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 produces an 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. The EBSNS holds its AGM in Great Village in June. It seeks through various activities to promote the appreciation and study of Elizabeth Bishop as a Nova Scotia writer, thus enriching our literary and cultural heritage.

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This issue is dedicated to the memory of Ilse Barker

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The Poet at Work

by Ross Leckie

Elizabeth Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments.* Ed. Alice Quinn. FSG, 2006.

No relation to the "grand, otherworldly" cow moose of "The Moose" – Great Village antique shop, 2006

As many of us are aware, Helen Vendler excoriated Alice Quinn for producing a collection of poems and drafts that Elizabeth Bishop did not intend for publication. The book was published by FSG, which suggests it was intended for a popular audience, but my own impression is that if not for the Vendler review it would have remained one of those quiet books of interest primarily to scholars and devoted readers of Elizabeth Bishop. Vendler's critique ensured massive attention for this book. If reviews were not already forthcoming, it wasn't long before the controversy was taken up by the major dailies, bringing the book to the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*, and the Elizabeth Bishop Society will debate these issues in a panel this spring at a convention of the American Literature Association.

The life of the writer is an odd paradox, in that it is both exceptionally private and markedly public. Bishop, of course, was a very private person. Through her poetry, however, she achieved a much celebrated public persona. To understand the work of a writer, context is most everything, whether it be historical or personal. It is the care given by archivists and librarians through which we are able to collect the papers essential to comprehending the life that shaped the writing. The books that ensue are simply ways of making the papers more available to the close readers. For this reason I find Vendler's strictures too stringent.

No one will mistake *Edgar Allan Poe* for Bishop's *Complete Poems.* Very few of the poems come close to the quality of the poems she published. Even the few that do so are unmistakably drafts. Nevertheless, Quinn's edition displays Bishop's wit, intelligence and charm, and, at times, her ache and sadness. It is sad to me that Bishop suppressed her love poems, for even in drafts they are exquisite. I'm speaking of such poems as "It is marvelous to wake up together," "Dear, my compass," and "Close close all night," which ends with sheer delight: "Each knows all / the other knows, / learned by heart / from head to toes" (141). Of equal poignancy are the family poems, my favorite being "For M. B. S., Buried in Nova Scotia." A poem that bristles with hurt is "Where are the dolls that loved me so," which seems nearly finished, but was perhaps abandoned by Bishop for its

Dolls in Great Village antique shop, 2006

potential bathos.

The book demands that you contemplate the "what if." So many of these poems give the preliminary suggestion that they would take a significant place in *The Complete Poems* had they been finished. The quite fragmented poem "The Grandmothers" falls in this category, with its conceit centering on the mysterious and resonant saying identified with each woman. Readers will undoubtedly find poems they wish had been completed. The one I long for is "Crossing the Equator," with its chilling opening lines: "We all need the horizon, so it hardens / in its definition: *the horizon*, / (If it hadn't, as they say, we would imagine it; / rather, my dear, *you*, being practical, would have)" (95).

Quinn is to be congratulated for including many drafts of "One Art." The drafts have long been famous amongst Bishop scholars for the way they display the mind of the poet at work, and now they are widely available. The surprise to everyone who knows the poem as one of the finest villanelles in the English language is that it did not begin in this form. It began as a fairly long free verse of the sort that populates the rest of *Geography III*.

This review would not be complete without applause for Quinn's extensive and thorough notes. While these notes have all of the precision and care of an exceptional scholar, what I enjoyed most was the way they provide context. Quinn recounts many of the events in Bishop's life that surround these poems, sometimes ranging widely from the poems themselves to remind you of nuggets of information that delight in the way they hint at the spirit of Bishop's writing life. I was pleased to be reminded that Bishop visited George Herbert's church, given how many Bishop poems share both Herbert's childlike surprise and his incisive wit in contemplating the nature of the universe.

I think all Bishop readers will find this book indispensable, in spite of Helen Vendler's admonitions and chidings. While these drafts do not have the polish of her completed works, in some ways they display, in their rough quality, Elizabeth when she is most at home.

Ross Leckie has published three poetry collections, most recently *Gravity's Plumb Line*. He lives in Fredericton, where he edits *The Fiddlehead*, coordinates the UNB Creative Writing Program, and is writing a book on the Sublime and American poets (including Bishop). Last winter he taught in Bhutan.

Dolls in Great Village antique shop (2), 2006

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All photos in this issue were taken in Great Villlage by the editor.

