Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia

NEWSLETTER

Vol. 11 Nos. 1 & 2 Winter 2005

In this issue

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 EBSNS seeks through its various activities to study and celebrate Elizabeth Bishop as a Nova Scotia writer, thus enriching our literary and culture heritage.

Aeolian Singers' Bishop Tribute

The Aeolian Singers, a 45-voice women's choir based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, have enjoyed more than 25 years of music making. The choir has toured Europe twice, recorded radio and television programs, and performed many times with Symphony Nova Scotia. This year, the Aeolians' annual International Women's Day concert (**Sunday, March 6th, 8:00 p.m., Rebecca Cohn Auditorium, Dalhousie Arts Centre, Halifax**) will be **Impersonations of an Ordinary Woman: Reflections on the Life and Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop**, featuring music, poetry, and dramatic readings.

The evening will include singer-songwriters Susan Crowe, Cindy Church and Lisa Lindo, as well as actors Marcia Kash and Martha Irving, along with Scott MacMillan (guitar), Cathy Porter (percussion), Margot Aldrich (viola), Dennis Connelly (bass), and Louise Grinstead (piano). ESBNS member Susan Crowe has collaborated with the Aeolians' Artistic Director Jackie Chambers in the creation of the evening's event. All profits will benefit the Marguerite Centre, the only residential facility in Nova Scotia for women recovering from abuse and addition. *For tickets, phone 494-3820 or 1-800-874-1669.*

A Songwriter Listens to Bishop

by Susan Crowe

... discrete syllables, single notes with distinct pitch, were a vital strategy of expression for Bishop, the single word or sound containing a world of pleasure and pain, from the anvil's clang to the scream. The brief and fragile indrawn yes *retained a currency throughout Bishop's life. The cadence of the indrawn* yes, *heard in childhood, crowned her poetic achievement and demands we listen to as well as look at Bishop's art.*

– Sandra Barry, from *Lifting Yesterday: Elizabeth Bishop and Nova Scotia* (in manuscript)

Listen, then, to a part of Bishop's poetry, from a songwriter's perspective.

Influenced deeply by her maternal family, she loved music. The customs and habits of Great Village, a quietly cultured place, might well have laid a foundation that remained for her lifetime. The common occurrence of musical evenings – singing from the hymnal, Scottish folk songs, popular music of the era – must have made a lasting and visceral impression on the young Bishop. How did she hear these songs, I wonder?

I've noted that, in popular music at

Editor : Brian Bartlett

Contributing editors: Jeffery Donaldson and Ross Leckie

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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. Dues are $8.00 for one year or $20.00 (CAD) for three years. Annual dues entitle you to two issues of the newsletter and all other privileges of membership.

Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia

P.O. Box 138

Great Village, Nova Scotia

B0M 1L0 Canada

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This issue of the* Newsletter *is dedicated to the life and memory of Donna Barry (1962-2004), a true friend of the EBSNS.

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A Songwriter... / cont.

least, she seemed to appreciate concise, elegant lyrics. She referred to Ogden Nash's lyrics to "Speak Low," and "Mean to Me" by Roy Turk and Fred E. Ahlert, as favourites. In these songs, the craft of the writing is clear, and in the case of "Mean to Me" the play on words is simple and charming: "Why must you be mean to me? Don't you know what you mean to me?" Living during the heyday of great lyricists, she might have heard some of the most beautifully crafted lyrics of the century, the work of Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, Oscar Hammerstein II, Ira Gershwin – and her time in Brazil introduced her to the great Brazilian musicians and lyricists. Her letters are peppered with references to recordings, musical events, and in one or two, she relates her experience as a teacher where she used Blues as a tool to teach iambic pentameter.

Bishop was not a lyricist. She was a poet – a musical, rhythmic, lyrical poet – but not a lyricist. What's the difference? The tools they share are many: rhyme, enjambment, meter, phrasing, freighted words – to name a few. They use some of the same devices and forms, and poets choose words for their sound, as do songwriters.

But – and here is where they part ways – songwriters must choose words that sing well. That which sounds good in the mind's "ear," even reads well aloud, can very often fall flat when sung. The allegiances differ. As lyrical as a poet may be, the parameters of a poet differ from those of a songwriter.

Bishop had hoped her "Songs for a Colored Singer" might be set to music and sung by Billie Holiday. This never happened, but parts of the poem lend themselves to musical adaptation. What follows will seem like hair-splitting, but I do it to illustrate a singer's (and therefore a songwriter's) considerations. I'll limit my observations to one part of the poem and I'll include these definitions for the sake of clarity:

Dactyl - a heavy stress followed by two light stresses

Semi-vowel, or liquid vowel - called this because their sounds are fluid. (l,m,n,r)

Mute consonant - a letter that can't be sounded without a following vowel (k, p, t, etc.) If the mute is at the end of a word, it stops the flow, stops the breath.

Iamb: a light stress followed by a heavy stress

Iambic tetrameter: a four-foot line, written in iambs. "At sea / the big / ship sinks /and dies."

Looking at the poem, the third song, "Lullaby," appears to have the shape that would suit it to a song. The strong and mostly regular meter begins drumming a beat before melody ever presents itself. Look at it here:

Lullaby.
Adult and child
sink to their rest.
At sea the big ship sinks and dies,
lead in its breast.

Lullaby.
Let nations rage,
let nations fall.
The shadow of the crib makes an
enormous cage
upon the wall.

