

Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia

NEWSLETTER

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The EBSNS was formed in 1994 to celebrate the life and work of the poet Elizabeth Bishop. It publishes a bi-annual newsletter. In 1998, it also published *Elizabeth Bishop: An Archival Guide to Her Life In Nova Scotia*, documenting Bishop and Bishop-related documents in the province. The EBSNS contributed to the purchase of an extensive family archive that documents Bishop's Nova Scotia childhood and is housed at Acadia University Archives, N.S. The EBSNS holds its AGM in Great Village in early June. The EBNS seeks through its various activities to reclaim Elizabeth Bishop as a Nova Scotia writer, thus enriching our literary and culture heritage.

Editorial

by Sandra Barry

When I drafted this editorial in mid-September 2003, I had hopes that the issue would be more or less on time. Then Hurricane Juan hit Nova Scotia, wreaking havoc on Halifax and many other communities on the southern coast – and across the central part of the province, including Truro and Great Village. The ripple-out affect of this event was greater and more complex than could have been imagined and the Newsletter got delayed. Then Christmas intervened. Then the blizzard of February 2004 hit. All of this, combined with some intense personal circumstances, caused further delay. I decided to present another double issue in hopes that our readers would understand, and we might finally catch up. My apologies for the delay and the excuses.

Finally, here it is, and I am excited to include a lively piece by Janet Baker, a Saint Mary's University English professor. Her research peregrinations are as delightful as her discoveries of some curious links between Elizabeth Bishop and one of Canada's foremost literary critics of the early part of the last century, Archibald MacMechan. We are told that Janet has enough material for a few more articles, and we hope to include them in future issues.

It seems that we are getting a reputation for provocative book

reviews. Brian Robinson's review of a recent collection of essays, *The Art of Elizabeth Bishop*, will likely provoke comment. Brian, a geography professor, also at Saint Mary's University, always offers up a relevant surprise. This issue also includes the minutes of the EBSNS AGM, which took place on 14 June 2003. Make note of the announcement of an EBSNS fundraising raffle. Heather Lawson is a remarkable stone sculptor with a growing reputation, and we are profoundly grateful for her generosity in donating one of her sculptures for this raffle. Buy lots of tickets!

This issue also contains a note about an Elizabeth Bishop conference sponsored by the American Literature Association, in Cancun, Mexico, in December 2003. Surely Bishop would appreciate her devotees going south as winter approached to talk about and celebrate her life and work.

Finally, Michiru Oguchi's lovely personal essay appeared in the last issue of the *Newsletter*. However, there were technical problems with formatting it. Thus the editors have chosen to reprint it as an insert, with deep apologies to Michiru, and heartfelt thanks for her patience.



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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.

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Elizabeth Bishop, Archibald MacMechan, and Victor Chittick: Some Divagations

by Janet Baker

*I have always felt I couldn't possibly live very far inland, away from the ocean.*¹

– Elizabeth Bishop

Several years ago I taught an evening class of Canadian poetry to a group of adults in Truro, Nova Scotia. Truro's proximity to Great Village with its Elizabeth Bishop connections along with the maturity of the students in the class made for what I imagined would be a warm reception for her poem "The Moose." I was not disappointed. These readers eagerly noted details they immediately recognized. Moreover they knew almost instinctively much of what the poem seems to be about. One question was raised, that of the meaning of "divagation" in "dreamy divagation." Our dictionaries supplied the immediate answer but a question in my own mind continued to percolate: I had a sense that I had encountered the word before, and in a context that might somehow be relevant to Bishop. Finally, this past summer, I found it. It was in a chapter of a now-obscure collection of essays by Archibald MacMechan, his *Book of Ultima Thule*. Writing about the glory of a spring day in the Annapolis Valley, with apple trees "cascading to the ground in torrents of

blossoms," he concludes this paean to the countryside he was happily and characteristically traversing on foot by stating categorically "you might wander the whole world over, and not find its equivalent. Such a land," he continues, "was manifestly created and fore-ordained for the divagations of a tramp-royal."²

While it may seem eccentric to place such emphasis on an isolated word, MacMechan himself was famous for doing so. In his book reviews for *The Montreal Standard* he often remarked on how one word could alter his opinion of an entire book: that single word out of place could skew a reading of the whole. Rereading some of MacMechan recently, I had the keen sense that Bishop had probably known of him and had likely read some of his work. Although this is not something capable of proof, a conversation with Sandra Barry in the autumn of 2001 intrigued me with a missing link: Victor Chittick, author of the biography of Thomas Chandler Haliburton, seemed to be that link.³ Chittick had come upon Bishop's work in *The New Yorker* and, in January of 1954, he had written to her care of the magazine:

My Dear Miss Bishop:

I hope you won't think it impertinence if I try to tell you how much I have enjoyed your two (latest?) stories in *The New Yorker*. Not that I shall attempt anything in the way of an appreciation of their aesthetic qualities. My competence in that field is much too amateur to put into words what I feel about the perfection of your writing. I am simply overwhelmed with its loveliness. But as a former Nova Scotian I should like to thank you for the delight you have given me with the absolutely correct Nova Scotianness of your characters, scenes, and incidents. [After speculating on the setting of "In the Village" and determining that it must be either Kingsport, Canning, or a made up, "synthetic" village, he concludes:] I suppose it's too much to ask further

about how you came to be a writer, and how you made your escape from Nova Scotia (you have, as your little volume of poems shows, though you have always carried it with you), but I should dearly like to know. Could it be that the first was owing in some part to the late Professor Archibald MacMechan of Dalhousie? Your Minas Basin touches bring to mind his descriptions of the same land – and seascapes in his "Ultima Thule" pieces.