Editorial

That Elizabeth Bishop generates a great deal of interest among Canadian writers is evident in many ways besides the three book reviews and the two recent Bishop-related poems by Canadian poets in this issue of the EBSNS *Newsletter.*

In the glossy Maritime magazine *Saltscapes*, poet and nature writer Harry Thurston recently borrowed words of Bishop for the title of a piece called "The Parrsboro Shore: home of the long tides," and he quotes other lines from Bishop's "The Moose" in the article. The use of Bishop as a poetic touchstone is found in M. Travis Lane's recent review of two collections by Nova Scotia poet Jeannette Lynes in *The Fiddlehead* (no. 223): "And this poet is funny, with that vigorous but modest irreverence I think of as peculiarly feminine, as in Bishop, Moore, Gotlieb." In a recent issue of *Books in Canada* (Dec. '06), reviewer Olivia Cole says of poet Anita Lahey's first collection, *Out to Dry in Cape Breton*: "...it's not just the Eastern settings of her work that call to mind Elizabeth Bishop. In 'Cape Breton Relative,' the final sequence, Bishop's poem 'Questions of Travel' seems touchingly present but, as throughout the collection, without ever giving a sense of unresolved influences." Lahey is currently the editor of *Arc*, one of Canada's two magazines solely dedicated to new poetry and poetry reviewing. *Arc* also has a website that includes the feature *How Poems Work*, where poets select the works of other poets to discuss in brief essays. For Zimbabwe-born, East-Anglia-educated Canadian poet Yvonne Blomer's *Arc* piece on Bishop's "Twelve O'Clock News," see http://www.arcpoetryca/howpoemswork/features/2005_02_blomer.php. The relationship between *Arc* and Bishop continues with the quoting of Seamus Heaney's comment on Bishop raising "the actual to a new linguistic power" in a review of a Patrick Warner collection (no. 56); and with the recent publication of Stephanie Bolster's poem "Rainbow," reprinted in this issue of our newsletter.

Much more extensively, in a recent book created by poet Anne Compton, *Meetings with Maritime Poets: Interviews* (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2006), Bishop's name and influence arise in conversations with seven of the sixteen poets Compton interviewed. In her introduction, she comments that the poets she spoke with named "those poets whose practices were, for them, models of excellence. John Thompson and Elizabeth Bishop were frequently named in this regard." Compton also writes of the frequency of sea imagery in the region's poetry: "The poets' interest in the sea is not merely the result of proximity. And it isn't some relic emotion left over from the days of a predominantly fishing-based economy. Theirs is an interest in a great energy, in an amoral, inhuman force that draws them to the edge and provokes questions of a metaphysical nature." Then Compton quotes lines from Bishop's "At the Fishhouses."

In Compton's book, George Elliot Clarke says, "When I was a younger poet, Bishop was the poet I was reading." Carole Langille, a South Shore Nova Scotia poet originally from New York, says: "The poets I gravitate towards are...reticent – like Elizabeth Bishop. You don't even know what she is referring to and yet there is great passion beneath that reticence," then Langille offers extensive, excellent commentary on Bishop's "Filling Station," and describes how "when I found myself living in Nova Scotia, coincidences kept occurring, which reinforced my feeling of connection with her." While Langille recalls that at a reading at the Guggenheim Museum Bishop "wasn't a good reader" and "I could hardly understand her garbled words," Sue Goyette says that on a CD recording Bishop "has this lovely voice. She completely surprised me, the way she came up with this sultry voice.... in all the pictures she has this conservative look. You think you have an image of the poet, and then she reads and you think, *This is so intimate*. She lives in her poems."

Talking to Compton, Ross Leckie speaks of Bishop, along with Stevens, Ashbery, and Jorie Graham, as among the "best poets enacting the sublime" who also have "a vision of a more egalitarian society." Leckie also comments that knowing something of Bishop's biography "helps me understand why somebody who rarely had the opportunity to return to Nova Scotia was, nonetheless, obsessed with the place and kept writing about it through all of her life." I also sense Bishop in the background when Leckie says: "The kind of humour I most admire is sly humour. The humour that sneaks up on you and is quite laconic. One of the things I really admire about people in the Maritimes is that they love wry humour and laconic wit."

One of the poets interviewed by Compton, Anne Simpson, doesn't mention Bishop in *Meetings with Maritime Poets*, yet in August 2006 at an International Council for Canadian Studies Conference in Halifax, when Simpson was invited to read her own work and two poems by others, her first choice to share with delegates from Ireland, Russia, Italy, Japan, and many other countries was Bishop's "First Death in Nova Scotia."

Other Canadian attention to Bishop has recently appeared in the publication of an intriguing essay called "'You are not Beppo': Elizabeth Bishop's Animals and Negotiation of Identity." While the essay's author, Priscilla Paton, author of *Abandoned New England: Landscape in the Works of Homer, Frost, Hopper, Wyeth, and Bishop*, is an American scholar, the journal in which her essay appears, *Mosaic*, is published and edited at the University of Winnipeg, in Manitoba. Paton's essay suggests new directions in readings of Bishop, in that it explores the poetry and prose not only alongside familiar works of criticism by Costello. Goldensohn, and Travisano but also in the light of books such as Paul Shepard's *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*, Stephen Jay Gould's *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, and Mary Midgley's *Animals and Why They Matter.* Among Canadian periodicals, *Mosaic* – like *The Antigonish Review*, *Arc*, and *The Dalhousie Review* – has contributed to the exploration of Bishop in this country. Earlier *Mosaic* articles include another by Priscilla Paton, "Landscape and Female Desire: Elizabeth Bishop's 'Closet' Tactics" (31.3, 1998), 133-51, and British scholar Jonathan Ellis's "From Maps to Monuments: Elizabeth Bishop's Shoreline Poems" (36.4, Dec. 2003, 103-19).

