

## Agnes Walsh. *Going Around with Bachelors.*

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we will kill any Dogmen who come near us,” Adibish answers, “that is called war” (196). When the Beothuk youth stumble upon a wooden shelter in the woods, it is described as “a kind of shack Dogmen hunters build in the forest — they are called tilts” (226). A European is described as carrying “a heavy blanket, a pot for cooking, smoking materials in a tin and containers that are named bottles” (227). A fairly lengthy discussion of land ownership, conducted in reverential, horrified tones ignores the fact that even most treaty Indians did not understand the concept (284-5). And why does a bottle need to be named but a tin does not? Both were equally foreign to Beothuk.

There is a lot to admire in *Cloud of Bone*. I enjoyed the first and third section so much I read them happily twice, although even that did not make the middle section more digestible. It also sent me back to *Topography of Love*, a book that I believe was sadly neglected both when it was released and since. There I found the same driving, confident voices I enjoyed in *Cloud of Bone*, the same obsession with hidey-holes, caves and tunnels, the same exploration of that venerable institution, The Mental, the same galloping, cumulative, enticing story-telling.

*Cloud of Bone* demonstrates that Bernice Morgan has not lost her powers of narrative, but perhaps she bit off more than she could chew when she attempted to convey an Aboriginal consciousness. I am in daily contact with First Nations elders and there are times I wonder if we were even born on the same planet. I saw nothing even vaguely unfamiliar in Morgan’s Shanawdithit. Certainly, the war vets and anthropologists of this world have had more than their fair share of the limelight, but it is not Morgan job to redress the historical imbalance.

They say that if you want to know about water, do not ask a fish. Morgan’s Shanawdithit is like a fish that is too aware of the water it is in, too aware of her own Aboriginal ethic. Perhaps a closer examination of why Shanawdithit’s sufferings spoke so strongly to an *akenashau* consciousness would have been more gripping than an attempt to dive straight into that alien mind. *Cloud of Bone* is not entirely successful as a novel, but it certainly raises some interesting questions for readers and writers alike. It will be interesting to see where Morgan goes from here.

Robin McGrath  
Goose Bay

Agnes Walsh. *Going Around with Bachelors*. London: Brick Books, 2007, ISBN-13: 978-1-894078-56-6; ISBN-10: 1-894078-56-X

THIS IS A DELIGHTFUL book, a fitting sequel to Agnes Walsh’s splendid first collection of poems *In the Old Country of My Heart* (St. John’s: Killick Press, 1996). It took seven years before a CD was produced of Walsh reading a selection of her poems from that first book (interspersed with ballads beautifully sung by her daughter Simone Savard-Walsh and the pump organ music of George Morgan). This time

around the bonus of a CD already comes with the purchase, in book form, of *Going Around with Bachelors*. Simone's singing of ballads again provides interludes, as do also snippets of conversation with Agnes and a hilarious sequence of out-takes from her attempts to read the tongue-twister "Me and Ye" without a slip-up (55).

I wish I were reviewing Agnes Walsh for a less regionally specific review medium, as I feel fairly certain she is already well known to, and loved by, poetry readers in Newfoundland and Labrador. Her work deserves to be read not only in that province but throughout Canada, indeed the whole English-speaking world. I can only hope that *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* reaches a wider audience than I am, perhaps mistakenly, assuming it does.

I would like to address the topic of Walsh's "Newfoundlandness" because of something I heard not long ago at a dinner party in St. John's. A Newfoundland-based poet, whose own poetry has drawn on Newfoundland's rich culture and lore, expressed dismay at the tendency of mainland reviewers, perhaps most especially those located like myself in Toronto, to label as "Newfoundland writers/poets" writers and poets from Newfoundland. As a "woman writer/poet" myself, I can understand feeling slighted when marked by a person occupying the "unmarked" category, as the gesture has so often carried the imperialistic implication of lesser. But it is Walsh's rootedness in Newfoundland's weather and landscape, her knowledge of the Rock's history and culture, its Irish heritage, her ear for the nuggets and cadence of outport Newfoundland speech and the Newfoundlanders' droll humour and narrative style — it is all of these dimensions of herself being a Newfoundlander as well as a travelled person that give her poetry so much of its depth and resonance. Even some of the major places to which she has travelled have close ties to Newfoundland, particularly Portugal and Ireland. So let me make it clear that, writing as I myself do from an exilic place, a place of deracination, when I think of Agnes Walsh as a Newfoundland poet, I do so with awe and not a little envy, and when I use the qualifier Newfoundlander, I mean it as praise.

Walsh, in the CD accompanying *Going Around with Bachelors*, remarks on the connection she herself feels between her writing and the ballad style. She considers her poetry influenced by the old world tunes in the repertoire of Patsy Judge, who lived in Patrick's Cove on the Cape Shore in Placentia Bay where she and her daughter have a home, as well as by the oral histories Walsh has collected from the people of Irish ancestry living on the Cape Shore. These influences have come to fruition in *Going Around with Bachelors*, especially in the first half or so of the book with its prose poems and long lined poems, longer lined than one finds in *In the Old Country of My Heart*. The prose syntax and longer lines lend themselves to the arresting narrativity of such poems as "I Solemn" (9-10), the title poem "Going Around with Bachelors" (16), and "Longevity and Guts" (23-26). The latter contains deft sketches of family members, "The Grandparents" and "The Aunts." The poem "Ellen," the last of "The Aunts," is actually a reworking into a prose poem of "In the Snapshot" (36) from *In the Old Country of My Heart*: the lines lengthened, line breaks and

enjambment removed, stanzas replaced with paragraphs, and the person the poem is about who before was anonymous now not only named but embraced as an aunt. Also benefitting from the fluidity of the longer line and the attention to narrative detail is the poem “Homecoming to the End” a powerfully moving elegy to Walsh’s father and his vanished world (18-20).

