

Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia

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

Volume 2, Issue 1

NEWSLETTER

Spring, 1995

Editorial

One suspects the "bare feet" were the most conclusive proof. It was they which probably took Elizabeth Bishop out of Great Village, Colchester County, Nova Scotia in September, 1917, landed her in Worcester, Massachusetts with her Bishop grandparents and expelled her from the paradise of primer class and Betsey, the little dog (who once ate a plateful of oysters when Grandfather Bulmer's back was turned).

The passage at issue is one in Bishops memoir - essay, "The Country Mouse," which has frequently been quoted in the material written about her:

I had been brought back unconsulted and against my wishes to the house my father had been born in, to be saved from a life of poverty and provincialism, bare feet, suet puddings, unsanitary school slates, perhaps even from the inverted r's of my mother's family.

The Bishop grandparents were obviously highly principled. By such standards they could easily have explained the flawed civility of, let us say, Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather and Louise Bogan.

Perhaps one should credit Elizabeth Bishop with a little more irony on this occasion

(and many others -- after all, she loved that most ironic of games, ping-pong). In 1917, Great Village was hardly the scene of "poverty and provincialism." As this Newsletter shows, it was still part of that very active imperial periphery of late-Victorian and lingering Edwardian culture which had gathered and drawn into its centre provincials such as Ezra Pound and Robert Frost. It also had gathered and drawn many of the men and women in Great Village into the process of that centre's self-destruction, what used to be called "The Great War."

Future issues of the Newsletter will further explore the subtlety and complexity of Bishop's Great Village in various ways -- socially, economically (it was not poor) and perhaps architecturally. This issue is devoted to the exemplary subtlety and complexity of one particular Great Village sometime inhabitant, Bishop's great-uncle, the painter and illustrator George Hutchinson, source of "Large Bad Picture" and "Poem" and, by various transmissions, of a measure of Bishop's own abilities as a painter. Like her, he somehow survived suet puddings.

News and Information

As this Newsletter goes to press, the Society and the people of Great Village are making final preparations for the "Elizabeth Bishop Celebration Day" which will be held on Saturday, June 10. The Society looks forward to meeting friends and members

from the maritime provinces, from Ontario, from the United States and Japan.

Of special importance during the day is the Society's first Annual General Meeting which will be held in the St. James United Church Hall between 2:00-3:00 p.m. A special nominating committee will present nominees for election to the Society's Board of Directors. But it is most important to note that nominations will also be welcomed and accepted from the floor, from among the Society's general membership, with the proviso that nominees are able and prepared to attend a reasonable number of Board meetings, held in Great Village or Truro, four to six times a year.

The highlight of the day will be the First Elizabeth Bishop Memorial Lecture delivered in St. James United Church by Thomas J. Travisano, author of *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* (1988) and a co-founder of the Elizabeth Bishop Society of the United States. He is about to publish a second major book upon Bishop's life and work and her place among her fellow poets. Copies of the textual version of Dr. Travisano's lecture will be on sale after he has delivered it.

To turn quickly to other matters, Sandra Barry's activities, carried out under the auspices of the Society and funded by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, have reached the point of a major preliminary draft of a substantial archival guide to material which has lain unorganized, only partially organized, or remained largely unknown.

The guide includes a synoptic chronicle of Elizabeth Bishop's ancestral and immediate maternal family history; an assessment of how Great Village, N.S., her early childhood home, functions as a primary source for

understanding Bishop's life and work; a multi-level archival description of the Bulmer-Bowers-Hutchinson-Sutherland family fonds, owned by Bishop's first cousin, Phyllis Bowers Sutherland; general descriptions of the location and type of Bishop archival sources found in a variety of repositories in Nova Scotia, including the Public Archives of Nova Scotia and Acadia and Dalhousie University Archives; general descriptions of the location and type of Bishop sources which remain in private family or individual archives; and, finally, a bibliographic essay surveying the critical literature written about Bishop in Canada and the United States.