Bishop's reply, alas, is not preserved, but Chittick soon sends her a copy of "The Orchards of Ultima Thule" which we can assume reached her, for in a later letter Chittick tells her to keep it if she wishes: "since you expressed an interest in seeing... MacMechan's 'Ultima Thule' essay I tried to find a copy for you, not only to do you a little service but just to celebrate. No luck – the original edition is long ago out of print. So I'm sending you my copy. If you have no other use for it beyond reading it, you may send it back (taking your time about doing so.) Otherwise keep it, and more than welcome."⁴

It is worth noting, for readers unfamiliar with MacMechan, that this essay contains one of the most warmly affectionate of his descriptions of his adopted province, Nova Scotia. In the words of Thomas Raddall: "I suppose everybody knows how Archie MacMechan, Ontario-born, a graduate of the University of Toronto, for a few years a teacher in Ontario schools – an out-and-out freshwater man, in the salty Bluenose term – came in 1889 to take a post at Dalhousie...and fell in love with Nova Scotia and the sea....He remained faithful to that love till death, and breathed his devotion into almost every line he wrote, though there was nothing narrow or merely provincial in his loyalty."⁵ In 1931, as Bishop was entering her second undergraduate year at Vassar, MacMechan retired from teaching: had she stayed in Nova Scotia and not been "kidnapped" by her paternal

grandparents, she might well have been in one of his classes.

It was Bishop's copy of this MacMechan text that I hoped to unearth when, in March of 2003, I visited Vassar's Special Collections where much of Bishop's own library reposes. Ideally, I hoped to find marginal notes in her handwriting as indicators of her response to the writing. My initial search was through the Bishop "grille" upon which many volumes are catalogued. No MacMechan appeared. (One daunting aspect of searching through her library listings is that some of her books are off campus in a sort of quarantine because of what archivists delicately term "mould issues", not surprising for books that have spent time in humid Brazil!) This left me with the roughly 2000 cards of the card catalogue of her collection, handwritten, presumably by student assistants, and housed in a sort of large cardboard super shoe box. Eight hours later I had to admit defeat. No "Ultima Thule" had appeared, which left me back at square one: it might have been returned to Chittick; it might exist but be in the off-campus site. Either way it was inaccessible.

I returned to Halifax, still marvelling at the grand scale of care, security, and money involved in Vassar's preservation of its holdings. I decided on one final attempt to find material relevant to what had by now become for me a quest. And so it was that I came upon more Chittick correspondence right under my nose, as it were. A misfiling of "Chittick" under "Littick" had set me back an afternoon, but in Dalhousie's Special Collections I found letters from Chittick to MacMechan's widow covering the period with which I had been concerned, 1954-56.

In summary, this is what I have been able to establish. At the time Chittick was writing his "Nomination for a Laureateship"⁶ he was writing another article, this one on MacMechan. Chittick's letters to Edith MacMechan, Archie's widow,

then in her 90's, speak with Chittick's characteristic verve and ebullience about his desire to make better known MacMechan's place as a pioneer in Melville scholarship.⁷ Chittick apparently had two projects on the go, each perhaps feeding into the other. Their common denominator was Chittick's conviction that both MacMechan and Bishop deserved a wider audience and that Chittick was the person to help spread the "gospel."⁸ He clearly perceived their affinity in their love of Nova Scotia. The geographical area near the upper reaches of the Bay of Fundy were common ground to them. MacMechan's association with Great Village was comprehensive and detailed. He was in correspondence, for instance, for over a decade with one Jordan Marsh of Economy who was living in retirement after a lifetime as captain of a brigantine. MacMechan initiated this correspondence in order to obtain from Marsh technical terms and specific details for the work he was doing on his final collection of sea stories, *There Go the Ships*. In MacMechan's well-known account of "The Great Ship," the *W.D. Lawrence* of Maitland, he attempts to give his readers some sense of the ship's size by quoting a Great Village ship-builder: "In September, 1872, a little to the south of Maitland, in front of his own house, William Lawrence laid the keel of the giant ship to be. No such keel had ever been laid in Nova Scotia: it extended two hundred and forty-four feet, nine inches, on the grass. John M. Blaikie showed me where he and his partners built their first vessel in Great Village. She measured a hundred tons. 'And we thought her a whale of a ship.' But this Maitland venture was designed to be bigger than twenty of Blaikie's 'whales.'"⁹

Another passage, an image of a landscape to be seen from the *altera ripa*, Great Village, would surely have resonated with Bishop: "Maitland is the Deserted Village of

Nova Scotia. In the heyday of sail, its shipyards rang from daylight till dark with the clamour of saw and broad-axe and adze on hardwood, or mallet on caulking-iron, of hammer on trenail. At night, nine hundred men would be free to walk about the one long street. Maitland was the home of famous ships and able captains. Here was built the Great Ship, which made the Lawrence fortune in one voyage, the tragic *Esther Roy*, and many another staunch Bay of Fundy vessel. Now the hamlet is shrunk and silent. Rarely does a human figure cross the street. The shore farms, and the remaining big houses look across the restless red waters of the Bay, in their portentous ebb and flow, towards Economy and Masstown and Great Village, and beyond, to the blue range of the Cobequids. Sunset over these hills is like a gate opened in the Celestial City letting free the splendour of God."¹⁰

A final passage in conclusion: writing of the Acadian dykelands near Grand Pre MacMechan says "There they lie redeemed from the sea, the huge levels of the marshlands, which complement the smiling orchard country with the eternal note of sadness. They are featureless and houseless like the sea; they have the monotony and the melancholy of the sea. Like the sea, they are continually swept by the wind...Longfellow never saw the land he made so famous...as a consequence he laid emphasis on the wrong things, such as the forest primeval with which the *habitant* meddled very little. If, instead of the murmuring pines and the hemlocks, he had put the desolation of the level, wind-swept marshland into his hexameters, he would have attained to greater truth and deeper pathos. It is in truth a land fit to inspire poets, for beauty haunts it, and the sense of tears."¹¹

This passage could have been written with Elizabeth Bishop in mind, as Chittick must surely have realized. Whether it can ever be definitely established that Bishop "read, learned, and inwardly digested"

specific writings by MacMechan, it is reasonable to conclude that, in the words of one of MacMechan's best-known students, L. M. Montgomery, Bishop and MacMechan would certainly have been "kindred spirits."

