception, the ultimate credit that was due her was stripped away because of petty politics and chicanery. As Soares's career declined and Bishop's flourished, their relationship crumbled.

*Rare and Commonplace Flowers* is a tale of two artists and two cultures, offering unique perspectives on both women and their work. Carmen L. Oliveira provides an unparalleled level of detail and insight, due to both her familiarity with Brazil as well as her access to the country's artistic elite, many of whom had a direct connection with Bishop and Soares. Rare pictures of the two artists and their home bring this unique story to life.

Carmen L. Oliveira is a Brazilian novelist. Neil K. Besner is a professor in the English department at the university of Winnipeg in Canada. 200 pp., 18 b & w illus., Cloth, \$26.00, 0-8135-3033-4, February, Rutgers University Press F: 888/471-9014; rutgerspress.rutgers.edu

"A white-haired woman with sad eyes rereads the first two lines of a poem that she has been trying, interminably, to finish:

'Of course I may be remembering it all wrong  
After, after—how many years?'  
"She looks out the window at a beautiful view of the port. There's little movement on the docks. On one of the walls of the room, the scowling face with blue eyes and horns bares its teeth. In every corner, piles of books.

"After how many years, in fact?

It was in 1951. November, 1951. Twenty-seven years ago!

"... Dear friend, sit down. The story is long, and sad."  
—from *Rare and Commonplace Flowers*

# The Sanger Years

Peter was the newsletter's first, and has been ever since, its only Editor. The "one and only" is an attribute reserved for few. But, as members of that founding group, we cannot recall that any other decision was even considered as each of us took up our appointed roles. Peter was to be Editor and that was it! In part—and here we must acknowledge the work of the Nova Scotia Agricultural College and the Department of Humanities Secretary, Sandra Murphy—this inevitability was due to his knowledge of how such a newsletter could be produced. However, "how" doesn't make much sense without a "why." And surely, what is remarkable about the Sanger approach is that

there was always a reason for each issue that went well beyond the usual notion of a newsletter. Discovery, critical acumen, industrious burrowing, not to forget the intrepid integrity of a man who stuck to his guns, are the characteristics of any given Sanger edition. As Brian Robinson said in his brief remarks at the Annual General Meeting, "he will be a hard act to follow." Well that cannot be the case because, obviously, no one will even try. So thank you, Peter, for your tenacity and the careful guidance that you gave (your gift) to us all during this more than incipient period when you undertook so much.

## *Passing of a valued EBSNS member*

*The EBSNS Executive and Board want to acknowledge the passing of one of our longest-standing members. On 26 September 2001, Zilpha Linkletter (b. 29 November 1915) died in Halifax, N.S.*

*Dr. Linkletter had a long and distinguished career in public administration in Nova Scotia and for many years sat on the Board of Dalhousie University. In the 1940s, when she was a student at Columbia University in New York City, she was introduced to Elizabeth Bishop by their mutual friend Ella Des Brisay. From that meeting emerged a life-long friendship. Dr. Linkletter participated in the effort to have Dalhousie confer an honorary degree on Bishop in May 1979, a few months before Bishop's death. Dr. Linkletter was an inaugural member of the EBSNS and always a strong supporter of its work.*

*The Executive and Board wish to express its sorrow at Zilpha's passing and its deepest sympathy to her family.*