Lullaby.
Sleep on and on,
war's over soon.
Drop the silly, harmless toy,
pick up the moon.

Lullaby.
If they should say
you have no sense,
don't you mind them; it won't make
much difference.

Lullaby.
Adult and child
sink to their rest.
At sea the big ship sinks and dies,
lead in its breast.
(from "Songs for a Colored Singer")

The poem consists of five very spare cinquains, the last repeating the first. The very shape of it attracts me. It starts with the dactylic "lullaby," easy to sing, starting with a liquid vowel 'l' that leads easily into 'a,' sounded here like 'u' and the perfect conduit into 'b.' 'B' at the end of a word would be a mute consonant, but here it's softened by the semi-vowel 'y' that follows, sounded here like "eye".... "lullaby": a beautiful word that suggests a feeling, and a good, bold start to the poem, and in this case, a song.

From here, we continue into "adult and child." This has a small "sing-ability" problem. "Adult" when sung must be fully enunciated, so as not to sound like "addled," and when it is fully enunciated we can't avoid the mute consonant 't.' Further, we face the same thing with "and." Another mute. If a singer ignores the mute, softens it into a slur, one might hear "adult in child." To the classically trained singer, this is not really a problem, but to the popular singer, who's often less clear in enunciating, it leaves room for muddiness. The mute 'd' at the end of the line is not a problem because the singer must pause there anyway to take a breath.

I'll stop there, and move on to other considerations. Continuing through the rest of the verse in this letter-by-letter sound-by-sound journey quickly becomes tiresome. I suspect no poet – and no songwriter – works like this on a conscious level. It becomes second nature, inner-ear, intuitive – it happens without thinking. My point here is that every letter, every word, every line, has a life off the page and outside the head, and each has purpose. The poet lives this, and the songwriter must – literally – breathe it.

Let's look at other bits of the structure. The poem has a repeating iambic tetrameter, a phrase that repeats in every verse at the fourth line. This is good. One can use this as a melodic and rhythmic touch-stone, but, oddly, Bishop didn't use the tetrameter in the second verse. By now, I'd already be working in terms of melody and rhythm and when faced with "the shadow of the crib makes an enormous cage," I wonder how I'll make that line swear allegiance to the rhythm in my head. It's tremendous in the poem, a surprise, and a potent image. But in a song...how can I make this sing?

The closing lines to each verse have perfect syllable matches (count them), but voicing "much difference" and "upon the wall" as you would voice "pick up the moon" or "lead in its breast" doesn't work. But the first two phrases, which include multi- syllabic words, clunk along clumsily when you break them up into beats.

There are some beautiful opportunities here that beg singing: "pick up the moon." Despite the dreaded mute consonant (and 'k' is a hard one), the alliterative value of the 'p's (pick up) suggest an emotional urgency, a quicker beating of the heart, a yearning. And then there is "the moon." Fewer words are easier to sing, fewer images more evocative. Perhaps this is why it became a cliché for lyricists, but one for which I retain a great tenderness.

The alliteration of "at sea the big ship sinks and dies" feels good in the mouth, despite the mute 'k' (see? softened by the 's'). "If they should say / you have no sense" is charming not only for the 's' sounds but also for the assonance in "they should say you...." Many singers complain about peppering a lyric with 's,' that it makes for too much sibilance, but used correctly, it can work. "Drop the silly harmless toy" works, too. "Drop" has onomatopoeia, to my ear, and I can imagine it phrased for just that effect.

Each letter counts to a pure lyricist. The alphabet is a palette of sound. We love long vowels, the liquid consonants, the aspirates. Each beat counts, because it must speak to, and with, the melody. It must honour the word choice. Words deliver meaning and how they do it is important. But lyricists are restricted by melody, predictable rhythms, and by the human voice. Even good lyrics need the support of these things to do their job. On the page, stripped of music, they often fall flat. They read awkwardly and they can sound dreadful.

Bishop was a musical poet, strongly lyrical at times, structured and disciplined on the page. Had she been a lyricist, the structures would have been different; the musical imperatives would have made different demands on her as a wordsmith.

Bishop was a great poet. With a shift in her ear, she might have been a great songwriter.

I'll never be a poet, great or otherwise. It's true what Bishop said when quoting the Spanish proverb "When a donkey goes out traveling, he still comes back a donkey." And when I venture into the world of poems, I still return a songwriter. Very few of us achieve poetry. We leave that to the poets.

Susan Crowe is one of Canada's finest singer-songwriters, with, in the words of the British magazine Folk Roots, *"that rare ability of crafting a lyric that bears scrutiny on its own terms." She has performed at all of Canada's major folk festivals, toured the mid-western U.S. and the Czech republic, and released four critically celebrated cds,* This Far From Home, The Door to the River, A Pilgrim's Mirror, *and, most recently,* Book of Days.

After years living in Toronto and Vancouver, she has returned to her native place, Halifax. "With one of the most distinctive voices in Canada today," the Vancouver Sun *has said, "she is destined to become one of our folk heroes."*

Editorial

Last year the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia, founded in 1994, celebrated its tenth year. As if in magical response to that anniversary, during the past few months several fortunate developments have marked this period as one of significant change and expansion. If this newsletter were to have a single-word name, it could be *Clang*, in honour of the sound made by Nate the blacksmith's hammer and anvil in Bishop's "In the Village." Yet the adoption of such a name might be trivializing, a betrayal of that auditory image from Bishop's magnificent story. Still, I find it hard to resist suggesting *clang* as the signal for several announcements, a clarion call of good news.