A final Canadian periodical worth citing is *Canadian Literature*, based at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver. Its major pieces on Bishop have included Cynthia Messenger's essay "'But How Do You Children Write Chagall?': Ekphrasis and the Brazilian Poetry of P. K. Page and Elizabeth Bishop" (issue 142/43), poet Richard Sanger's essay "High Seas: Elizabeth Bishop Returns Home" (166), and the editorial "Home Economics" (also issue 166), written by Kevin McNeilly, who mentions his junior-high years "a few miles from Great Village, in North River, a municipality just outside Truro." McNeilly discusses "In the Village" as well as James Merrill's tribute to Bishop "Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia." P. K. Page's Bishop-based glosa "Poor Bird," and the poetry of Anne Carson, Stephanie Bolster, and Louise Halfe. *Canadian Literature* has also published reviews of several books of Bishop criticism (150), the essay anthology *Divisions of the Heart: Elizabeth Bishop and the Art of Memory* (176), *Rare and Commonplace Flowers: The Story of Elizabeth Bishop and Lota de Macedo Soares* (176), Donna Smyth's Bishop-inspired play *Sole Survivors* (185), as well as a review of Julie Bruck's poetry collection *The End of Travel* (176), citing the derivation of its title from Bishop and its Bishop-related poem "A Bus in Nova Scotia."

In this editorial I have mostly excluded mention of contributors to Bishop scholarship already likely familiar to faithful readers of this newsletter. The preceding survey is by now means complete, but I hope it goes some direction in detailing how Elizabeth Bishop's powers as a writer of great complexity and integrity have been increasingly recognized over the past decade by Canadian poets and academics. While maintaining its outward gaze and international scope (our past issues having included articles about Bishop as read in Czechoslovakia, Japan, Brazil, and other countries), this newsletter aims to go on providing vibrant Canadian perspectives on Bishop.

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EBSNS Annual General Meeting
Great Village Legion Hall
17 June 2006 – Minutes

Chair Sandra Barry called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. 22 members and guests present.

Sandra noted that Margo Wheaton has had to step down as secretary, which will remain a floating position. Brian Bartlett agreed to take notes for minutes for the meeting (final minutes by Sandra Barry). Brian read the minutes for the 2005 AGM. Moved to accept them as read (Barry / Kerslake). Approved.

Treasurer Joy Graham read Treasurer's Report. Noted an increase in dues being paid. Noted that we had made $1644.00 on the sale of the booklet to date. Moved to accept report as read (Corrigan/ Arthur Chisholm). Approved. Joy also distributed another report bringing the figures up to date for June 2006.

Ann Marie Duggan read the Nominating Committee Report. She noted the departure and offered thanks for the contribution and participation of five board members: Peter Sanger, Donna Smyth, Deborah Stiles, Paul Tingley, Terry White. Members remaining include Sandra Barry (Chair), Lois Bray (Vice Chair), Joy Graham (Treasurer); Brian Bartlett, Angus Chisholm, Arthur Chisholm, Ann Marie Duggan, Meredith Layton, Brian Robinson, Margo Wheaton. Three new members – John Barnstead, Alexander MacLeod, and Fonda Smyth – were welcomed. Two positions remained to be filled. It was agreed upon recommendation by Susan Kerslake and Fonda Smyth that Elizabeth Peirce and Bob Smith, neither of whom was present, would be asked if they would become board members. [Elizabeth subsequently said yes.] Sandra Barry read the President's Report. Items mentioned included the memorandum of agreement with