Endnotes

1. Quoted in *Poetic Voices of the Maritimes*, edited by Alison Mitcham and Theresia Quigley. Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1996, p. 32.
2. Archibald MacMechan, *The Book of Ultima Thule*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1927, p. 203.
3. For introducing me to the Chittick letters, and for her generosity in sharing her wealth of knowledge, I am forever indebted to Sandra Barry.
4. Courtesy of Dalhousie Archives.
5. Archibald MacMechan, *Tales of the Sea*. Foreword by T.H. Raddall. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1947, p. viii.
6. *Dalhousie Review*, Spring-Winter, 1956.
7. After several rejections, the article was published in *The Southern Review*, midsummer number, 1955. In his letter of June 12, 1955, Chittick writes to Edith MacMechan that he had had the article accepted by the *Review*, a publication of the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas: SMU "is known more for its football than for scholarship, but I'm elated to be getting my paper published anywhere." Letter courtesy of Dalhousie Archives.
8. Chittick's own word, used semi-facetiously. Same letter as above.
9. Archibald MacMechan, *There Go the Ships*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1928, p. 142.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 227-8.
11. MacMechan, *The Book of Ultima Thule*, p. 289. In his final letter to Edith MacMechan, Chittick writes, "It was very kind of you, and most heartening, to tell me your daughter Grace enjoyed my little piece about Elizabeth Bishop in *The Dalhousie Review*. I hope you did too."

Letter, September 5, 1955. Courtesy of Dalhousie Archives.

**ELIZABETH BISHOP
AND
HER WORLDS
American Literature Association
Symposium
Cancun, Mexico**

From December 11-14, 2003, about 25 Bishop scholars gathered in Cancun, Mexico, for a symposium sponsored by the American Literature Association. Scholars from Canada, the United States and Great Britain presented a wide range of papers on the poet's life and work. One of the highlights was a dramatic reading of a new play based on the correspondence between Bishop and her close friend the poet Robert Lowell, written by actress and writer Monique Fowler* of New York City. Ms Fowler, Thomas Travisano and Laura Menides performed the reading. A full report, by Anne Shifrer, of this fun-in-the-sun symposium will appear in the next issue of the Newsletter.

* Ms Fowler has presented a second performance of her Bishop/Lowell play at Hartwick College, NY, in March 2004. She has plans to take this play to universities across the United States.

**Elizabeth Bishop Society
of Nova Scotia
Minutes of the Annual
General Meeting**

14 June 2003

Great Village Legion, Great Village,
N.S.

The Annual General Meeting of the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia convened in the Great Village Legion, Great Village, N.S.,

on 14 June 2003, at 2:00 p.m. Twenty-six members and guests were present.

President Brian Robinson welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order. Brian briefly described the agenda for the afternoon. Secretary Sandra Barry read the minutes of the 2002 AGM, which took place on 8 June. The minutes were approved as read.

Treasurer Joy Graham handed out the Treasurer's Report. She noted that while she had been officially appointed treasurer for the previous year, financial matters had not been transferred to her, so the report had been completed by the previous treasurer and current board member, Angus Chisholm, who was unable to attend the meeting. Joy noted that she and Angus would be meeting soon to arrange matters with the bank in Truro. The Treasurer's Report (attached) noted a bank account balance of \$948.75. Joy stated, however, that with the incoming renewal of dues the current balance was approximately \$1350. Motion to accept Treasurer's Report was made by Arthur Chisholm and seconded by Meredith Layton.

The Nominating Committee (consisting of Angus Chisholm and Brian Robinson) put forward a status quo slate of officers and board members. The slate was accepted and approved.

President: Brian Robinson
Vice-President: Donna Smyth
Secretary: Sandra Barry
Treasurer: Joy Graham
Board: Brian Bartlett
Lois Bray
Angus Chisholm
Arthur Chisholm
Ann Marie Duggan
Meredith Layton
Ruth Peppard
Peter Sanger
Deborah Stiles
Paul Tingley
Terry White

A brief discussion took place about the need to update signing officers. It was decided that Joy Graham would be added to the list,

which includes Angus Chisholm and Arthur Chisholm. This decision was unanimously approved. A brief discussion took place about the role of auditor. Meredith Layton has been acting as auditor for the society for some time, and it was agreed to make this role official. Motion to accept Meredith Layton as auditor was approved.

Brian presented the President's Report. His focus was on two of the issues which had been mentioned in the minutes of the 2002 AGM: the "kiosk," which he described more accurately as a "poster" or "display," and fund-raising – issues which he pointed out are linked. Brian presented a model or mock up of a "poster," which would make use of the EBSNS pamphlet on one side and information compiled by the Great Village Historical Society on the other. He stated that from his information, a "display" of this size would cost at least \$2000. He pointed out that there would be space for sponsorship information (e.g. from Wilson's and other local businesses). Thus, the money to construct and erect this "poster" could be acquired by selling sponsorship, but more importantly, the society needed to raise some of its own money. To that end, the society was about to inaugurate a new fund-raising venture. Sculptor Heather Lawson, who was present, had generously agreed to donate a stone sculpture, which she was creating especially for the society, as a prize in a raffle. The sculpture will contain a quotation from an Elizabeth Bishop poem. The raffle would commence as soon as a lottery license was acquired and tickets printed. Brian noted that Heather would be making a presentation after the meeting was adjourned.

Brian noted that he would go to the Lottery Commission and acquire the license, as well as attend to the printing of the tickets. He said he hoped that the license and tickets would be ready before 1 July, as Great Village was hosting a Canada Day celebration and he would be in

attendance operating a booth for the EBSNS.

Some discussion took place about the location of the "display" and concerns about vandalism. It is hoped that Wilson's will be willing to provide land for the "display" at the gas station in Great Village. Brian said that he had been in contact with Wilson's and was hoping to meet with them soon, to make a presentation using the model.

Some discussion took place about the Canada Day celebration in Great Village, particularly regarding historic tours. Brian said he had been contacted by Desirée Stockerman, co-chair of the Great Village Canada Day Committee, who asked if he would consider conducting a tour. Since the Great Village committee itself continues to debate whether the tours will take place, and Brian said that it would be difficult for him to do so since he would be manning the booth, it was decided the he would call the co-chair of the committee and confirm that he would be there to man a booth only.

Motion to adjourn the meeting by Ruth Peppard, seconded by Brian Bartlett. Meeting was adjourned.

A presentation was given by Heather Lawson and Susan Larder of raspberry bay stone. Heather presented a brief video which showed how she received her training. Susan presented a slide show which highlighted the raspberry bay stone studio, which has recently partnered with a Quebec group, Economuseum, an organization which supports traditional artisan crafts. Following this presentation Brian Robinson, Sandra Barry and Brian Bartlett offered brief readings of Bishop material. Then the gathering partook of sweets, rhubarb punch and tea, prepared by Lois Bray and Ruth Peppard.