This issue of the *Newsletter* contains separate pieces on two cheering events from the past half a year: the formal decision to to digitize the Bishop-Bowers-Hutchinson-Sutherland family fonds at Acadia University, making archival materials associated with Bishop's Maritime connections available to scholars world-wide; and the purchasing of the Bishop's childhood house in Great Village by a group of a dozen investors, who plan to create an Artist in Residence program at the site. (One inspiration for this program is the Wallace Stegner House in Eastend, Saskatchewan, once the childhood home of the American novelist, now for more than a decade available for sojourns by visiting artists.)

As if that weren't enough good news, last December an unexpected donation of approximately $12,000. CDN was made to the EBSNS by Freedom Forum, which defines itself as "a nonpartisan foundation dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all people." Based in Virginia, it was founded in 1991, and one member of the Board of Trustees of its "Newseum" program is broadcaster, writer, Nova Scotia native, and avid Bishop reader Robert MacNeil. EBSNS members have reason to be grateful to the generosity of MacNeil and Freedom Forum. (Those curious for more details about the organization can check out *www.freedomforum.org*).

Last April *The Chronicle Herald* in Halifax printed an article about Nova Scotia singer-songwriter Susan Crowe by local music critic Stephen Pederson. During an interview, Crowe said, "I am interested in the poetic and the aesthetic and the craft, in where that takes me. When I finish a song, I want to move on. The feeling is sublime, but it doesn't last – so I read, I pay attention to things...." When she continued, "I don't like being addressed at parties as a songwriter. I'm just an ordinary woman who happens to write songs," I was instantly reminded of James Merrill's comment about Elizabeth Bishop spending a lifetime "impersonating an ordinary woman." So it made sense that in the next breath Crowe mentioned Bishop: "As a writer she chose craft and austerity. She felt the aesthetic was the important thing, not the message.... These days, most artists demand that the world meet them on their terms. Bishop met the world on its terms." To the great benefit of our readers, Susan has agreed to write an essay about Bishop from a musician's perspective, and her key involvement in an upcoming musical tribute to Bishop is also announced in this issue.

The concluding items in this letter are poems by two poets, Sue Goyette and Helen Humphreys, written out of responses to Bishop's poetry. The inclusion of the poems here is a follow-up to features in the *EBSNS Newsletter* issue 2.2 (Fall 1996) which reprinted poems about or for Bishop by P.K. Page, Richard Outram, John Reibetanz, and Peter Sanger; and in issue 4.2 (Fall 1997), a reprint of W.J. Keith's "Five Poems from 'Elizabeth: A Verse Tribute.'" If in the future more Canadian poets speak of, to, or from Bishop in their work, we'll continue to chart that tradition. (A day before I began to write this editorial, newspapers carried the sad news of Richard Outram's death. His poem "Service" is worth recalling now, with its allusions to Bishop's "Filling Station" and its lines "it's somebody like (there was nobody like) Elizabeth Bishop. / And...if on a good day we are all weighed and found wanting, / she still loves somehow undeserving us." There was also, it should be said, nobody like Richard Outram.)

This is the first issue of the *Newsletter* for which I've been sole editor, but I wouldn't have completed the work without the expertise of former co-editor Sandra Barry, who continues to help in many ways. Thanks to Sandra for her vigorous dedication to this newsletter in the past, and for her ongoing activism on the part of EBSNS – now, since last July, as our Chair. Though Sandra may wish to censor this part of the editorial, I recommend to readers the essay "Driving Miss Barry" in novelist Howard Norman's recent book *My Famous Evening: Nova Scotia Sojourns, Diaries & Preoccupations* (Washington: National Geographic, 2004). The essay is a lively, good-humoured, informative tribute to Sandra and her absorbing passion for Bishop and Great Village.

I eagerly await your ideas and submissions for future issues of this newsletter. The next issue will likely include a book review, a report on the Aeolian Singers' evening, an update on the new status of the Bishop house in Great Village, and a piece on Bishop's appearances in Atlantic Poetry anthologies.

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New Co-ownership of Bishop Childhood House

by Sandra Barry

On 24 November 2004 a group of investors (seven Nova Scotians and five Americans), each with their own direct or oblique connection with Elizabeth Bishop, bought Bishop's childhood home in Great Village, Nova Scotia, the home where her beloved maternal grandparents lived, the home where she witnessed the final breakdown of her mother, the home she returned to every summer until 1930, the first of her "three loved houses," her earliest "proto-dream-house...crypto-dream house."

The goal of this group is first and foremost to preserve and maintain the home as it has always been and currently is, which is very much as it was when Bishop lived there, to maintain it as a residence. The house was designated a Provincial Heritage Property several years ago, and this designation will be retained. The co-owners, many of whom are artists and scholars, intend to spend time in the house; and over the next couple of years they will also establish an "Artist in Residence" programme, whereby scholars, writers, painters, musicians, etc., can visit in order to work on projects or simply to retreat.

These goals and plans are currently in a very early stage, and will take time to evolve and manifest. While the group is technically not a non-profit organization, the intention is to be so in practice, that is, all revenue and fundraising will go directly into the operation and preservation of the house. The group welcomes inquiries. They include Janet Baker, Sandra Barry, Kate Chandler, Larry Clark, Susan Crowe, Monique Fowler, Carol Frost, Susan McCabe, Dorianne Rheaume, Paul Tingley, Thomas Travisano, and Jeff Weatherhead.