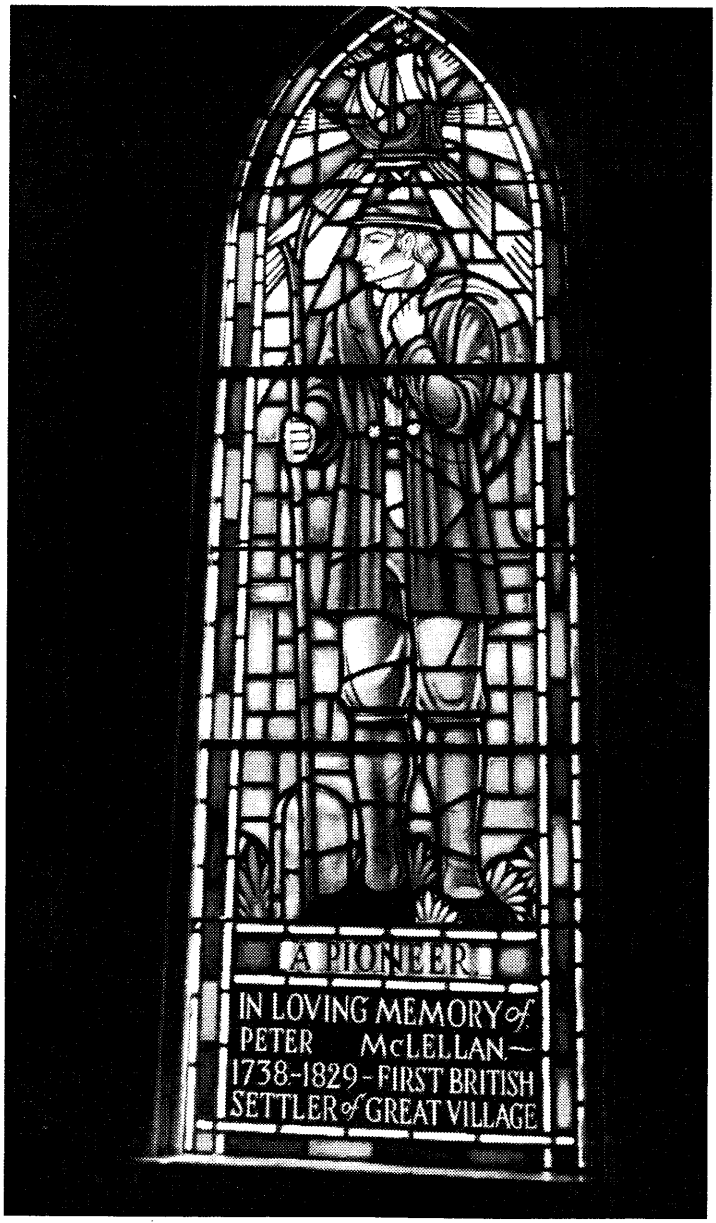
Wilson's about the land for the pergola display, and the two grant applications pending from Office of Economic Development and Department of Tourism re: the display. Thanks were extended again to Robert MacNeil and Freedom Forum for the initial money for the display. A contractor has been chosen but no date yet fixed for construction. (Ann Marie's architectural plan of the display was available to be viewed after meeting). The President's report also mentioned the Elizabeth Bishop centenary approaching in 2011; talks and discussions are already under way to mark this important date. Move to accept report as read (Barry / Kerslake). Approved.

Other business: Sandra noted the passing of Ilse Barker, one of Elizabeth Bishop's dearest friends. Lois Bray moved that a thank you be offered to Ann Marie Duggan for all her work in designing the pergola display. Enthusiastically approved by all with applause.

Thanks to the Legion and Arthur Chisholm for their continued helping in making the Legion available for the AGM. Brian Bartlett gave a brief report on the next issue of the Newsletter, which is well underway. Thanks were also offered to Brian for his efforts. Finally, on June 28 the EBSNS will have a presence at the Colchester Library event in Truro, the launch of summer reading programme the theme of which is "Quest for Heroes."

Nancy Corrigan, pastor of the St. James United Church, said that the church would be open for viewing by anyone present. Meeting adjourned. Refreshments at the Legion, prepared by the Fire Brigade Ladies Auxiliary.

Room by Verse reading at the Elizabeth Bishop House: Several readers participated in a program constructed by Sandra Barry, reading excerpts from Bishop's unpublished novel and from her poems "The Monument" (Elizabeth Pierce), "Insomnia" (Sandra Barry), "The Gentleman of Shalott" (Brian Robinson), "Sonnet" along with Robert Burns's "O, Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast" (Alexander MacLeod), "The End of March" (Adrianne Barry), "Cirque d'Hiver" (Brian Bartlett), and "Santarém (Donna Smyth).



Memorial Window (first British settler), St. James United Church, Great Village

"The Last Light": A Tribute to Ilse Barker (1921-2006)

by Sandra Barry

The title of this tribute is a phrase in a poem about Elizabeth Bishop, written by Ilse Barker, under her *nom de plume* Katherine Talbot, and published in the Winter 2006 (V. 12) issue of the *EBSNS Newsletter*. "The Poem – i.m. E.B." is perhaps the last work published by Ilse Barker before her unexpected death

on 20 May 2006. It is fitting that this work was a memorial poem for Bishop, her dear friend of many decades.

I first met Ilse Barker in September 1994, at a Bishop conference at Vassar College. It was my first Bishop conference and I was going into the lion's den of veteran academics, writers and scholars, knowing no one (though I had some contact with Tom Travisano and Gary Fountain). Ilse's presentation was not academic. It was rather a deep meditation on her friend's poems from the point of view of someone who had known her intimately. That intimacy had unfolded mostly through a lengthy correspondence. Ilse met Elizabeth at Yaddo in the early 50s, and while they did meet again on a number of occasions, the Atlantic Ocean separated them for most of their friendship – so, they wrote letters, many letters, to each other.

One morning during the conference, after I had nervously given my paper, I was sitting at a table in the dining room of the Vassar College Alumni House, and Ilse came up to me and asked if she could join me. I think she got how nervous I was, and she was also very interested in the fact that I came from Nova Scotia – for Bishop had spoken with her often about Nova Scotia. We had a lovely conversation and exchanged addresses. From that point on, we wrote to each other regularly. Indeed, in an age when letter-writing is fast becoming a dying practice, Ilse was one of my most faithful correspondents – we wrote to each other alternating months for over ten years.

