Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia

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

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Editorial

It has finally happened. The Bulmer-Bowers-Hutchinson-Sutherland Family Fonds has been purchased by the Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia.

The Fonds is the principal depository of family papers, documents, books, photographs and artifacts associated with the childhood of Elizabeth Bishop in Nova Scotia and with her lifelong, continuous personal, artistic and familial connection with the province. To choose some of the most obviously important items in the Fonds, it includes the *New Devotional and Practical Pictorial Family Bible* (The National Publishing Co., Chicago, 1870), which served as the starting point for "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance"; material on Bishop's mother, Gertrude; inscribed, presentation copies of Bishop's books; paintings by Bishop's great-uncle, George Hutchinson, and her aunts, Maude and Grace; and books owned by Bishop as a child (including Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*) or given by her to relatives when she was an adult (including Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories)*. These and all the other items in the Fonds have been itemized in Sandra Barry's *Elizabeth Bishop: An Archival Guide to Her Life in Nova Scotia*, which was published by the EBSNS and briefly reviewed in the spring issue of the *Newsletter*.

Although the Fonds has been purchased by the Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia, it will not be kept in the Nova Scotia Provincial Archives building in Halifax. It will be placed on long term loan in the archival collections of the Vaughan Memorial Library at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. The decision to deposit the Fonds at Acadia has been welcomed by all those who have been involved in its purchase for many reasons. One is that Acadia University, through the good offices of Professor Gwen Davies, Head of Acadia's English Department, and her colleague, Professor Donna Smyth, has made a major financial contribution to acquiring the Fonds. A second is that the Fonds will now become a readily accessible teaching and research resource in a university setting in the maritimes and a focus for Bishop studies in Canada. A third is that Acadia is only a little over an hour's car journey from Great Village and is itself part of the cultural heritage and historical context which helped to form Bishop's imagination. Bishop's great-uncles, John and William, both, in fact, attended Acadia, and William became the first graduate of Acadia to be appointed President of the University, a position he held from 1907 to 1909. Finally, a fourth reason for the Fonds being deposited at Acadia is that it will assist the University to prepare and present a scholarly symposium on Bishop's life and work and its Nova Scotia roots and connections which is scheduled for September, 1998.

Those who have joined in or followed the activities of the EBSNS since its inception in spring, 1994, will know what an exciting and happy moment this is in Society's existence. There are many people to thank for their foresight, loyalty, patience and moral, physical and financial support. Not all of them can be named here. There will be other public occasions when they will be named and thanked in person. But this is the place for preliminary public thanks to Mrs. Phyllis Sutherland, first cousin to Elizabeth Bishop, who has preserved the Fonds for so many years with such care and to the Honourable John MacEachern, formerly Minister of Education and Culture for Nova Scotia, presently Minister of Municipal Affairs, whose advice and support were very directly instrumental in the founding of the Society, the publication of Sandra Barry's archival guide and the acquisition of the Fonds. Among others whose help the Society wishes to acknowledge with deepest gratitude are Carman Carroll, the Provincial Archivist of Nova Scotia; Candace Stevenson, Head of the Nova Scotia Department of Cultural Affairs, and her colleague, Peggy Walt; and Lorraine McQueen and Patricia Townsend of the Vaughan Memorial Library, Acadia University. Five generous private or corporate donors have also been of critical importance in ensuring that the Fonds will stay in Nova Scotia. They are: Stanfield's Limited of Truro (through the particular care of Tom Stanfield); Rod MacLennan of Truro; and Dr. W.J. Keith of Toronto. The remaining two of the five major donors contributed earliest, at a moment when their encouragement made the impossible appear possible. They live far and away elsewhere and wish to remain anonymous.

Peter Sanger

News and Information

Much of the activity of the executive members of the EBSNS during the last summer and fall has centred upon the effort and negotiation involved in purchasing the Bulmer- Bowers- Hutchinson- Sutherland Family Fonds. Now that the Fonds has been acquired, the Society will direct its attention to securing a wider financial base for its own future operations; retaining its present members (please remember to renew your membership!) and securing new ones; and continuing its *Newsletter* and public information activities. The obvious major project ahead for the Society is to work with Professor Gwen Davies and other members of the English Department of Acadia University in planning the Elizabeth Bishop Symposium which will be held as the next in the series of Thomas Raddall Symposiums on Atlantic Literature in September, 1998. Updated information about the Symposium will appear in subsequent issues of the *Newsletter*.