If anyone is interested in learning more about this very special house (the site of "Sestina" and "First Death in Nova Scotia") please contact Sandra Barry (Trustee of the Elizabeth Bishop House) at *slbarry@ns.sympatico.ca/* or 902-429-6385 / 1323 Dresden Row #3, Halifax, N.S., B3J 2J9 Canada.

Updates about the house and the "Artist in Residence" programme will appear in this *Newsletter* as often as it is possible to provide them.

Bulmer Archives and Acadia University

Another recent exciting Elizabeth Bishop development occurring in Nova Scotia comes out of the Acadia University Archives, Wolfville, N.S. The AUA is digitizing a large collection of Bishop-related material which it holds (i.e., the Bulmer family archive), described in *Elizabeth Bishop: An Archival Guide to Her Life in Nova Scotia* (1996), by Sandra Barry. The *Guide* has been out of print for many years, but will be incorporated into the virtual archive, which is being created at AUA. It is hoped that this virtual archive will be up and running by the fall of 2005. If anyone is interested in learning more about this project, contact Rhianna Edwards at AUA at *rhianna.edwards@acadiau.ca*. Again, updates about this project will be forthcoming.

EBSNS Annual General Meeting 12 June 2004 – Minutes

1. The minutes from the 2003 AGM were read. Moved by Angus Chisholm, seconded by Ann Marie Duggan, to accept the minutes as read. Motion passed.

2. The Treasurer's Report was read and submitted by Joy Graham. Moved by Joy Graham, seconded by Meredith Layton, to approve the report as read. Motion passed.

The Report will be audited by Meredith Layton. The signing officers are Angus Chisholm, Arthur Chisholm and Joy Graham. The Registry of Joint Stock renewal has been received and will be completed by Ann Marie Duggan.

3. The President's Report was read and submitted by Brian Robinson. Moved by Brian Robinson, seconded by Peter Sanger, to approve the report as read.

Moved by Peter Sanger, seconded by Lois Bray, that Brian R. be thanked for "faithfully serving as President." Motion passed.

Brian also read a letter from Sarah Baldwin and announced that his Bishop article for a proposed literary atlas of the Maritime Provinces was eliminated because "Bishop was not Canadian." The article was then distributed.

Peter Sanger said that since the beginning there has been a problem of getting Bishop accepted in Canada. Dalhousie has shown little support – luckily Acadia has shown support. The *Newsletter* becomes even more important – and should

remain scholarly. Lois Bray questioned why we are not educating people, particularly school children, about Bishop. She suggests a yearly speaker at schools. June Chisholm remarked "we don't want to be known as a Dead Poet's Society." Peter Sanger suggested that curriculum organizers would need to be contacted. Perhaps a film could be shown. Joy Graham (English Dept. Head, Cobequid Education Centre) said that her curriculum is flexible enough to include Bishop material but cautioned there would be no financial compensation. She also suggesting Bass River (West Colchester) School.

4. Sculpture Raffle: Tickets will be sold on 1 July, 2004 at the Great Village School. Tickets have been sold at the Truro Mall and Lowland Gardens. Lois Bray will sell tickets at the Great Village School yard Sale on the morning of 26 June. Brian Robinson and Ann Marie Duggan will sell tickets at Lowland Gardens in the afternoon. Brian and Ann Marie were thanked by Lois Bray for selling tickets and for those who brought refreshments.

Arthur Chisholm moved that a $5-10 contribution be made towards the liability insurance for the Canada Day event in Great Village. Seconded by Ruth Peppard. Cheque is to be made out to Betty McNeil.

Meeting Adjourned.

EBSNS Nominating Committee Report – June 2004

Ann Marie Duggan was the nominating committee for 2004. The slate remained relatively unchanged except for a couple of positions. Thankfully, Sandra Barry has agreed to be Chair. Unfortunately, the position of Secretary has yet to be filled. The current slate is as follows:

Chair: Sandra Barry

Vice Chair: Donna Smyth

Treasurer: Joy Graham

Secretary: TBD

Directors:

Brian Robinson (Past Chair), Ann Marie Duggan (Membership), Brian Bartlett (Newsletter), Lois Bray, Arthur Chisholm, Angus Chisholm, Meredith Layton, Ruth Peppard, Peter Sanger, Deborah Stiles, Paul Tingley, Terry White.

Respectfully submitted, Ann Marie Duggan

EBSNS Lottery Report 2003-2004

A stone sculpture created by Heather Lawson, with an inscription from Bishop's poem "North Haven" on the front and a bird on the top, was raffled by the Society. The lottery license was obtained in August 2003. Tickets were produced by Ann Marie Duggan at a cost of $142.78. Tickets were sold by EBSNS members, at the Truro Mall, Lowland Gardens and at the Great Village School, Canada Day event. Ticket sales were worth $742.00 – making the net profit $599.22.

The winning ticket was drawn on 1 July 2004 by Maria Wood, daughter of Desirée Stockermans. The sculpture was won by Deborah Felt (daughter Lois Bray), Great Village. The sculpture has a fitting home in an herb garden

Bishop and Her Worlds Symposium

by Anne Schrifer

Sponsored by the American Literature Association (ALA), the "Bishop and Her Worlds Symposium" was held December 11-14, 2003, in Cancun, Mexico. Directed by Thomas Travisano, with support from Jacqueline Vaught Brogan of the ALA governing board, the symposium was intentionally small scale, consisting of approximately 40 people, mainly Bishop scholars with a sprinkling of poets and a few hardy souls who love Bishop's work enough to sit in a room with no windows listening to hours of academic prose while outdoors the Caribbean sun illuminated white sand and aquamarine ocean.