Lastly, with great pleasure (and relief) the Editor of the Newsletter here greets and thanks two Associate Contributing Editors: Jeffery Donaldson is a professor in the English Department at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. His collection of poems, *Once Out of Nature*, was published by McClelland and Stewart in 1991 (with Preface by Richard Howard). He is the author of numerous articles on contemporary American poets, particularly Howard and Strand. John Barnstead, the author of the essay published in the present Newsletter, is a professor in the Russian Department at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. He is a translator, critic and poet. He has recently completed an annotated translation of the poems of Mikhail Kuzmin.

Great-Uncle George" and the Effacement of The Master ***John Barnstead***

Coming to "Large Bad Picture" after an evening of Rilke and Baudelaire in parallel, German and English, English and French, you cannot help hearing the echo of golden alternatives in its first quatrain: *or,*

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.

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

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Contributions to the Newsletter, or suggestions for its contents are most welcome. Please contact Ms. Murphy about either.

northerly, Labrador, before, occasionally subsiding into the hesitant, teutonic primordial word-groping of harbor, teacher, picture. Or is it that you hear the steady dip of oars, the last two plashes shallower as the dinghy is shadowed by the overhanging cliffs hundreds of feet high? Are they massive outcroppings of ore, waiting to be mined and refined, eventual occasions for fist-fights in the claims office of some governmental department in St.

John's? So much of what's made of a poem depends upon when it's come upon.

Even though he's 'a' great-uncle, not 'my', and left nameless, you take it for granted (now) that the artist responsible for the Large Bad Picture is Bishop's own, George Wylie Hutchinson. Why was he effaced, though, then? To partake of the archetypal? Or did he simply suffer the fate of any minor figure in art?¹ Bishop eventually gave a few details about him in her conversation with George Starbuck:

EB: In my first book there is a poem called "Large Bad Picture"; that picture was by the same great-uncle, painted when he was about 14 years old. They were a very poor family in Nova Scotia, and he went to sea as a cabin boy. Then he painted three or four big paintings, memories of the far North, Belle Isle, etc. I loved them. They're not very good as painting. An aunt owned several of them. I tried to get her to sell them to me, but she never would. Then Great-Uncle George went to England, and he did become a fairly well-known "traditional" painter. In 1905, I think it was, he went back to Nova Scotia for the summer to visit his sister, my grandmother. He made a lot of sketches and held "art classes" for my aunts and my mother and others. I eventually fell heir to this little sketch ("About the size of an old-style dollar bill"), the one I describe.²

Thanks to the researches of Lillian Falk and Sandra Barry, a great deal more is known about Great-Uncle George. He turns out to have been a good friend of British novelist Israel Zangwill, who is reduced (now) in literary histories to the source of the phrase "the melting pot" as applied to American society, but who was very popular in the 1880s and 1890s, the author of the 1894 *Kunstlerroman*, *The Master*, the hero of which, Matthew Strang, seems to be based largely on Hutchinson himself.³ The fate of the minor artist has effaced Hutchinson more than once: it had been thought that the model for Matthew Strang was Halifax-born painter Gilbert Stuart Newton (1794-1835); reference works on British illustrators perpetually conflate him with his contemporary, George W. C. Hutchinson. No doubt future analysis will untangle them, and it will become clearer which of the contributions to the *Illustrated London News*, *The Ludgate Monthly*, *Black and White*, *The Idler*, *Chums* (illustrations of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island!*) *The Pall Mall Budget*, and *Puck and Ariel* belong to whom. Zangwill's novel itself contains such queer anticipatory reminiscences of passages in Bishop's prose and poetry that you feel curiously deflated to learn that as late as 1972 she was still searching Widener Library for a copy to read.