The date for the 2004 Annual General Meeting of the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia has yet to be set. It will take place sometime early in June in Great Village. We will let members know when the meeting has been firmed up and hope there will be a good turnout.

**Elizabeth Bishop Society of
Nova Scotia
FUNDRAISING RAFFLE**

**Stone sculpture
by Heather Lawson**

Value: \$350.00
Draw Date: July 1, 2004
Time: 3:00 p.m.
Draw Location: Great Village School,
Great Village, N.S.
Tickets: \$2.00 each or 3 for \$5.00

Licensed by the Nova Scotia Alcohol
and Gaming Authority:
AGA#175310-03

For information contact:
P.O. Box 138, Great Village, N.S.,
B0M 1L0

To purchase tickets contact EBSNS
Board of Directors.

On the Bishop Trail

by Brian Robinson

The Art of Elizabeth Bishop. Eds. Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida, Gláucia Renate Gonçalves, Eliana Lourenco de Lima Reis. Belo Horizonte: Editoria Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2002. 292pp. ISBN 85-7041-257-6 www.editora.ufmg.br

In the 1920s Aldous Huxley wrote a clever essay on tourism whose title Bishop scholars will respond to immediately, "Why not stay at home?" (*Along the Road*, Flamingo reprint 1994). Although this slight piece may not have the appeal of Bishop's "Questions of Travel," it is interesting to think of her in that (almost) generational context – especially when we remember that Bishop and Huxley traveled together in the 1950s to the Xingu region on the eastern fringes of Amazonia. She doesn't seem to have found Huxley "exactly easy" as a traveling companion (*One Art* p.363). And so I imagine him button-holding her with the following: "We read and travel, not that we may broaden and enrich our minds, but that we may pleasantly forget that they exist. We love reading and traveling because they are the most delightful of all the many substitutes for thought" (amongst which he included drink) (*Along the Road* p.8). Perhaps the wrung-out Bishop of the final years in Brazil – the one who made a lonely journey through the desolate Rio São Francisco region – might have welcomed the clichéd escapist aspect of travel: "I lost all track of time and distance – feel as if I had amnesia" (*One Art* p. 463). But this kind of necessary forgetfulness was unlikely to become a poetic source for Bishop because, as Silviano Santiago claims in his somewhat overwrought introductory essay to this volume, "traveling brings in new, hard, incandescent matter that needs to be ordered by words so that, when escaping from life at the moment it is lived, the essence of biography is not escaped from by

forgetfulness" (p.18). Hence the significance of Brazil for a Bishop surprised by memories of Nova Scotia (hence too poetry as surprise).

While Huxley is not amongst the references in this (indexless) collection derived from the May 1999 celebration of Elizabeth Bishop in Ouro Prêto, Brazil, "questions of travel" is a good place to begin, and this is the understandable reason why (after the introduction) the first section of this volume is devoted to the theme of such questions as the point of view of the tourist. Also, as the editors remind us, most of the North Americans and Europeans (and one Japanese) who were at the conference were also tourists, so, beyond what the editors loosely call the "Imagined Community" (or "homeland") of Bishop's Ouro Prêto, there remained the imagined vastness of Brazil (the interior beyond the coast), which for most of us could only be entered into as naive tourism – a fact which prompted us to think of Bishop a step ahead and a better read version of ourselves. Eliana Avila notes this and goes on to suggest that, although privileged, Bishop was rarely a "mere" tourist: "When Bishop was away from Lota in Brazil, she traveled to regions of extreme poverty for relatively long periods of time" (p.252). Indeed on her São Francisco trip she found the poverty beyond comprehension. But, unlike the later more correct generational emphasis of Germaine Greer, who also visited that region, she did not seek to disentangle her concern for the misery of the region from that of the disparaged tourist collecting folk art. (see Przybycien pp.68-9; Greer's São Francisco journey is in *The Madwoman's Underclothes*, Picador, 1986, pp.232-54)

Issues of tourism in particular and representation in general arise throughout the questions of travel section of the collection which, like most of the book's first half, is dominated by Brazilian scholars.

Often they use the epithet "tourist" as if its implications were obvious, but it is clear from the insights of de Oliveria, Cohen, Przybycien, Dwyer and Santos that tourism should not be treated as an identifiable category, pejorative or otherwise, but rather as a set of possibilities in a continuum. Depending on circumstances, the range might be from Bishop as bemused outsider, or observer of the exotic, or lost exile, to equally bemused or bewildered tourist (yet still as a consumer of the sights). This Brazilian emphasis is as valuable as, and is akin to, the discovery of the significance of Bishop's Nova Scotian roots.

With the exception of an unfortunate cover and "Foreword" by Eric Karpeles the editors have shaken off North Carolina sponsorship. Such big names as Vendler and Fountain are still to be found, but their grander summaries are less rewarding than the leverage of the local. Of course, given the colonizing effects of contemporary theory, it is difficult to segregate one region's approach from another's – nevertheless the immediate appeal of, say, the two essays on "Helena Morley" is that their local aspects place in perspective a childhood which might too easily be taken as a parallel to one in Nova Scotia.

Not that a bias towards things Brazilian has prima facie benefits. Santiago's introductory piece is too dense to lead the reader into the book. Indeed, all in all, the first chapters do not introduce very much. This is a pity because, as I have suggested, concerning the questions of travel section, the topics are valid and coherent to the extent of often flowing from one author without the benefit of editorial sequels.

However, because there are few clues in the introductory chapters to the thinking behind the organization of the book, it may be useful to provide a quick Cook's tour....

The introductory invocation and "Questions of Travel" (Part 1) sections have been allude to. Part

Part 2, "In the Middle of the Road," as the quote from Drummond suggests, is on Bishop's translations of Brazilian poets and *The Diary of 'Helena Morley'*. "Exchanging Hats" (Part 3) is concerned with influences and correspondences between Bishop and other poets, Ashbery, Graham and Rilke. "Poem" (Part 4) concentrates on specific poems, "The Weed", "Poem" and "Pink Dog." In contrast, the final section "One Art" seems loathe to arrive at finality or closure. Think of it as a collection of self-forgetful shifting

and sliding surprises...