Fortunately, Bishop inspires imaginative comment. The poet Carol Frost, for instance, began her meditation on "The Fish" with a picture of herself in a kayak next to a 39-pound fish she had caught off the coast of Florida. Examining her own experience as poet and fisher-woman enabled her to speculate about the background to Bishop's "The Fish." Another interesting paper, by Susan Rosenbaum, looked at Bishop's work in relation to surrealist practice, considering the critique of gigantism offered by small portable works of art as well as Bishop's miniaturist gaze that discloses strange, sometimes surrealistic worlds to view.

Papers also included those that opened up significant new territory in archival research, such as Pat Marshall's study of Bishop's education in Latin and Greek. Marshall examined Bishop's efforts to translate Aristophanes' "Birds" as a student at Vassar and the ramifications of this effort in later work. Barbara Page overviewed the project to create a compendium of

Bishop's travel writings, focusing on the querulous book that Bishop wrote for Time/Life about Brazil and her emendations in green ink to the copies she gifted to friends.

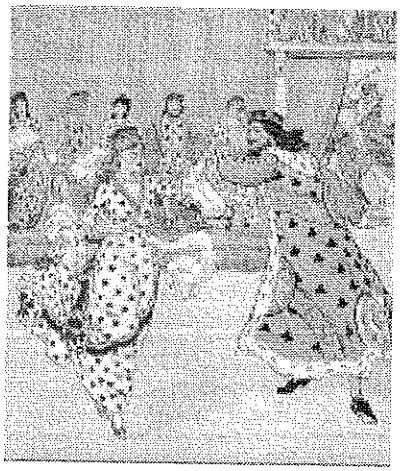
Conference participants placed Bishop's work in a variety of interesting contexts. Brett Millier, for instance, helped refine discussions of whether or not Bishop's poetry is political by examining what the contested term "political" seemed to mean in the late 1950s versus our expanded sense of term. Priscilla Paton explored the animals of Bishop's poetry and prose in relation to new scholarship on animal rights, linking Bishop's own sense of bodily vulnerability to the vulnerability of animals.

In addition to this random sampling of the interesting work presented at the conference, a conference highlight should be mentioned – the debut reading of a play by Monique Fowler which is based on the correspondence and selected poems of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell. Thomas Travisano's edited collection of the correspondence formed the basis for this new creative work. Monique, herself an accomplished New York film and stage actor, played Bishop to Travisano's Lowell. Laura Menides read the stage directions, which describe the visual images and music that will accompany the performance when it is fully produced. Fowler's play captures the poignancy of the Bishop and Lowell friendship, their efforts to stay close, to nurture each other's poetic gifts as well as their sometimes painful distances.

The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion of Bishop's work, scholarship past and to come, after which the participants disbanded, some for home and some to Chichen Itza, the massive Mayan-Toltec archaeological site, where they contemplated what Bishop might have thought when she visited the astonishing worlds of Mexico.

Reading Mother Goose with Bishop

By Brian Bartlett



A few years ago while reading a Mother Goose collection to my children, I came upon the counting rhyme "One, two, three, four, five, / Once I caught a fish alive. / Six, seven, eight, nine, ten. / Then I let it go again." Later that night I checked Elizabeth Bishop's *Complete Poems* to confirm a hunch that the first and final lines of her poem "The Fish" might have roots in that counting rhyme. Between her two lines – "I caught a tremendous fish," "And I let the fish go" – the poem is layered with densely adjectival, metaphorical language (parts of the fish are likened to wallpaper, roses, feathers, tinfoil, a peony, a mechanism) far more baroque than the brisk, bare sketchiness of most nursery rhymes. Yet those two framing lines clearly resemble the stanza I'd read to my children. Whether Bishop was actually influenced by Mother Goose here – or even knew that counting rhyme – may be forever unprovable, but conscious or unconscious influence seems more likely when you realize that in a 1938 letter to Marianne Moore Bishop mentioned that she was reading Mother Goose; and that in a 1977 talk sponsored by the Academy of American Poets she said: "One of my grandmothers was great at reading old English ballads, nursery rhymes, riddles and so on, and I think I took to it in that way very easily, without thinking much about it. I still think nursery rhymes are one of the greatest things to get started with. If you want to write poems, and can't, just read a few of the good old nursery rhymes" ("Influences," *American Poetry Review* 14.1 Jan.-Feb. 1985).

Bishop's letter to Moore is cited in an essay about Bishop's childhood reading, Peter Sanger's "'It Was To Be': Elizabeth Bishop, the Burning Boy and Other Childish Marvels," found in *Divisions of the Heart: Elizabeth Bishop and the Art and Memory of Place*, ed. Barry, Davies, Sanger (Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press, 2001). Sanger's essay is crucial for anyone interested in the bearing of Bishop's earliest reading upon her later poetry and prose. Comprehensive and deftly researched as a groundbreaking study, Sanger's essay nonetheless defines itself as an entrance into a complex topic and alludes to the need for further exploration in similar directions. My brief offering here is intended as a short step following the giant strides of Sanger's affectionate, careful investigations.