Brett Millier writes of the "enduring and endearing ineptitude" of Uncle George's painting⁴, Bonnie Costello of a "clumsy effort at the sublime"⁵ but isn't that simply a response to the image of his work generated by Bishop's poetry? Was he really as unskilled as all that? Not if he is judged even by the ephemera of his magazine and book illustrations. One sketch, for Zangwill's *The King of Schnorrers*, might almost embody some Victorian precursor of "the Man-Moth"; another, from the same author's *The*

Bachelors' Club, captures a comic anticipatory essence of the anandrous aunts with avernal eyes in "Exchanging Hats". How powerful is the urge to juxtapose: pictures with poems, poems with poems. The apparent ineptitude and the clumsiness in the rhyming and syntax of "Large Bad Picture" become assets if they mirror the assumed faults of the picture the poem depicts. Just as it is difficult to read Bishop's "To a Tree" without imagining it a reply to Robert Frost's "Tree at My Window", so "Large Bad Picture" involuntarily brings to mind W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts".⁶ But while Auden's is a public poem, a magisterial critical generalization followed by an Old Master widely-known, drawn in to illustrate the point, most of Bishop's readers cannot (yet, at least) have a direct visual knowledge of her great-uncle's Large Bad Picture. It seems likely they would like to, though. Ekphrastic poetry prompts an urge to juxtapose the words with the painting, but subordinates them to it.⁷ How much more humble the ekphrastic poem than the title of a painting, the usurping power of which is so strong that it is often what is looked at first in a museum! "Large Bad Painting" is not so much a captured mind-moment prior to formulation of dogmatic statement as it is a questioning of critical juxtaposition and evaluation in general, and a questioning of our urge to possess the original. No dogma will be forthcoming. No purchase is possible, for the painting has become what is said about it; its constituents are those of writing: 'hundreds of fine black birds hanging in n's in banks'. "Large Bad Picture" participates in the same fascination with the passage from 'm' to 'n' which generated "The Man-Moth": *comprehensive* paired with *consoling*, *commerce* with *contemplation*. Who could resist the urge to diptych? And so you come upon "Poem".

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GEORGE HUTCHINSON*

(TAKEN FROM ZANGWILL'S *THE BACHELOR CLUB* AND *THE KING OF THE SCHNORRERS*)



*SLIGHTLY REDUCED



When I read "Poem" for the first time, aged twenty-four, much of its sadness escaped me. The 'crisp' irises, for example. How could that adjective come out of the 'slanting stick' which is what first lures the viewer in for a closer look, when it is resolved into 'white and yellow, fresh-squiggled from the tube'? It is only then that you are *in* the picture, and can feel that the air, too, is fresh, and cold. And yet the 'fresh' of 'fresh-squiggled' is a lie, for the painting is many years old; it is in trying to make that lie true that you are drawn in and pastwards.⁸ But looking for where 'crisp' came from is what drew me into the poem. I found its sound-rhizome in the '*wisp*' that at first might or might not have been the church steeple⁹, and one of its falls or standards in Miss *Gil/espie*¹⁰ of the last of the musing rhetorical questions. Are the munching cows munching iris, pastoral beauty, simply a misapprehension of nature's culture? But even that would be second-hand, insufficient knowledge. You can only really know the crispness of the iris if you have snipped one out or plucked one up yourself, and it is the memory of such futile attempts to possess beauty (like Bishop's own vain efforts to purchase the "Large Bad Picture") that haunts the poem. It isn't as if she didn't know better, at least in Art: the gills of "The Fish" are 'fresh and crisp with blood', her only other use of the adjective in her poetry¹¹, and the poem ends with her releasing the fish. In reality, though, (we are told) she kept it. The preposed virtuosity of the 'soon-to-be-dismantled elms' (rural Nova Scotia being one of the few places where they have escaped, for a time, the Dutch disease) pales in comparison with the virtual image this adjective leaves of the curled damp pulp the picked iris so quickly becomes, even as it at the same time concludes the money imagery through its association with the commonplace phrase 'a crisp new dollar

bill'. Am I mistaken (now) in thinking the whole final passage of "Poem" is redolent of Frost's "Spring Pools", where the flowers also shiver, and the water is as potentially transient, and the watery flowers or flowery waters are as difficult to distinguish one from another as life or the memory of it, art "copying from life" and life itself are here? Does "Poem" bear the same relation to "Hyla Brook" that "Large Bad Picture" bears to "Musée des Beaux Arts"?