I always wanted to go to England to see her, to visit her in her snug West Sussex home; but it never happened, something I deeply regret. Ours was a friendship made in letters, and it was truly a wonderful way to get to know her. Ilse kindly wrote a short memoir piece for the Fall 1996 (V. 3, No. 2) issue of the *EBSNS Newsletter*, and when she sent me her poem for Bishop in 2005, I asked immediately if we could include it in the next issue. She readily agreed and was pleased to see it there when I sent her a copy in February 2006.

Her death was utterly unexpected – there had been no indication to me that there was any problem. Indeed, Ilse was in the process of selling her home in West Sussex and moving nearer to her son and his family in Wales. My last letter from her was in early April 2006. I had replied and was waiting to hear from her when the news came. I was shocked and deeply saddened when I heard, but what was most disconcerting was the realization that I would never again receive a letter from her – a loss which I am at a loss to describe. A number of tributes to Ilse have appeared in various publications, by people who knew her better than I did. All I can say is that I am finding it very difficult to shake the hope that, one day, I'll open my mail box and there will be the characteristic slender envelope from her with her typed letter and her elegant signature flourish at the end. I am very grateful to have the letters Ilse sent to me, to have some of her thoughts and feelings recorded in the context of our long-distance friendship. Her letters with Elizabeth Bishop are valued as a window into Bishop's world. Perhaps my correspondence with Ilse will be seen similarly, as a window into Ilse's world, a fascinating world of writers and painters and daily life in West Sussex at the end of the twentieth century. In letters we can continue to have a glow from the "last light" of life. We often wrote about how letter-writing was dying out – but Ilse kept up this most expressive form of communication right up to the end of her life. I expect there were letters on her desk waiting to be mailed.

A Perplexing Book on Bishop

by Nancy Bauer

Cheryl Walker, *God and Elizabeth Bishop: Meditations on Religion and Poetry*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.

My advice to a reader of this book is: ignore the title and concentrate on the subtitle. Walker's first mention of Bishop is at the bottom of page two: "In this book, I propose to reexamine some traditional Christian concepts such as sin and spiritual love, using the life and poetry of Elizabeth Bishop for inspiration." Starting out on this shaky premise, Walker continues to hedge her bets. She explains that because religion was not the main focus of Bishop's life, "this version of her life will be shorter. Shorter need not mean less interesting, however. It all depends, in this case, upon you, 'the reader.'" Why would she choose Elizabeth Bishop as her inspiration if she has to say, for example, that Bishop has "some not quite articulated sense of metaphysics," or "at the level of the unconscious...she thought of herself in need of grace"? She does not explain if Bishop herself was unconscious of this need.

Throughout the book, Walker refuses to make determined statements. Instead there are speculations: "Perhaps it is not too outlandish to suggest," "This might also explain," "These words might well apply." She writes, "We can only speculate about such matters," and "One cannot help but feel a certain theological resonance in all this." About Bishop's denial that she is religious or a believer, Walker writes: "On the score of religion, though, one sometimes feels that she doth protest too much." The book is filled with "perhaps," "probably," "might have been." Before she explicates the poem "Anaphora," Walker asks a series of questions and then adds, "What do you think?" She asks the reader to

agree, "Though her poetry (like all good poetry) is rooted in actual experience, it reaches beyond anecdote to something less temporal and more profound. Might we call it 'eternity'?" This hedging continues throughout the book, becoming increasingly annoying.

Some of the prose is surprisingly awkward. George Herbert "has an interesting 'take' [Walker's quotation marks] on the way an exaggerated sense of self worth works to frustrate the operations of love in 'Love III'." She goes on, "There is something very funny about this poem." Funny as in hah hah or funny as in odd, peculiar? The coxcomb on the rooster in the poem of the same name is "very phallic." How phallic is very phallic? Walker describes the glory of Solomon in Herbert's poem, "Sion," as "Solomon's Disney wealth." Disney?

Walker makes a strange juxtaposition between Bishop and a character in a Jeannette Winterson novel. "This character is a Romantic, of course, and thus unlike what we mostly understand about Bishop." I am left to wonder, Why bring it up then? Walker compares Bishop to Rumi and then writes, "Of course, to place Rumi next to Elizabeth Bishop is to see how different they are as well as to see perhaps what they have in common."

A perplexing anomaly is that Walker changes halfway through the book from using "I" to using "one" and then "we": "What one wants to say about this bird [the sandpiper] is that from one point of view he [sic] is missing the big picture"; "Now if we go back to the end of Bishop's story, 'The Country Mouse', we can see that it becomes a lot clearer...." Walker changes back and forth throughout the rest of the book, and so we never know who is speaking. In a work of literary criticism the writer ordinarily adopts one stance and keeps to it, unless she makes it clear that she is changing that stance for a particular reason. It is possible that sections of Walker's book were essays first published in journals, and that she didn't feel she should change them to make them uniform. Writing about Bishop's "The Prodigal," she takes a whole paragraph to tell the plot of

Memorial window (Albert Schweitzer), St. James United Church, Great Village. After teaching in Upper Economy, Parrsboro, and Canso in Nova Scotia, one of Bishop's great uncles, John Hutchinson (younger brother of painter George), worked from 1882-87 in India for the Foreign Mission Board of the Maritime Provinces. There he set up a circulating library, established a parish school, and translated a novel from Telegu. Later he was a pastor in Kansas, then became President of Acadia University.