Sanger's essay outlines what he calls a "matrix of [Bishop's] own childhood experiences, nursery rhymes, fairy stories, children's literature, elementary school texts and related folklore and mythology" that is detectable "in minor or major ways" in, remarkably, "nearly 80 of the 110 original poems and prose poems in

The Complete Poems." That some of the appearances of this "matrix" are passing and very subtle, and that Bishop's writings also connect to sources as wide-ranging as Hopkins, Baudelaire, Moore, Defoe, Bunyan, Pascal, a *New York Times* typo, and her Great-Uncle George's paintings, may disguise just how pervasive her childhood experiences – including her reading and hearing of poems and songs – remained in her writing.

Factors that complicate the question of influence include the letter to Moore, and the report of Mildred J. Nash in her memoir "Elizabeth Bishop's Library: A Reminiscene" (in *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996) that in in 1978 when Nash was hired by Bishop to help rearrange her library in her Lewis Wharf apartment in Boston, "Elizabeth's best books – dictionaries, rhyming dictionaries, George Herbert, an annotated edition of the Opies' *Nursery Rhyme Book* ... were on a multi-layered circular bookcase placed right next to her desk." (Nash also reports seeing nearly a complete set of Beatrix Potter's books, along with two biographies each of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear.) That Bishop was reading nursery rhymes in 1938, when she was 27 years old, and continued to show an interest in them four decades later, suggests that some Mother-Goose parallels in her work derived from her adult rather than childhood reading, though quite likely her '38 and later reading brought back to her memory rhymes she'd heard, read, and known as a child. For now, my approach here isn't based on provable cases of influence, but on similarities and a *speculative imagining of possible sources or reading experiences*. This is a hazier area of literary responses than the documentation of verifiable or acknowledged influences, but to ignore it as hypothetical and imprecise would be to ignore a mental activity some of us engage in when keeping in mind another reader (in particular, a writer we revere) while reading. Most of what follows here is more imaginative than scholarly, reliant on *if, what if,* and *suppose.*

While recently reading the 2nd edition of Iona and Peter Opie's *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1997), I kept thinking about Bishop, so this essay is grounded in the premise *Suppose Bishop read this rhyme....* The Opies' annotations "Once I caught a fish alive" indicated that the rhyme has been adapted several ways, including by a children's Baptist Mission meeting in London, ca. 1946, the children's enthusiastic recitation – according to *Picture Post* – "flutter[ing] the tarpaulin off the blitzed roof" with the words "One, two, three, four, five, / Jesus Christ is still alive. / Six, seven, eight, nine, then, / He will come back again." No sooner that I read that then I imagined Baptist-bred Elizabeth being amused by that story. In such a way our familiarity with the intellectual and emotional qualities of writers can feed into our imagining how they might read something *we're* reading. Call such imagining, if you will, a game.

Here are other rewards from the game I played while reading the Opies' book. (Their introduction claims that the term "nursery rhyme" is prevalent in England, "Mother Goose" in the U.S. Does Canada, as in so many other aspects, dip into both traditions?) Sanger has studied Bishop's own childhood copy of Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* and suggested influences of Stevenson's poems on her. What Stevenson inherited from Mother Goose might mean that at times Bishop's adapting of nursery-rhyme features may have been second-hand – through Stevenson – but whatever the case, nursery-rhyme rhythms aren't far away when we read stanzas like these in her poems: "Minnow, go to sleep and dream, / Close your great big eyes; / Round your bed Events prepare / The pleasantest surprise" ("Lullaby for the Cat"); "The moon in the bureau mirror / looks out a million miles / (and perhaps with pride, at herself, / but she never, never smiles" ("Insomnia"); "Far, far below the people / Were little colored spots, / And the heads of those in swimming / Were floating coconuts." That third example is from Bishop's ballad "The Burglar of Babylon," a poem in which the influence of traditonal ballads far outweighs that of nursery rhymes; but it's worth noting the Opies' comment that some nursery rhymes were extracted from ballads, the histories of ballads and Mother Goose intermingled. Sometimes even Bishop's unrhymed quatrains quietly echo nursery-rhyme characteristics, such as casual personification: "Let the moon go hang, / the stars go fly their kites. / I want to know my age. / Tell me how old I am." But it's rare that Bishop's Mother Goose echoes are as direct as that of "Humpty Dumpty" found in "Under the Window: Ouro Prêto": "The driver and the assistant driver wash / their faces, necks, and chests. They wash their feet, // their shoes, then put them back together again."

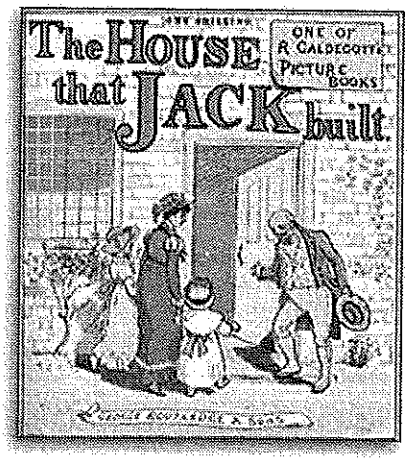
In the Opies' selection, a common narrative pattern includes passages like "As I was going to Derby /... / I met the finest ram" or "As I was going up the hill / I met with Jack the piper." Echoes of that first-person-excursion-and-encounter pattern appear in Bishop's "Manners" ("...as we sat on the wagon seat... / / We met a stranger on foot") and, less exactly, in "Chemin de Fer" ("Alone on the railroad track / I walked with pounding heart," then "I saw the little pond // where the dirty hermit lives"). In