Aged twenty-four, I missed the implicit grief of "I'll probably never have room to hang these things again," too. Nothing within the poem itself tells us precisely who is speaking here: some relative from the next generation back, but who? An aunt bound for a nursing home? Or (as I thought at first, before I knew anything about Bishop's personal history) her mother? In the last pages of Zangwill's *The Master*, Matthew Strang becomes a genuine artist only after giving up hopes of happiness and efforts to earn money through his art. You wonder how Bishop would have felt reading the final pages of the novel, with its mad mother, values, payments, dower and accounts; its conglomeration of *con*'s and *com*'s:

One of his pictures is of a woman looking out to sea with hopeless eyes; there is a mocking glory of sunset in the sky. This is called "The Pain of the World". [...] The figure is his mother's, come back to him in his own solitude - the image of her standing thus in the asylum at Halifax could not be effaced from his soul; it had to find expression in his Art. As he worked at it, with the brutal aloofness of the artist,

studying lights and shadows, values and effects, gradations and tones, he wondered whether the artist were a cold-blooded monster, or a divinely appointed alchemist sent to transmute the dross of the world's pain to the gold of Art for the world's pleasure; a magician to cover up the rawness of life, as kindly Nature covers up the naked earth with grass, or throws the purple light of dream over all that is dead - over the centuries that are past or our youth that is gone; a Redeemer, whose beautiful perceptions of pathos and tragedy robs the grave of its victory, and plucks Death of its sting, so that no man suffereth or travaileth without *contributing* to the raw stuff of life of which Art is woven by the souls dowered with the pangs and privileges of *Over-Consciousness*. Each man, it sometimes seemed to him, dimly, had to pay so much in sorrow and pain; and in return for that he drew from the *common* human fund the *comprehension* of life and the *consolation* of Art, new sympathies and new delights, music and books and pictures, that only lived through the rich variety of human destinies; mystic atmospheres and minor scales, meaningless to souls that had not suffered or inherited the capacity to suffer. Some - generally the

stupid - paid little in pain and sorrow; and some - as in his own case - much. But so long as the account showed a balance to the general good, it was not for the soul that was sacrificed to *complain*. It was, perhaps, even a privilege to subserve the *common* good. Life was so arranged that virtue could not be sure of personal reward, and this uncertainty was just what made virtue possible. Under no other scheme of things could the soul enjoy the privilege of virtue.¹²

Only a knowledge of reality can tell you whether a painting depicts sunrise or sunset, the "perpetual sunset" of "Large Bad Picture" or Zangwill's "mocking glory".¹³ It is language, not painting, which clarifies that point, just as it is language which dims reality to "a large aquatic animal breathing". Reality tells you the asylum is in Dartmouth, not Halifax. Reality tells you the Dartmouth Hospital cannot be seen from Dalhousie University when you are receiving an honorary degree.¹⁴ Does this invalidate *The Master* as a source for learning about George Hutchinson, or Brett Millier's biography of Bishop? Of course not. Compression, whether by history or art, chance or design, has simply taken its toll. The bight is littered with old correspondences. Matthew Strang is not George W. Hutchinson, nor is George W., it turns out, George W. C. "Large Bad Picture" is not the Large Bad Picture. "Poem", though, is just what it says it is.

NOTES

1. They talk about the sorrows of great artists, the tragic unhappiness of great artists but after all they are great artists. A little artist has all the tragic unhappiness and the sorrows of a great artist and he is not a great artist.