But the longer lines and narrativity serve not only the elegiac and the poignant but also the whimsically hilarious. “Almost a Word,” a poem that neither wastes a word nor has a word out of place, tells the story of a courting ritual in which the courted had no clue for weeks that she was the object of a courtship (12-13). Walsh captures both the laconic style of the woman relating the tale and the taciturnity of the two men involved — the man for whom the young woman worked as housekeeper and the husband-to-be this employer arranges for her to marry. But for droll humour the poem that takes the prize is “Dad and the Fridge Box,” a story told in prose-poem form that is alone worth the price of the book (14-15). Walsh’s narrative poems tell their stories, whether sad or funny, with a precision and an economy that sends the reader right back to the beginning to read them again.

I have read these poems again and again and listened again and again to Walsh read them to try to decipher wherein the skill lies, for it is not in showy wordplay that draws attention to itself. No, the skill, the magic springs from the rhythm of the speech, the beat-perfect timing, the dead-pan pacing, the absolutely accurate diction, the just right endings. (Too bad Paul Muldoon did not know about Agnes Walsh when he was writing the lectures that have been collected into *The End of the Poem*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006). Those years Walsh devoted to taping and transcribing oral histories have paid off. Often a poem builds and builds to a matter-of-fact ending that takes one’s breath away or makes one double up with laughter. The poem “The Interview,” in which the interviewee turns into the one grilling the interviewer as to why she does not hold down a steady job, gives to the interviewee an argument clincher to end the poem:

I can come and go, I say.  
 Coming and going, she says, only leads to drafts.  
 And drafts lead to colds, and colds to pneumonia (28).

And both tenderness and humour conclude the poem “Love,” in the last section of which the narrator pays a visit to her elderly bachelor friend after he has moved from his life-long home around the bay into an apartment in the city:

You’ve lost your smell. The wood-smoke, the oil, the musk,  
 the years, the years and years. So, I ask, the shower then,  
 that must be a treat?  
 Ah yes, you laugh, the shower. That’s the first time I had a wash  
 since I fell overboard in 1942. I’ll have to beat the women off now (35).

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Walsh has sat at the table of a master and pays tribute to this mastery of tone and timing by her father in the opening stanza of “Homecoming to the End”:

That way he had of looking over his glasses at me  
when I tried to say something matter-of-fact,  
but knew I wasn’t pulling it off.  
He wouldn’t say anything, would never answer right away,  
just go back to his paper  
and say it to the print, matter-of-fact (18).

Perhaps it is a perversity of mine, the nostalgia I feel for the years I lived in St. John’s, but I find the poems in *Going Around with Bachelors* that are grounded in Newfoundland to have greater heft and sympathetic vibration than the ones written about elsewhere in the world, whether Spain, Portugal or Ireland. These latter often seem to me more purely descriptive, to have been written through the eyes of an outsider rather than from the guts and soul of an insider. Take the opening lines of “Al-Gharb”

The night is indigo and filled  
with the scent of warm flowers, (40)

and the opening lines of “For Anita”

In the soft rain there on the balcony in Oporto  
all of us were happy, happy with expectation — (41)

and compare them with the specificity in her celebration of September light in “Patrick’s Cove”:

There is a visitation of light  
upon the bare wall, ...  
....  
This is the September light that falls  
piercing with its cooler edge, ...  
....  
It slants the kitchen table just so, tilting it,  
trying to convince you you are on water (45).

Or compare them with the description of “Wind in the Old Town” (36-37). Or with her arresting image of fireweed: “The petals look like they’d avalanche, like / to touch one would cause a riot” (44).

Walsh's gift for imagery deserves special comment. Let me cite just one more of dozens of possible examples, this taken from "Homecoming to the End":

The open canvas flapped in the wind,  
billowing out like a blossoming magnolia (18).

In her first book of poems, Walsh wrote of falling, when young, in love with words as the keys to her existence, her kingdom:

The taste of salt was a word.  
I licked it, named it, rolled it over, loved it.  
Then wind, then my ocean, my sky (*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 23).

Walsh has remained true to that love in her second book, a mature woman's book that is suffused with memory, revisiting, reminiscence, loss, and revivification. As she writes in her long poem "Love,"

What to do when the only way forward for me  
is back, back in time through you and this house (34).

In *Going Around with Bachelors*, Walsh has beautifully demonstrated that for her the way back is the way forward.

Ruth Roach Pierson  
Professor Emerita OISE/UT

Susan Chalker Browne. *The Land of A Thousand Whales*. St. John's: Tuckamore Books, 2006, ISBN: 1-897174-08-X

A LANDSCAPE CHANGES when it is peopled with stories, even when those stories are fictional. When we read a narrative, we move into the condition of not knowing how it will all work out. We see through the eyes of the story's characters, feel their anticipations and disappointments, look at their world as part of the conditions that make their story possible. Reading a good historical novel changes the way we look at a landscape; we see the possibilities that other characters saw. And creating that landscape in our mind's eye, as the result of reading the abstract black marks of words on the page, means that we see it as an imaginary as well as a real world. It is a surprisingly powerful experience.

The Labrador coast is not short of its own stories but there are still too few that tell of the incoming of the White fishermen. *The Land of a Thousand Whales* recounts the story of the Spanish whale fishery of 1580 from the perspective of 12-year-old Sebastian. Lured by what he perceives as the romance of "the land of a