Space does not provide for more detailed considerations of each section but, if I may be allowed a personal divagation, the careful analysis of the oral aspects of "The Moose" is a salutary alternative to more theoretical pieces. But even here Michael Happy's undercutting of "the proliferations of issues-oriented criticism" is as refreshing as Laura Menides' reminder that Bishop had a sense of humour (both are in the "Poem" section).

Perhaps I too may be forgiven some partiality if I recommend this book for its Brazilian connection alone. As such it is much more than an educated travelogue, but it can be read at that useful informed level. Reading Brazil via Bishop's poetry should not be an entirely self-forgetful pleasure. Neither should it be a one-way street to exile, despair, loneliness and whatever alcohol substituted for.

To Teach...

by Helen Cannon

In a 1972 letter to Dr. Anny Baumann, Miss Bishop, teaching as an ad hoc instructor at Harvard, wrote, "Now I must get ready for the 2 p.m. seminar – look up all the words in the dictionary so that I'll know them when the students don't, & they'll think I'm awfully smart."

This small note says a good deal about Bishop's teaching methods and attitudes – pedagogy and philosophy that likely were classed as outmoded even then, and certainly would be now, but that I, as a teacher, take as a model and reinforcement. What I know about Elizabeth Bishop as a teacher has served me during the years of my own teaching. Dana Gioia's 1986 *New Yorker* (15 Sept.) tribute to Miss Bishop as his teacher and her own letters about her teaching have presented me with validation for my own pedagogy.

It was 1975 when Gioia registered for Harvard's 282: Studies in Modern Poetry, Miss Elizabeth Bishop, Instructor. Bishop was then 64 and something of a novice at university teaching, having resisted it for years. This year I turn 60. I boast no titles or rank; I've come late to my profession – yet I believe I know some true things about teaching and recognize my teaching philosophy in what I can learn of Bishop's method.

When Miss Bishop did reluctantly enter the academy stream, she was swimming against the current. Never very secure about how she would be received at Harvard, she wrote earlier (1970) to Frani Blough Muser, "I had an awful thought... 'What if no one signs up for my two courses?' ...I needn't have worried – all the usual nuts and freaks seem to want to take 'Advanced Verse Writing.'"

I find myself wondering how Elizabeth Bishop would conduct her classes and seminars now. In 1975, according to Gioia, "Her manner was at odds with the academic glamour of Harvard, her conversation not designed to impress."

We have no reason to believe – even given Bishop's openness, awareness and flexibility – that she would align herself with postmodern camps of criticism. Would she capitulate to ponderous jargon in her teaching? Would she be caught up in critical issues of race, gender and class? The very questions I pose here reveal my own teaching biases, of course. The Miss Bishop I hold as a model is, I realize, partly my own wishful construction, but her methods – real or imagined – as I employ them are still viable today, when the very nature of teaching and learning seems to have dramatically changed.

A teacher's methods reveal much of personality. Bishop as teacher could not be other than her courteous, unaffected, intelligent self. James Merrill described Bishop's poetry as "more unaffectedly

intelligent than any written in her lifetime." That refusal of affectation spilled over into her teaching. Neither in her lines nor in her teaching could she countenance sham, pretension, or pomp. Gioia remembers her first day seminar comments, "I'm not a very good teacher. So to make sure you learn something in this class I am going to ask you to memorize at least ten lines a week from one of the poets we are reading." Eyebrows raised, eyes rolled upward. How demodé! How decidedly uncool! But as Gioia indicates, how effective! Still today, I believe, she would take her students *to the lines* rather than sending them to the critics or to the surround. "Use the dictionary," she advised. "It's better than the critics."

Certainly Bishop examined form – concerned herself and her students with matters of rhythm and images – the music of lines – but again, not by way of secondary analysis. What does she suggest to one who would write and understand? A would-be poet inquired and elicited an articulate statement of her beliefs about the teaching and writing of poetry. In a long, very giving letter, Bishop reaffirms, "From what you say, I think perhaps you are actually trying too hard – or reading too much *about* poetry and not enough poetry. Prosody – metrics, etc., are fascinating – but they come *afterwards*, obviously. And I always ask my writing class not to read criticism." And again, "Read a lot of poetry – all the time and *not* [just] 20th Century poetry....then the great poets of our own century... – and not just 2 or 3 poems each... – read ALL of somebody. *Then* read his or her life and letters."

She took her teaching assignment very seriously, never becoming easeful or complacent at it, "I taught this last term and it seems to grow harder rather than easier." She obviously read student efforts with the same care she would use in reading a Stevens poem, say, or

Coleridge, or Auden; she took novice works entirely seriously and commented on them much more than cursorily. Think of the time she must have taken with Gioia's final paper (along with every other student essay that came with it). Gioia writes:

Flipping through my essay, I saw that every page had dozens of corrections, queries, deletions, and suggestions in Miss Bishop's spidery hand. Some pages had obviously been worked over three times – once in blue ink, then in red, and finally, in the proverbial blue pencil. In horror I began reading marginal comments like "Awful expression," "Unnecessary phrase," "A mouthful," "Not in the dictionary" – most of which were followed by an exclamation point, as was her ubiquitous and incontrovertible "No!" An occasional "Better" or "Yes" (no exclamation point) did little to revive my self-confidence. I had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Only then did I turn to the covering letter, which began:

Dear Mr. Gioia, You'll see that I have made many, many small marks and suggestions on your paper, but this is really because it is very good, very well-expressed, and I'd just like it to be even better-expressed, and here and there to read more smoothly.

It doesn't take much deduction to see Miss Bishop, the teacher, to have been reasonable, courteous, self-effacing, well-prepared, giving, disarmingly human, and at the same time stringent and exacting. I hold in my mind *this* image of Miss Bishop (who did it her way); I realize that she was the center. However much she respected her students, however much she rejected the notion of *tabula rasa*, she also refused to mythologize the student as preeminent. Even while she acknowledged the validity of their experience and accepted them for being their unpredictable, independent and beautiful selves, she maintained her role as teacher. I want no better.