"Britannia Rules the Waves," Bishop's lines "Queen Elizabeth had a dress of eyes, / Embroidered to embarrass courtiers," may not resemble nursery rhymes in form, but they suggest the light-hearted depictions of monarchs in Mother Goose lines like "A bag-pudding the king did make, / And stuffed it well with plums," or, far better known, "The Queen was in the parlour, / Eating bread and honey." (Like Mother Goose, Bishop wasn't cowed by traditional state authority, their attitudes likely to be whimsical rather than reverential, as when, in "First Death in Nova Scotia," Bishop describes royal chromographs hanging above a loon shot and stuffed by Uncle Arthur, and deflates the fantasy of her dead cousin "invited... / to be the smallest page at court" with the memory of "his eyes shut up so tight / and the roads deep in snow.")

Another characteristic of some nursery rhymes evident in a few Bishop poems is what the Opies call "wild extravagance," sometimes but not always merging into "nonsense." Mother Goose gives us, for instance, "There was an old woman tossed up in a basket, / Seventeen times as high as the moon," "I saw a balloon made of lead / I saw a coffin drop down dead," "And the dish ran away with the spoon" (from very familiar lines on which the Opies comment: "Probably the best-known nonsense verse in the language, a considerable amount of nonsense has been written about it"). Bishop gives us extravagant moments like "His singing split the sky in two. / The halves fell either side of me" ("Behind Stowe"), "A slight young weed / had pushed up through the heart and its / green head was nodding on the breast" ("The Weed," strongly influenced by George Herbert), and "The cat's gone a-hunting. / The brook feels for the stair" ("Sunday, 4 a.m.").

Closer to the most painful experiences of Bishop's childhood – her father's early death and her mother's disappearance – we can guess that she found some nursery rhymes both disturbing in their proximity to her own experiences and charming in their encapsulating economy. What would Bishop at six or eight years old have felt experiencing the sharp turn between the two stanzas of one nursery rhyme, from "My father died a month ago / And left me all his riches; / A feather bed, and a wooden leg, / And a pair of leather britches" to the de-glamorizing shift into "He left me a teapot without a spout, / A cup without a handle, / A tobacco pipe without a lid, / And half a farthing candle"? The Opies' anthology includes several other examples of nursery rhymes that refer to the deaths of fathers, such as "My father left me three acres of land, / Sing ivy, sing ivy" or "My father he died, but I can't tell you how, / He left me six horses to drive in my plough: / With a whim, wham, waddle ho!" With the loss of both parents, and her uprootings and her early travels between Great Village and Massachusetts, it's also possible that young (and older) Elizabeth would've responded with particular acuteness to rhymes about dispersed families, such as "Ladybird, ladybird, / Fly away home. / Your house is on fire / And your children all gone" or "Clap hands, clap hands, / Till father comes home," or those of family solidarity, such as "Hush-a-bye, baby, / Daddy is near, / Mommy's a lady, / And that's very clear" or "Rock-a-bye, baby, / Thy cradle is green, / Father's a nobleman, / Mother's a queen." With the quotation of such stanzas I don't mean to sentimentalize the tragedies of Bishop's youth, but to suggest that in reading nursery rhymes with Bishop in mind we can engage in an imaginative act that isn't irrelevant to understanding her life and art, even if its results are more suggestive than concrete.

Two final parallels to mention between Bishop's and Mother Goose's poems are references to madness and drowning. "There as a man, he went mad, / He jumped into a paper bag," begins one Mother Goose poem, and another catches in rollicking rhythms more widespread madness: "There was a mad man and he had a mad wife / And they lived in a mad town." If Bishop encountered such poems in 1938 while reading Mother Goose, that would have been only four years following the death of her mother, whom she'd not seen since the age of five. Perhaps it's not so curious



that Bishop's single extensive use of a particular nursery rhyme is her radical adaptation of "The House that Jack Built" for her poem inspired by Pound's asylum years, "Visits to St. Elizabeths," in which Jack's house is replaced by "the house of Bedlam," and the incarcerated man is described as "talkative," "cranky," "cruel," and "tedious," but also, more sympathetically, "tragic," "brave," and "wretched." Structuring the poem for Pound (dated 1950) around a well-known Mother Goose rhyme may have helped Bishop attain some protective distance from Pound's condition – and her mother's – while also putting the agony and pathos of mental disease in an archetypal framework connecting it to lines

deeply rooted in Anglo-American-Canadian culture.

The references or allusions to drowning in many Bishop poems – "Cootchie," "Songs for a Colored Singer," "The Unbeliever," "Casabianca," "The Moose" – were certainly inspired in part by Bishop's acquantaince with accounts of drownings during her childhood and later years (not surprising for one who so often lived near coasts), including the death of her Great-Grandfather Hutchinson off Sable Island in the 19th century. But because of that knowledge of drownings, and no doubt the ways in which it powerfully suggests our vulnerability on earth and our susceptibility to the whims of weather and fate, Bishop's poetry may also have been touched by the prevelance of drowning in nursery-rhymes; or, if that's too much to claim, perhaps she at least felt with special keenness nursery-rhymes such as the very familiar one, "Ding, dong, bell, / Pussy's in the well," as well as those about corked-leg Peg thrown into the water ("Her leg was drowned first, and her head followed after"), and about three children who fell through ice into a river ("Now had all these children been at home / ... / They had not all been drowned"). In that last example, we're not far from the world of Bishop's story "The Baptism," though the ill-fated girl in that story dies not from drowning but from an illness aggravated after she was baptized in an icy river. (Childhood mortality is painfully frequent in Bishop's prose pieces – also in "Gwendolyn" and "The Farmer's Children"). On the other hand, one can also imagine Bishop appreciating the humour in "Three wise men of Gotham, / They went to sea in a bowl, / And if the bowl had been stronger / My song had been longer." At times Bishop shares with Mother Goose a stoical, "awful but cheerful" sense of humour.