Jesus' parable. In addition to not knowing who the writer is, I don't know who "the reader" is that Walker addresses. But certainly it's not one who wouldn't know the parable of the prodigal son.

In this short study Walker cites over sixty poets, mystics and critics: Herbert, Eliot, Rilke, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, Auden, and Derrida, among many more. The effect of these many citings is confusion. In the section "Suffering Meaning," Walker takes two pages to explicate a poem by Emily Dickinson, and then with no transition she goes on to Aldous Huxley, St. John of the Cross, and Gerald Manley Hopkins. These people write about suffering, but Walker doesn't make it clear how they are connected to Bishop's work. She states that when Bishop had her own dark night of the soul with the death of Lota Soares, she read not Hopkins but George Herbert. Why then cite Hopkins? What does this all mean? That the poets and mystics cited include religion in their work, write about suffering, love, and the poor? She collects writings from all over that have to do with the subjects announced and then mentions them higgledy-piggledy, letting the reader figure it all out herself.

As you can tell, I am baffled by this book. When re-reading it, I tried to see what I might have made of it if I had followed my own advice and ignored the title, concentrating on the subtitle; if I had tried to relax about the confusing or non-existent transitions; and if I had disregarded the stylistic infelicities. I did not want to be guilty of a reviewer's inclination to review a book she wishes the writer had written. Walker is making the case for Bishop's being a religious writer in the tradition of Herbert, Rumi, Hopkins, thus overturning the conventional view of the poet. I find that an appealing thesis. Walker is at her best when she concentrates on the work of Bishop herself and on the poets known to have influenced Bishop – Hopkins and Herbert especially. On several occasions she really does connect Herbert to Bishop. Early on in the book she writes, "Bishop loved the poetry of George Herbert" and was consciously inspired by him in writing "The Weed." In the last section of *God and Elizabeth Bishop*, "Assent," Walker discusses this influence very convincingly. "Assent," which concentrates on Bishop, makes some thought-provoking points. Here I began to see what the book could have become if there had been fewer uses of the phrase "might have been."

Walker focuses on six religious concepts, listing various writers who have dealt with them. The book is a personal meditation on the relationship between the concepts and the writers. "I have read this poem [a Hopkins sonnet] for so many years (beginning when I was an undergraduate searching for a senior thesis topic) that it is difficult for me to remember how I stumbled over Hopkins' lines the first time, uncertain how to read this clotted syntax, how to take in these gouts of spiritual gore." Walker includes a prayer she learned as a child and has recited all her life. She remembers her mother. She recalls the religious insights of a former student who became a nun. Walker's sensitive meditation combined with her wide knowledge – and with a thesis that she cannot prove but obviously deeply believes to be true – could have made an interesting book, but in the end her diffuse approach sabotages it.

Nancy Bauer is a Fredericton fiction-writer and founder of the Maritime Writers' Workshop. Her novels include *Flora, Write This Down*, *Wise-Ears*, and *The Irrational Doorways of Mr. Gerard*. She recently began writing an arts column for *The Telegraph Journal*. In the 1950s she attended Mount Holyoke College, where one day Marianne Moore visited and read poetry.

Taking Her Time: Ellis on Bishop, Art, and Memory

by Brian Robinson

Jonathan Ellis, *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop.* Ashgate Publishing, 2006.

This is an ambitious book whose aim is, in Jonathan Ellis' own words, "to look at Bishop's entire artistic output, the dead ends, drafts and notebooks as well as the final versions and complete collections." As if this time spent burrowing in the archives was not exhausting enough, the book also takes on Bishop's letters and paintings as if they were as crucial as the complete works. However, Ellis' approach is not exhaustive in the sense of seeking out every detail in order to derive Bishop's art from a biography of what actually happened to her. On the contrary, Ellis is concerned with Bishop's life only in so far as events are "refracted" in her writing. So, rather than lesbian identity, alcoholism, and the childhood traumas which have been revealed since the 1980s, the key of the book's title is "memory" in the "work" of Elizabeth Bishop. Or, in the famous lines from "Poem", "life and the memory of it so compressed / they've turned into each other. Which is which?"

So, going beyond the issues orientations of the 1980's, Ellis' revelatory sequence is not merely from autobiography to book, but also from painter to poet and from poem to reader. Ellis therefore adopts a position which takes to task critics who (and here I am paraphrasing) seem to love Bishop for what they think she has experienced and seen, not for what she has actually passed on to us later. It is Ellis' contention that, as in the form of the poem "Poem," there is life that cannot be explained away or retold by

biography. This does not mean that life as experienced is ignored. Instead, Ellis emphasizes "the notion of poetic form as a hiding place for autobiographical secrets, somewhere to absorb, codify and often re-imagine memories."