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Travel and Translation

by Michiru Oguchi

**What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life
in our bodies, we are determined to rush
to see the sun the other way around?**

– Elizabeth Bishop

These lines from “Questions of Travel” ring true to me. It is precisely this childishness which drove me toward Elizabeth Bishop. Addicted to her poetry, I went on pilgrimages to related places in search of backgrounds and objects. My reaction is typical of Bishop readers although perhaps a little way out, since I'm a Japanese living in Tokyo, who has now been tracking Bishop down for over twelve years. The result of my childishness is this: my Japanese translation *Elizabeth Bishop Shishu* (Selected Poems) published by Doyo-Bijutusha on February 8, 2001.

It is a small book but contains what are in most cases the first Japanese translations of her major poems: ten from *North & South*, nine from *A Cold Spring*, “Rainy Season: Sub-Tropics,” all of *Questions of Travel* and *Geography III*, and six others chosen from *The Complete Poems*. As Bishop is still not well known in Japan, I added a brief chronology and notes. The latter, not without some concern, for as is well known, Bishop was against the idea of footnoting poems (letter to J.F. Nims, Oct. 6, 1979, *One Art*). Even so, I wanted to give Japanese readers detailed information widely shared among world readers today. Isn't it forgivable if, in the notes, I introduce Bishop's own comments and the reactions of her friends, critics or contemporaries toward each poem? I wished to show the outburst of international attention Bishop received throughout the 1990s.

Thus, the book was done, a slim volume of 164 pages, set in the format of the ‘Contemporary World Poets’ series, which includes Lorca, Symborska, Paz, and some 30 others. It is not the bilingual edition as I originally intended. Yet I was pleased with it. So was Margaret Mitsutani, who first introduced me to Bishop and served as poetry consultant to my translation from beginning to end.

One summer night in 1989, I encountered the poem “One Art” through *Voices & Visions*, a video Margaret lent me. I was immediately captivated and started writing down words from the tape. As none of Bishop's books were available in Japan and *The Complete Poems* was out of print even in the U.S., Margaret's mother helped us, and two second-hand copies from a warehouse in Pittsburgh finally arrived after a couple of months. With the written text, I began translating “One Art.” “In the Waiting Room” was next. These two are my first and oldest translations. Before 1991 I managed to finish all the poems in *Geography III*.

My true start, however, was marked by my travel that year. In October 1991 I was in Great Village with questions in

mind. All Bishop hunters are alike when they come looking for the house, churches, school, for meanings of phrases, names, images to be clarified: ‘Tantramar’, ‘Hustler Hill’, ‘Little Marvel Stove’, ‘Maple Leaf (Forever)’, ‘Silted red’, ‘flats’ lavender rich mud’ and so on. Flora and fauna, rare or common, all had to be weighed in the geography of the poetry. I came back in 1995, wishing to dig deeper till the landscape would speak to me. Great Village, visited and revisited, was eloquent. [For more about these visits, see *EBSNS Newsletter*, Fall 1995.]

Five trips in ten years certainly pushed my translations forward. In Key West (1993), Nova Scotia (1995), Worcester (1997), Brazil (1999), I observed her “continent, city, country, society.” Conferences provided me with others' views and friendly discussions to check my translations on various levels. I witnessed her mother's needlework and portrait, the dollar-bill size painting; her “three loved houses” were the highlight, for they disclosed the traces of the poet's life left in each one. I have so many mental pictures such as the “Roosters” yard in Key West; the studio in Petropolis with bromelias and rocks beside it, where Lota showered Bishop with love and fits of temper, shared with me love's “ignorant map”; in Ouro Prêto, the chatter of hummingbirds mingled with that of local women, or perhaps Manuelzinho's family, faces laughing, crying, staring at “immodest tourists”...

Pilgrimage is not the only way to fulfil literary quest, but it's the one I recommend, even in this age of the internet. Houses and landscapes cannot be transported, nor can the air, smells, colors, the temperament of the people or the tone of their voices telling inside stories be sent out electronically. “Génie du lieux” Marcel Proust would say – What matters most is formless, and it is these invisible threads that form the texture of Bishop's poetry. A translator should never go home without gripping that ‘wire’ (in “The End of March”) which “imply leashes the whole affair / to something off behind.” Travel might give you that.

I'll never forget Margaret's comment on my translation of “The Burglar of Babylon.” When I showed her my draft (around 1995), she said, “It is grammatically correct, but the whole tone is wrong.” I knew a few things about Brazil by that time and had thought it would be enough. But I understood what she meant: not knowledge or accuracy but, above all, music! As I revised the draft, I kept thinking of what it lacked. In the meantime, I realized it was rhythm,

the two beats that shocked French composer Milaud, that seemed to be the heart of the matter. As a translator, I felt an urgent need to learn about things Brazilian. Music studies and travel helped me to acquire the beat and breath of the Brazilian spirit. I thought of Micuçu, the poorest villain in the world, fighting with the cheapest gun. ‘Conto’ and ‘Taurus’ sing out this tragicomic ballad. It was only after my journey in 1999 that I finally stopped revising it.

A translator herself, Margaret pointed out to me the difficulties of Japanese translation created by difference in cultures. Through dialogues with her, I grappled with forms such as the sestina and villanelle, where word order and rhyming rules become obstacles. Gender codes are another delicate problem, as a different language can reveal what Bishop wanted to keep hidden. This problem is not unique to Japanese. Think of the French translator confronted with the simple pronoun ‘they’ in an unpublished love poem from Key West: should it be translated ‘ils’ or ‘elles’? Either choice would create a problem. Probably the neutral ‘on’ should be chosen to avoid being trapped in the hide-or-reveal game. The limitations of translation lead me into confusion and complaint. I’d like to focus on one example of the possibility of translation from my book.

To Westerners’ eyes, *Elizabeth Bishop Shishu* appears to
(cont. above right)

open from front to back. Following the series format, the text is printed vertically. In traditional Japanese texts, the lines come down the page, and the pages are turned from right to left – just the opposite of English books. But recently horizontal writing is becoming more common. If another chance comes, I’d like to try a bilingual edition with parallel texts on facing pages, as other translations into French, Italian, Portuguese and most others are done.