The memoir on Elizabeth Bishop which appears in this issue of the *Newsletter* should be introduced by some biographical detail. Its author, Ilse Barker, is more widely known as Kathrine Talbot, the name under which she has published novels, short stories, poems and translations. She came to England in late 1938 as a refugee from Hitler. She married the painter, Kit Barker (1916-1988) in 1948. They lived in the United States between 1949-1952, where they met Elizabeth Bishop at Yaddo in the winter of 1950-1951, immediately after Bishop had ended an unhappy, unproductive year at the Library of Congress. Mrs. Barker was at Yaddo to finish a novel. Her husband was preparing for an exhibition of his work in New York. Mrs. Barker writes:

"Born in London, Kit was self-taught, starting to paint at an early age. A surrealist in the thirties he later always called himself a landscape painter, though his landscapes were often fairly abstract, and he painted other subjects: still-lifes, figures and flowers. During our time in the United States he showed in many group-shows and had one-man exhibitions in New York, San Francisco and St. Louis. He exhibited in the Bond Street area of London during the late fifties, sixties and seventies.

He and Elizabeth Bishop were very attached to each other. They shared many tastes as well as their afflictions: Kit was prone to asthma in his later years. He sent her paintings and watercolours and she bought some of his work while she was with us in England."

Mrs. Barker's memoir is further testimony of what is so evident throughout Bishop's poems, essays, stories and letters, that her imagination was nourished by a wide, generous and layered environment of family and friends. What many other writers have needed to construct largely out the interrelationships of literature and the other arts, Bishop found mainly in relationships among people she befriended and loved. As such, she was in many ways dissimilar from other poets of her time and generation whose orientations were literary. As such, she resembles Frost and Hardy, who also provide and endure.

Houses: Elizabeth Bishop's Domestic Travels

by Ilse Barker (Kathrine Talbot)

Elizabeth Bishop loved making plans. I can't remember when she began telling us that she was coming to Europe from Brazil to travel to Italy and visit us in England. As far back as 1953 she wrote that she would be with us the following spring and ended the letter 'but I'll save everything to tell you in person.' As so many of her plans, the trip to Europe was carried over from year to year -- and it was not realised until 1964. The fluctuations in the Brazilian currency stopped her earlier visits -- later it was often the political turmoil and her friend Lota's involvement in it. When she was finally with us in 1964, she felt (as I always do when I am with friends who live far away) that there wasn't enough time for all the things we wanted to talk about, for seeing the countryside and places of interest and meeting friends, and that another plan for a longer visit must immediately be made. Once she was back home in Brazil, she began to write about her next trip, and since she had to be in Europe for a poetry conference then, she was with us again two years later.

It must have been a strange contrast for her to find herself in an Elizabethan cottage in the south of England after living in the house in Samambaia she shared with Lota de Macedo Soares, so modern and open to the great landscape of mountains and rocks. She

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had been involved in the designing of parts of this ultra-modern house, had met some of the famous architects who worked on it, had discussed blueprints, and had finally seen it written up in the international architectural magazines. I think she felt very much in sympathy with the architect's aims and, with her instinctive appreciation of visual and spatial concepts, derived great pleasure from seeing the house grow and be completed. She sometimes drew rough sketches of the latest addition, the terrace, her studio, the waterfall and swimming pool, then occasionally finished by typing over part of the sketch, making the last page of the letter into an attractive design.

Since Elizabeth was by nature a very domesticated person, she enjoyed her part in choosing and sometimes executing the detail: I remember how happily she wrote about the bathroom wall which she and Lota were painting in a diamond pattern 'like a harlequin.' (My husband Kit, who was a painter and whose work she admired, sent them a watercolour of a harlequin to go on the facing, white-tiled wall.)

Looking at the plans of the Bulmer-Bowers house in the Spring 1996 Newsletter (a house that could be *moved*!), I am struck by how different it is from the Samambaia house with its steel girders and glass, as well as from the Tudor cottage on an English hill where Elizabeth found herself when she visited us in 1964, 1966 and 1979. Our cottage was built in the fifteen-hundreds of local sandstone; the walls were a foot thick with small lattice windows, and one was conscious that it was a little fortress against the weather -- and adversity. It faced south, with only one minute window looking towards the beautiful northward view across the wide valley and the hill opposite, Blackdown, where Tennyson had once lived, the highest point in Sussex. Its' shelter and bastion' aspect and the huddle of village houses along narrow streets which you can still find at the centre of English villages -- even when the interiors have been 'gentrified' out of all recognition -- is what must strike transatlantic visitors as strange, possibly quaint. I deduce this from the way I feel when I travel on the American continent, where the towns and settlements spread themselves as if they had half the world at their disposal, which, of course, they have.