An interesting result of this approach is how Ellis divides his book along geographical lines which draw attention to the Nova Scotia of Great Village, Cape Breton and Sable Island in Bishop's memory and art. This comes as a surprise in the context of the introductory chapter whose intent I have been summarizing. Indeed, even as he is introducing different spatial and temporal zones ("North and South, Brazil and elsewhere"), Ellis' concern for artistic form means that there is no hint of a literal Nova Scotia. Instead, we find metaphors of imaginary icebergs and snowforts (Chapter 1), coastal hideaways and seashore retreats (Chapter 2) and, darkened rooms and haunted villages (Chapter 3). In other words, Nova Scotia, and all that it implies, is a metaphoric rather than a chronological presence. This may seem obvious enough – what else should Great Village represent? The surprise is the degree to which Ellis has driven what Nova Scotian scholars have made of "the photographs, pictures and schoolbooks that...act as memory aids, the family heirlooms and treasures regularly passed on from relative to relative." For example, Ellis provenances family stories in the context of the scholarly reluctance to situate Bishop's writing within Nova Scotia. Notably, in his insightful chapter on letters in Bishop's work and life, Ellis demonstrates how Robert Giroux's decision to edit out correspondence to relatives from *One Art: The Letters of Elizabeth Bishop* has undermined the significance of Bishop's Aunt Grace as "an unofficial mentor and reader" (not to forget the family genesis of the dollar-bill-size picture in "Poem"). Characteristically, Ellis goes on the show both how elements of "Poem" have their origins in Bishop's immediate enthusiastic response in a letter to her Aunt, and how, nine years later, she adjusted the form and tone of the letter, with the result that "the unrestrained language of the letter [is] pegged back." As Ellis suggests, Bishop "relies on the letter to write the poem, but the expressive artist must always be cancelled out for the poem to be complete."

The significance of Nova Scotia as metaphor is therefore one that goes beyond references to ice and snow, sea and shore, etc. As I have just suggested, Ellis carries his analysis through from the initial "metaphoric" chapters to an approach which makes more of sources like the letters and pictures than academic confirmation and documentation. I would go so far as to suggest that Ellis draws complete works and documents together in such a productive way that it makes the recent controversy over the publication of Bishop's incomplete poems seem redundant. It is not difficult to see where Ellis would stand on this issue (his inclusion of so recent a publication is significant; see *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box,* ed. Alice Quinn).

Space does not permit a review of the remarkable number of poems Ellis has managed to include. It should be pointed out, however, that not only has he something to say about most of Bishop's "complete" output, but he has also demonstrated clear links to unpublished sources as well as the letters and paintings. Extensive as these correspondences may seem, Ellis' fluent prose and his determination to insist on Bishop's poetry as the final arbiter means that the readability of the book is never at risk. The jargon of "unpacking" is irrelevant – or does Ellis reduce his sightings to subliminal references?[1] Unfortunately, the closest I can come to demonstrating how Ellis achieves coherence is in my tracing of the references he makes throughout his book to the Nova Scotian context of "Poem."

I would therefore conclude by drawing attention to Ellis' final chapter on "The Moose" which he titles acutely "Taking her time." Here Ellis draws together Bishop's Nova Scotian geographic, historic and linguistic heritage, along with Peter Sanger's work on Nova Scotian speech patterns and, once again, Grace Bulmer Bower's letters to show that – well, audacious as it might seem – the wonderful voice sequence of the bus journey is "Bishop remembering her Aunt Grace talking." The eternal tragedies of Aunt Grace's prose become refigured, "shifting the particular 'creaking and noises' of her individual memories into capitalized, generic 'Grandparents' voices'."

As Ellis himself concludes, what we learn from his approach to the sources Bishop employed in the time she took to look her poetry over "is not to consider any one element better or more evolved than another, but...to keep in play...art and memory, home and elsewhere, love and death.... in such ways, one life (or one art) becomes many and can ultimately be passed on to many people."

Footnote:
[1] I am thinking of Paul Muldoon's recent reading of "12 O'Clock News." His hit-and-miss reminders, associations, reminiscences and sequiturs ad infinitum, playful as they may be, lead him from surface to subterranean subliminals which, to cut a long story short, open correspondences that are beyond criticism itself; see Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006) 82-113.

Brian Robinson, a professor of Geography at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, formerly President of EBSNS and still very active in the society, has published widely in the field of literature and geography, including essays on Seamus Heaney and Charles Dickens.

Rainbow

(after Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish")

by Stephanie Bolster

The photograph fans out the bright
contents of the six-month plover's gut:
the last five hundred things it ate, dead
lighters and crushed glass, cigarettes,
baubles until no room for food.
We do [redacted] wrong
and yet that reek of alley rot, puke, tunnel-pent air,
I love because New York London Paris.