Peter Sanger's essay speaks of Bishop's "matrix of childhood experience and culture whose more concrete existence must now be proved." While my efforts here have had less to do with assertions of proof than with questioning and guesswork, I trust that such speculations – which move in directions than can only be called fictionalizing – are enlightening as well as enjoyable to pursue. I've tried to read a large body of Mother Goose rhymes with Bishop as a sort of presiding presence, imagining her reading them, but other readers might do that with other books we know she admired or loved. Wouldn't it be a mind-challenging adventure to re-read Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*, or George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, or Flannery O'Connor's *The Habit of Being*, with Bishop constantly in mind?

Illustrations in this essay are from the popular Victorian children's books by Randolph Caldecott, 1846-86. Images of "The Queen of Hearts" and "The House that Jack Built" were downloaded with permission from a website that displays those images and others in vivid colour: *www. randophcaldecott.org.uk.*

I have yet to discover whether editions of Caldecott's books were in Great Village during Bishop's childhood, or to verify whether Bishop's copy of the Opies' book of nursery rhymes is available.

Sketch of Bishop's Great Village childhood home by Brian Robinson.

On Hearing Elizabeth Bishop Read Her "Crusoe in England"

by Sue Goyette

Her voice is a blouse, crushed berries one
by one and then hours apart, open. Each word an island
with one kind of everything. O, I'm transported;

the archipelago of poem, her voice the bright blue
violet that creeps over everything, the ocean
of time around us, tide high and then retreating;

all the hemisphere's left-over loss at once. Was there
a moment when I actually chose this? Then miles away,
a memory was being born and she swerved from its shore,

Mont d'Espoir, my despair, and navigated around the sinking
ship of family, the dreams of food and love. None of the books
have ever got it right. Her voice rained so much,

she built shelters of elegy around herself, invented umbrellas,
parasols. How, she wondered, could anyone want such things?
There were years, fifty-two miserable weeks in each, small volcanoes

she climbed thinking of caves, the faint glimmer of sky,
the way out. She'd been dyed early with bright red berries,
pale, pale Elizabeth, and then her mother didn't even know her.

When the birds leave her voice, all at once, the sound
is of a big tree in a strong wind. And other times, her voice
is a knife, begged, implored not to break. Every nick,

every scratch a cicatrice where once were leaves.
Her voice is a lantern, a spiked walking stick for climbing
over herself, it's a crucifix. It lives and, even now, delivers

the gossip, whispers the gospel, testimony of the long dead
according to the first chapter of the book of being stranded on a poem.

From *Undone* (London: Brick Books, 2004). Reprinted with permission of author and publisher.

Sue Goyette grew up on the South Shore of Montreal and now lives in Halifax. She has published two books of poetry, *The True Names of Birds* and *Undone*, and a novel, *Lures.* She has taught creative writing for the Maritime Writers' Workshop, The Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia, The Banff Wired Studio, and The Sage Hill Writing Experience.

Bishop reading "Crusoe in England" in Coolidge Auditorum in April, 1974, can be heard on the the Bishop tape (2000) in the *Voice of the Poet* series produced by Random House Audiobooks.

After a Poem by Elizabeth Bishop

by Helen Humphreys

Through a mesh of kisses, falling rain
on the roof. The clear feel of this minute,
electric and sudden, air hissing with light.
To wake together, the same rain, what
our bodies hear. Pass of wires over the flat roof,
a net thrown up to catch the black sky.

The house struck down, go on, imagine this.
The moving storm, prickle of sweat
at the back of your neck. We are caught,
here in the blue air lightning shreds.
Bird cage. Rattle of song. The sky
wakes from the dream of us, runs electric.

A kiss is never simple, that's the point.
Lie down. The flat black back of night
above us, roof, thick wires of darkness
coiled in the room. It's always been this easy
and this hard to love. Ourselves no
different, the world completely changed.

From *Anthem* (London: Brick Books, 1999). Reprinted with permission of author and publisher. Note from book: "'After a Poem by Elizabeth Bishop' is a transposition (i.e. using most of the same words in my poem as she used in hers, but subverting the order and meaning) of Elizabeth Bishop's 'It is marvellous to wake up together,' which was first published, posthumously, in *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*, by Lorrie Goldensohn."

Helen Humphreys of Kingston, Ontario, is the author of several poetry collections, including *Anthem*, *The Perils of Geography*, *Gods and Other Mortals*, and *Nuns Looking Anxious, Listening to Radios*, and as well as of the novels *Wild Dogs*, *The Wild Garden*, *Afterimage*, and *Leaving Earth* (Toronto Book Award winner and *New York Times* notable book of the year.)

Annual General Meeting
Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia
in Great Village
Saturday, June 4, 2005
Details to follow