The writing format might seem superficial to English readers, but it is more important for Japanese. Let me quote Margaret’s explanation on Japanese writing: “...since Japanese, unlike Chinese, has a phonetic alphabet, the pronunciations of the original words can be reproduced alongside the Chinese characters without disrupting the text. This dual use of Chinese characters and phonetic readings is a technique translators commonly employ when they want to preserve the original word while at the same time giving an equivalent in Chinese characters, and can be used with key words in a poem” (“Lost and Found in Translation,” *In Worcester, Massachusetts*, 1999, p. 306).

The examples Margaret gives here are ‘Mont d’Espoir’ and ‘Mount Despair’ in “Crusoe in England.” How can the original “play with names” be preserved in the Japanese translation? There are two possibilities: ① is the translation of the original French/English sounds, while ② is the Japanese sounds of Chinese characters:

<p>/Mont' d Espoir/ モン・デスポアール <u>希望峰</u> きぼう ほう /kibou/ /hou/ =hope =mount</p>	<p>←pronunciation→ ←phonetic readings①→ ←Chinese characters→ ←(phonetic readings②)→ ←pronunciation→ ←meaning→</p>	<p>/Mount Despair/ マウント・デスペア <u>絶望峰</u> ぜつぼう ほう /zetsubou/ /hou/ =despair =mount</p>
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Bishop displays a translator’s sense here, as the pun is made of homonyms between French and English words, their meanings being antonyms. In the Japanese translations, the tri-lingual relationship can only be preserved if we use Chinese characters for the meanings together with phonetic readings ① for the French and English sounds. The phonetic

readings ② are not necessary for Japanese readers, because they are the Japanese readings of these Chinese characters. The script used in ① is often applied to foreign words, while ② is for ordinary Japanese words; this is the customary rule.

'Lent tree' in "Electrical Storm" can be also treated as the previous example:

/lento/ /no/ /ki/	←pronunciation
レントの木	←phonetic readings①
四旬節の木	←translation using Chinese characters
しじゅんせつ き	←(phonetic readings②)
/shijun-setsu/no/ ki/	←pronunciation
=Lent =tree	←meaning

This is of course a nickname, suggested by the Christian calendar. On March 21, 1953, Bishop wrote in a letter to Loren MacIver: "The 'Lent' trees – *Quaresmas*, because they bloom in Lent – are purple all over the mountains, mixed with pink and yellow acacias" (*One Art*, p. 255). But doesn't it designate some specific tree, as 'Lent Lily' refers to daffodils? Isn't it the translator's task to look for its true name? Or should I be satisfied with a faithful translation of the name even after hearing Brazilian scholars in Ouro Preto fervently arguing about this tree's identity, and the Brazilian encyclopaedia identifies it as 'Tibouchina', native tree of 'familia de Melastomaceas'? Finally, I decided to heed Elizabeth Spires' question, "Would Bishop approve of this?" As Paulo Enriques Britto and Carmen Oliveira give 'Quaresmeira', I decided on 'lento no ki' (①), its Japanese equivalent. In an essay on Bishop's use of names, I noted that she seems to prefer common names to more individualistic proper names ("The Art of Naming," *In Worcester, Massachusetts*, p. 294). 'Lent tree' is the poet's choice in "Electrical Storm." Therefore in "January 1, 1502" we should accept "symbolic birds" rather than specifying them as *Paradisea* (bird of paradise).

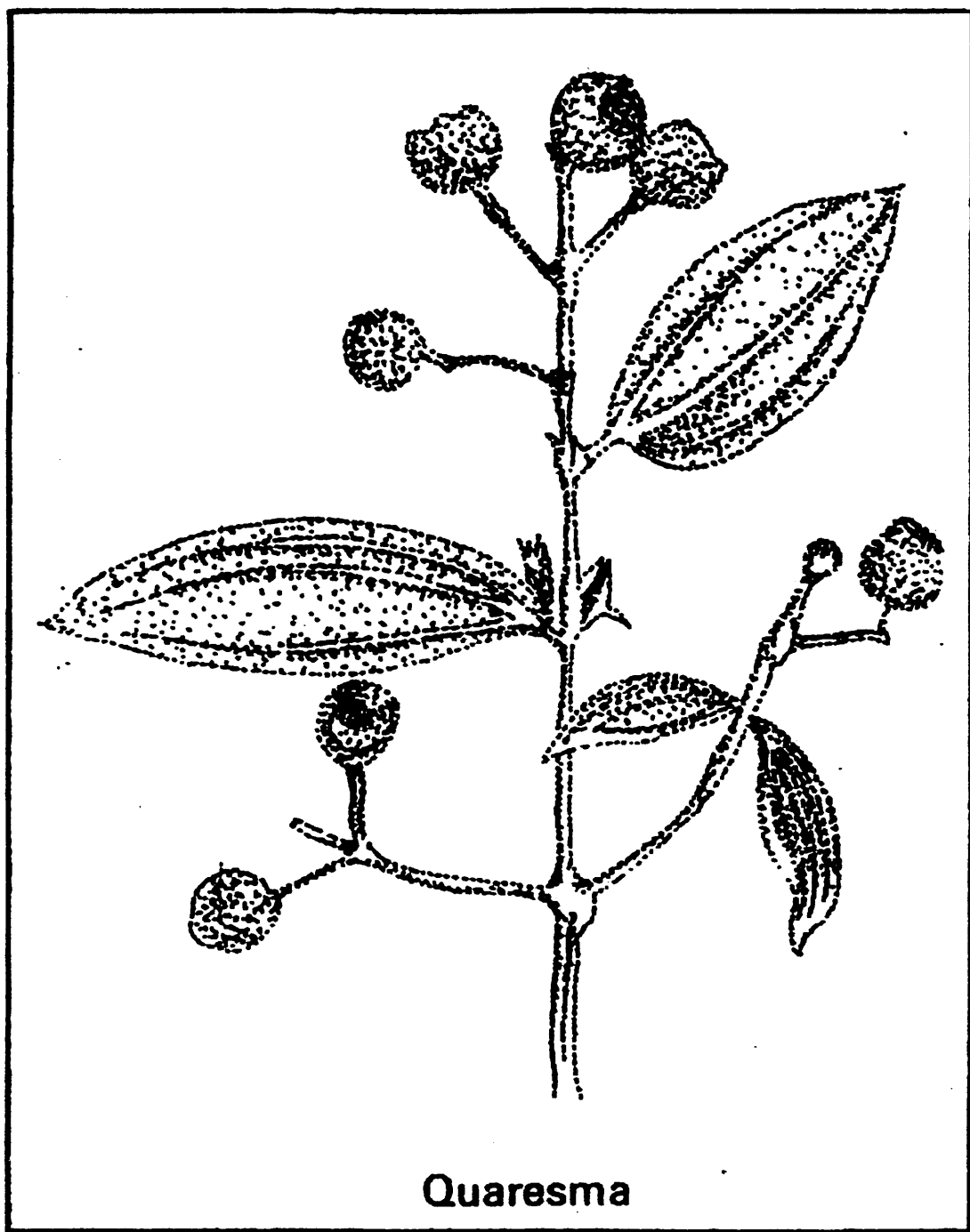
Likewise, we should refrain from identifying her plain "flowers" as *Hypericum* or *Passiflora*, and keep her attacking "scaling-ladder vines," even though they are obviously the strangler-liana such as *Apui* or *Clusia*, in this "hell green" world (*Verde Inferno*, Amazon's nickname). In this poem, I was at my wits' end with the plant called "'one leaf yes, one leaf no' (in Portuguese)": it remains (perhaps by the poet's intention) as the defining puzzle of Amazon flora. Bishop just wants to be a plant hunter offering a perfect specimen without explanations. (Poets want to use words, while philosophers would rather explain them.)