Elizabeth, arriving from more than ten years in Brazil, was intrigued by the cottage and the nearby villages and small towns. She could see that there was a residual generic likeness between her English surroundings and the Nova Scotia village she had known. We had only to take her to the nearest hamlet for her to remember the forge in Great Village and to recognise the shop with its sugar butter, shoe polish and hanks of wool.

We had lived in our cottage without electricity, telephone, running water and indoor sanitation for seven years, but four years before Elizabeth visited us the electricity had been laid up the hill, a telephone installed, and a spring was tapped to bring water into the house. We had a large window put into the north side where the roof had descended almost to the ground, and where the fine view was now revealed. Facing west, the cottage had a 'Sussex hip,' commonly known as a 'cat slide,' which is a good description of the long steep triangular roof coming down from the ridge, and below it we now had a little terrace where we sat after Elizabeth arrived from Milan, unwrapping her Italian presents.

The problems of electricity, telephone and water were only too familiar to Elizabeth from Samambaia (I remember how often she wrote that the telephone wires had once been cut and stolen), and she was interested in the way, just as in the big modern house, our water was brought into the cottage by gravity. She climbed up with us to the covered tanks in the hill where the water was stored after flowing from a pipe between the rocks. We told her of the Sunday morning when we had scrambled up with a 'dowser' friend and a group of young people who wanted to see the fun, of how the hazel bough had twitched in our friend's hands, and we had revealed a wet patch with a trowel and, digging a little, had found the water coming out of the rocky slope.

Wherever she was, Elizabeth found pleasure in small everyday tasks, especially cooking, and in the details of the practical side of daily life. We had corresponded for years on the use of primus stoves, paraffin (kerosene) lamps and the domestic arrangements of country living. I have a frightening description in one of her letters of how she lit the primus with 'lots of alcohol, so everything gets red hot...'. When she stayed in London halfway through her visit, before returning to the cottage and ultimately leaving by boat for Brazil, she bought me some of the kitchen utensils she felt I lacked; I still use the tomato knife and the vegetable steamer and think of them, of course, as 'Elizabeth's tomato knife,' etc.

A meticulous writer, slow to finish a poem to her satisfaction and often 'blocked,' she found relief from the strain by turning her creativity from the business of poetry to the preparation and cooking of food, enjoying the day-by-day tasks in the kitchen as well as the pleasures of special occasions, making doughnuts in the courtyard at Samambaia to the amazement and delight of the Brazilian servants, or cooking her New England or Canadian dishes.

With the great 'extended' family around her in the early and mid-fifties (for Lota had an adopted son whose increasing number of young children came to stay to Elizabeth's delight, and the cook produced a baby Elizabeth, 'Betty,' followed by others), she was for ever making birthday cakes and 'pudims' -- a Brazilian word for dessert left over like other English words from the days of the British nannies. Unexpected guests arriving, Elizabeth had to see what could be found to feed them, once making 'Eggs Benedict, sacrificing half a canned ham that my aunt had sent me from Canada.'

Her letters, especially in the early Brazilian days, were full of the events of everyday life and the people around her, Brazilians and Americans, builders, gardeners, servants and their constantly increasing progeny, as well as visitors from all over the world. She wrote about the books she read, travel books, novels, history and many biographies, and often suggested books Kit or I might like to read. She sometimes asked us to look for a volume she wanted in the second-hand bookshops of London and Sussex. At other times she had a special book sent to us by a London bookseller. She also now and again sent me the latest cookbook at a time when the present-day avalanche of cookery writing had not yet started, and we were enchanted by Elizabeth David's books. We occasionally exchanged recipes, and she shared some of her favourite ones, as she did later when we cooked together for a few days in Maine. I still make the 'Lemon Chess Pie' she passed on to me, a recipe possibly inherited from one of her Nova Scotia relations, though I

suspect it comes from New England.

Elizabeth was housekeeping in an apartment on Brattle Street in Cambridge when she first taught at Harvard. We visited her there in 1973 with our son Thomas who was almost ten. She had taken a great deal of interest in him when he was born and when she first saw him, aged eighteen months. She admitted to adoring babies ('every house should have a small child'), and when her friend Mary Morse adopted Monica, a Brazilian baby, her letters were full of the little girl's development. Elizabeth continued to follow Thomas's progress through the years and seemed to enjoy the nine-year-old as much as the baby.

It was Halloween time, and Elizabeth had planned a party. That morning we sat at her kitchen table, Elizabeth, Marie Joe Paz (the Pazes were living in Cambridge while Octavo lectured at Harvard), Thomas and I. Elizabeth, Marie Joe and Thomas spent some happy hours making Jack-o-Lanterns. I wasn't entrusted with a knife -- I am hopelessly cack-handed -- and was glad to leave the job to the experts, for they were all three skilful and artistic. I think I was put to preparing fillings for canapés, happy to admire the different faces cut into the pumpkins. Some grinning some mournful, they winked and flickered that night at the guests from the top of the bookshelves in Elizabeth's livingroom.