Most people, if you ask them and they know this passage at all, will tell you that it is Gertrude Stein. And they will put it that way, too: "That's Gertrude Stein", not "Gertrude Stein wrote that" or "Gertrude Stein said that". Is. Present tense. One or two erudite and intrepid souls will say it is Alice B. Toklas. Actually, it is Gertrude Stein pretending to be Alice B. Toklas quoting Gertrude Stein. One or two intrepid and erudite critics of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* will even assert that it is Alice B. Toklas pretending to be Gertrude Stein pretending to be Alice B. Toklas quoting Gertrude Stein, but no one ever remembers that this latter Gertrude Stein is also quoting. She is quoting "Bruce, Patrick Henry Bruce, [who] was one of the early and most ardent Matisse pupils and soon he made little Matisse, but he was not happy". It was in explaining his unhappiness to Gertrude Stein that he uttered this memorable characterization of the minor figure in art. The irony is that, as a minor figure in art, Patrick Henry Bruce cannot but be habitually effaced from the one memorable thing he had to say. Not by Gertrude Stein, who conscientiously provides the attribution and even repeats the name, not so much to fix it in our memory as to job a memory already faulty: "Bruce, (of course everyone knows him...no? You know) Patrick Henry Bruce, (there now...No, *not* 'give me liberty to give me death'!) one of the early and most ardent Matisse

pupils..." - no, a higher principle is at work here: "To him who has much, more will be given: from him who has little, even what little he has will be taken away."

2. George Starbuck, "'The Work!' A Conversation with Elizabeth Bishop," in Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1983): 314.

3. Lillian Falk, "A Nineteenth Century Literary Representation of Nova Scotia Dialect", *Papers from the Seventeenth Annual Meeting of the Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association*, 1993: 33-39. Many further details on George Hutchinson's life are provided by Sandra Barry, "An Artist in the House", a preliminary paper read at the Elizabeth Bishop Symposium, Vassar College, 22-25 September 1994, part of an eagerly-awaited larger study of Bishop's Nova Scotia ties.

4. Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 475.

5. Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991): 215.

6. See, for example, the discussion of Thomas J. Travisano, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia): 89-91; David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989): 124; Costello: 224, 230, 255-56 (n.3).

7. Costello: 217 posits walrus where Bishop has only 'a large aquatic animal'; has she seen the painting and imposed its image on the poem?

8. Is it because of the Baudelaire tonight that you feel something somehow ominous in the repeated 'fresh' and the 'freshets' - "Il est des parfums *frais comme* des chairs d'enfants"? Or have they simply become infected with the 'fretted' of "Large Bad Picture"? The bandage from "Going to the Bakery"? The gills in "The Fish"?

9. Just as ambiguous as the 'wisps of fog' in "Manuelzinho": who is twined in *them*? Manuelzinho and his children or Bishop herself?

10. In a letter to her Aunt Grace, Bishop mentions that "I just made up 'Miss Gillespie' because it's a good Scotch name & went well with geese!!" Millier: 474 adds that it was the last name of Lucius, Bishop's first literary version of herself.

11. Anne Merrill Greenhalgh, *A Concordance to Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry*, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985): 180.

12. Israel Zangwill, *The Master*, (London: William Heinemann, 1895 (2nd edition)): 456-457.

13. Here you involuntarily recollect a passage from one of Bishop's letters to Robert Lowell (quoted by Kalstone: 191):

[The family poems] have that sure feeling, as if you'd been in a stretch...when everything and anything suddenly seemed material for poetry - or not material, seemed to *be* poetry, and all the past illuminated in long shafts here and there, like a long-awaited-for sunrise.

Is the association 'Long-awaited-for'...'yet to-be-dismantled'...? Or could it be 'long-awaited-for sunrise'...'perpetual sunset'...?

14. *Pace* Millier: 547, and perhaps Bishop herself.

**** AVAILABLE ****

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

by Thomas Travisano

The First Elizabeth Bishop Memorial Lecture: Presented in Great Village on June 9, 1995.

Published in a limited edition by Anchorage Press of Jolicure, New Brunswick.

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