Only after reading the Portuguese translation of "Manuelzinho" or "Santarém" can we use 'saúva' for 'umbrella ants', 'marimbondo' for 'wasp'. Ants and bees have a most interesting history in Brazil, which tempts me to write whole new interpretations of these poems. But a translator should carefully keep her tongue, and her nose out of the matter. She's an outsider, after all.

Looking back, I am amazed how much time I spent on all these things that are lost now, leaving no trace in my final drafts. The translator is an outsider indeed, chasing shadows of words. Reading Neil Besner's essay "Lost in Translation" (*EBSNS Newsletter*, Spring 2002) about his English version of Carmen Oliveira's *Rare and Commonplace Flowers*, published around the same time as my book, I envied the happy relationship between Carmen the author and the translator Neil. For Bishop translators, there is no chance of talking with a living author. They must work within the limits of translation and beyond the boundary of English and the author's voice. A labor of love? Maybe. But I'd rather say "efforts of affection," which sounds more rewarding.

Happiness remains. It was a joy to present the book to Mr. Kijima Hajime, the eminent poet and editor of *The Poetry of Post War Japan* (University of Iowa Press, 1975). Being a translator and long-time correspondent of Langston Hughes, he guided me to A. Bontemps/L. Hughes (eds.), *Poetry of the American Negro*, which includes Bishop's "Song for a Colored Singer." He assisted me in many ways in publishing this book, as Margaret did.

Responses were another kind of happiness. The letters I received proved the power of Bishop's poetry. Some liked "One Art" best, particularly with its form and play on the words *waza* (master) and *wazawai* (disaster). A young professor kindly praised "In the Waiting Room" and "Sestina," while wanting to discuss one phrase in "First Death in Nova Scotia" with me. "The Moose" was the favorite of many, while "Rainy Season" struck readers' minds with its idiosyncratic beauty. Essayist Dekune Tatsuro recommended this book to a librarian's magazine, showing Bishop's charming letter and the paragraph "everything only connected by 'and' and 'and'." Poet Osada Hiroshi sent me a card, saying that he was attracted to "Roosters" and "Over 2,000 Illustrations...." Quoting my translation of the lines "I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house, / my crypto-dream-house" from "The End of March," Mr. Osada added in English, "You got it all!" His blessing confirmed for me the happiness of travel and translation, this childish affair I still want to continue.



Quaresma

Quaresma, *s.f.* Os *quarenta* dias que vão de quarta-feira de cinzas até domingo de Páscoa; (Bras.) espécie de coqueiro; o fruto dele; nome de diversas plantas da família das Melastomáceas, gênero *Tibouchina*; (V. *Jacatirão*) (sinôn., neste sentido: *quaresmeira* e *manacá-da-serra*); o fruto dessas plantas. (*Diccionario Ilustrado*)

Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia

Annual General Meeting

**Great Village Legion
June 12th, 2004
2:00 pm.**

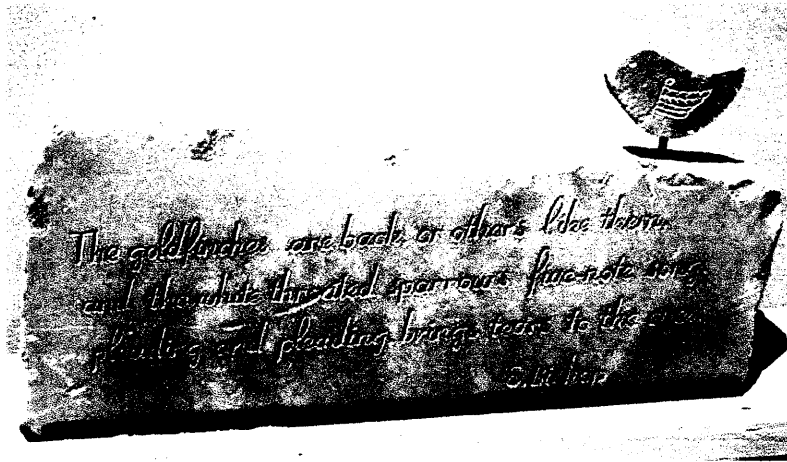
**View the
Stone Sculpture by Heather Lawson
with Bishop Inscription
to be raffled
July 1st, 2004
(tickets will be available)**

**Update on Progress
of
Riverside - Bishop / Great Village Exhibit
(Wilson's Location)**

Bishop/Great Village Publication Available

Other Events to be Announced

Light Refreshments to be Served



STONE SCULPTURE RAFFLE

**Stone Sculpture by Heather Lawson
with Bishop Inscription**
in aid of the
Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia

**Draw: July 1st, 2004
3:00 p.m.
Great Village School**

Value: \$350.00
\$2.00 each or 3 for \$5.00

To purchase or sell tickets
please contact:

Brian Robinson
The Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia
PO Box 138
Great Village, N.S.
B0M 1L0
or
(902)423-7443