When Elizabeth gave a party no trouble was spared, and she was certainly deep in the spirit of Halloween. When we arrived at her apartment, the door was opened a little way and a cold clammy hand stretched out to welcome us. She had filled a kid glove with ice and put it in the freezer, and no ghostly hand could have more authentically sent shivers down your spine! Once inside, we were surrounded by big black spiders hanging from the ceiling, and witches on broomsticks flew overhead, later getting entangled with the ping-pong bats, for the company was keen to play table tennis once the food was removed from what served Elizabeth as a dining table. There were hotly contested matches between John Malcolm Brinnin and Bill Read on one side, Thomas and Octavio Paz on the other.

Kit, Thomas and I were staying in Kirkland House on the Harvard campus thanks to Alice Methfessel's good offices. She was working there at the time and joined us at the Brattle Street apartment for meals and for the party.

Elizabeth looked very smart that night, and I remember that she wore tan suede pants and beautiful lilac and pink silk shirts during our Cambridge visit. She was always interested in clothes and often wrote that she had been or was about to go to the dressmakers in Rio -- not, presumably, the seamstress who comes to stay in the house in her poem 'Houseguest,' a sad poem about a sad woman who says nothing but: 'I need a little money to buy buttons,' or the seamstress in 'In The Village' who 'crawled around and around eating pins like Nebuchadnezzar had crawled eating grass,' and who was busy pinning up that slippery purple material of her mother's dress.

When she lived in Brazil, Elizabeth often wrote about her clothes, worrying whether they were really smart, looking at new fashion magazines to get ideas to pass on to the dressmaker. At other times she was certain that she had chosen well, and once she was back in the United States she was

pleased to be able to choose handsome, ready-made clothes.

She had few clothes when she came to England from Brazil in 1966, and I remember an occasion in London when she brought the dress she was planning to wear at an evening party to the apartment where Kit and I were staying. Our hostess and I helped to iron it. The material was silk and the pattern a large hound's tooth check, a good bright blue and black, very handsome and fashionable but badly crumpled from being packed. I can see it now on the ironing-board where we finally got it nice and smooth, and Elizabeth was pleased.

The house on the island of North Haven in Maine where we joined Elizabeth in 1978 must have reminded her of her grandparents' house in Great Village. It was in any case a familiar environment for her from the first. I know that she was very conscious of how much Maine made her think of Nova Scotia, and when she returned to Sabine Farm for several summers (always feeling that the rental was beyond her means, and that each summer might have to be the last for that reason), she experienced it as a double homecoming. And that house was, I am sure, very like the Bulmer-Bowers house with its porch and comfortable dark rooms, the wooden exterior bleached by time and the sea winds to a wonderful silver.

There was no 'stuffed loon' in the parlor as she describes in 'First Death In Nova Scotia,' but there were models of schooners, and the pictures on the walls were of sailing boats and storms.

Elizabeth cooked on a bottled-gas cooker under the water gauge which had to be watched in case the well ran dry. Here the view was of a wild garden and the washing-line. The front of the house faced a meadow and Penobscot Bay with the mountains in the distance. We sat on the platform-like terrace or the balcony above and watched the sunsets over the water and the swallows darting in and out of their nests under the roof of the porch. The bay was framed by fir trees and pines as if someone had 'landscaped' it, and the fishing boats and schooners sailed by, slow and stately, like a specially laid on entertainment.

Elizabeth sent us out to pick blueberries which grew close to the ground just beyond the wooden terrace at the front of the house, quite different from the foot-high blueberry bushes, green with foliage but not so full of berries, which I had known on the European continent where blueberry pie is also a delicacy. She liked to fill her pies with mixed fruit, so we walked along the short drive, across the little road and down the path towards the sea to pick wild raspberries which grew in profusion on the bushes.

The pies were delicious. We had them as dessert at the big dining room table which had been cleared of the pages and bits of paper with scrawled words and lines which Elizabeth had scattered over the surface. She finished her poem 'North Haven' while we were there and showed it to us, and one of Kit's drawings was later used on the Broadside which was published the following year. But though I had seen her type a poem on her typewriter at our cottage when she was with us some years before, I had never seen her physically spread out her work and her ideas as if to gain an overview of what might be of use. It was like a collage or jigsaw, not only in her mind but distributed over the table, and one might have picked up a felicitious phrase or found a rhyme scheme

among the scraps of paper she was using to plan the composition of her next poem.

Sussex, England
August 1996

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