Five times the fish says yes to the hook,
no to the tug, five times keeps
what's given, and if the poet's right
to let it go (grandstander with her similes
of wallpaper and feathers) who am I to gulp
that greasy rainbow, as if art could cancel
ruin, as if I could eat the world and live.

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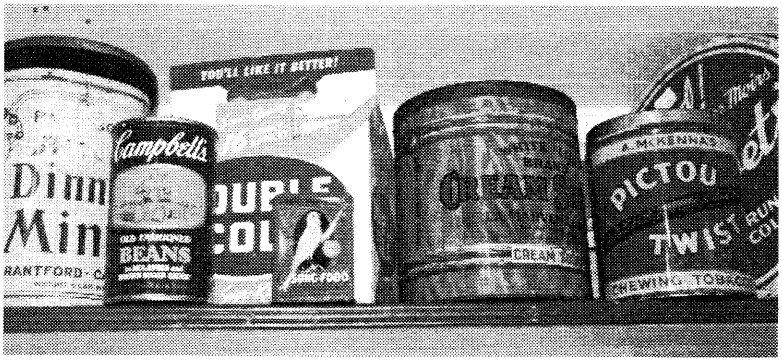
Stephanie Bolster's books of poetry include the Governor General's Award-winning *White Stone: The Alice Poems* (which appears in French translation this year), *Two Glasses of Milk*, and *Pavillion*. She teaches Creative Writing at Concordia University in Montreal, and is currently writing a book of poems about zoos, as well as editing an anthology of zoo poetry and fiction.



Cans and boxes, Great Village antique shop, 2006

Villanelle for E.B.

by Carey Toane

My words are of no use to me,
their rhythm out of pace;
I am not half as light as she.

Her voice fills pages naturally;
nothing goes to waste.
My words fall apart on me.

We share a name, a geography,
a map of common space, yet
I'm not half as light as she.

We share the winter, snow and sea.
Heavens, I know the place!
My too-bright eyes play tricks on me –

never mind. My wishful genealogy
a dilettante's disgrace.
She is twice as light as me.

This territory, a continent
on which all lines are based.
Her words demand the best of me.
I am not half as light as she.

Carey Toane is a Canadian writer currently living in Finland, studying at the University of Helsinki, where she is completing her master's thesis on Bishop's Nova Scotia poems. Another of her poems will be published in a forthcoming issue of *CV2*.

Looking for Elizabeth

for Elizabeth Bishop

by Robin Ekiss

I have come to this country with my small desires hidden in my pockets, looking for you. I have gone days without speaking to another human being. I have watched the landscape rise out of the ocean and recede again. I travel alone, carrying maps badly worn at the folds, maps that disguise more than guide, given to me by a poet who no longer needs them. I do not know which country my heart is in. I am a cynic and a skeptic in speech. I am between houses and of one season: doubt.

Elizabeth, irrational things cling to you. Small animals come out of their holes to whisper their secrets to you. Because of you, the mantis prays to its leaf. Because of you, the snail drags its lame foot behind it and does not complain. The snail knows it is beautiful. If I could speak, rumbles the toad low in its throat, I could make myself be heard. I am a small thing in need of a voice. If I could speak, I could make myself.

As it is, I look for you under rocks, and in the unblinking eyes of fish. I turn over the shells of turtles, and you are there, trapped like a moth in a lampshade.

Elizabeth, navigator, where are you tonight? The train compartments are full of men. Women do not travel alone. We are exceptions. From you I learn to sleep with one eye open and doubt my destination. From you I learn to suffer the long winter months, July weighed down in the fog, the fine mists of August heavy on my brow. In our perpetual November, the moonlight is as pale as late autumn leaves, thin and papery. It does not go away. You are always with me. Your poems stand between us, like a door.

(first pubished in ZYZZYVA)

Robin Ekiss is a former Wallace Stegner Fellow in Poetry at Stanford University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poetry, AGNI, TriQuarterly, The Kenyon Review,* and *The Gettysburg Review*. She lives in San Francisco.

Visiting Bishop's Papers

by Keith Ekiss

I became lost traveling to Vassar.
Looking for answers, I forgot the map.
I stopped for directions, the snow fell faster,
like unidentical maps of someplace cold.

Her train traced the margin of Croton.
She paused to sketch its namesake leaf —
mottled-red with a red stem, greenish carbon.
A faithful (life-sized) representation.

A perfectly useless form of concentration,
she wrote – to guard against sorrow.
There was time to paint just one leaf.
Her train was bound again through snow.

I came away knowing this and little more:
the compass rose painted on the library floor
predicted all the ways she would travel.

Keith Ekiss is a current Wallace Stegner Fellow in Poetry at Stanford University. He is the past recipient of a Witter Bynner Translators Residency from the Santa Fe Art Institute for his translations of the Costa Rican poet Eunice Odio. His work has appeared recently in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Washington Square*.

Annual General Meeting
Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia
The Legion hall, Great Village
Saturday, June 16, 2007 – 1 p.m.

Bishop plaque, St. James United Church, Great Village