

The Three Wise Men of Maritime Literature: A Personal Tribute

Gwendolyn Davies

Volume 30, numéro 1, autumn 2000

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad30_1for05

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Davies, G. (2000). The Three Wise Men of Maritime Literature:: A Personal Tribute. *Acadiensis*, 30(1), 31–37.

The Three Wise Men of Maritime Literature: A Personal Tribute

IN HIS 1954 COLLECTION of sonnets about the people of the St. John River Valley, *The Stunted Strong*, Fred Cogswell writes:

Not soft the soil where we took root together;
It grew not giants but the stunted strong,
Toughened by suns and bleak wintry weather
To grow up slow and to endure for long;
We have not gained to any breadth or length,
And all our beauty is our stubborn strength.¹

Cogswell's declaration of the importance of place and space in shaping character and in strengthening a sense of identity bears resonance with two other writers of his generation, who, like Cogswell, claim New Brunswick as the source of their rootedness and writing/teaching as the focus of their careers. These three — Fred Cogswell born in East Centreville in 1917, Douglas Lochhead born in Guelph, Ontario in 1922 (but rushed down to Fredericton to be christened amongst his Van Wart relatives) and Malcolm Ross born in Fredericton in 1911 — have had coaxial if not intersecting careers over the past 60 years as they have edited, published, taught and administered both within and without the academy. In the process, they have not only taught generations of students who have carried on their work in related areas, but they have also influenced the research directions of the field of Maritime literature within which many of us are working today. Hence my title, the "three wise men", and hence my linking of three scholar/writers who may hitherto have been thought of as working in unrelated venues.

The fact remains, however, that these three men emerged from a common generational background, grew up with a sense of pride in their Loyalist or Acadian or Scottish antecedents, received post-graduate degrees outside as well as inside of Canada (Edinburgh for Cogswell; Cornell for both Ross and Lochhead) and participated in the Second World War (Cogswell in the army in 1940-45; Lochhead as an infantryman in 1943-45; and Ross with the National Film Board and the Wartime Information Board in 1942-45). All three entered university careers at the end of the Second World War, although for many years, until he reached Massey College, Lochhead's venue was to be more the university library than the university classroom. It was within the library context that he was able to develop his interest in early typesetting, printing presses and book history. This area of research has informed his work on distinctive printers' ornaments and on the bibliographical studies (including Atlantic Canada) for which he was awarded the Tremaine Medal of the Bibliographical Society of Canada in 1985.

It was to this bibliographical and "history of the book" research that I was first

1 Fred Cogswell, *The Stunted Strong* (Fredericton, 1954).

drawn when I began my thesis studies in the 1970s. However, I soon found that I owed a debt to all three of these men as I began to research 18th and 19th-century Maritime literature. Indeed, were it not for the literary archaeology of the work undertaken by Fred Cogswell or the edited series that Lochhead and Ross began to direct from the University of Toronto Press and McClelland and Stewart respectively, a whole generation of teachers in the 1970s and 1980s would have experienced a dearth of texts, and an absence of context, for the study of Maritime literature. Cogswell's articles on "Haliburton" and on "Literary Activity in the Maritime Provinces (1815-1880)", published in *The Literary History of Canada* in 1965, have been influential by the very nature of their venue, but from an Atlantic literary historian's point of view, they have also had the added merit of de-centring the bias of many earlier Canadian literary histories by foregrounding the rich writing legacy of the Maritime area.

Certainly, in the immediate post-war years, it was Cogswell who dominated the Maritime literature scene. As a critic, he not only contributed the key chapters on Maritime literary history already mentioned, but he also wrote influential articles on 19th-century literature and authors for the Bibliographical Society of Canada (1961), *The Arts in New Brunswick* (1967), the *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada* (1977), the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* and *A Literary and Linguistic History of New Brunswick* (1985). He argued in articles such as "Literary Traditions in New Brunswick" in the *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada* that there was a continuity between 19th and 20th-century writing in the region. The post-Confederation poets, Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman and Francis Sherman served as a case in point. Believing in a mystical bond between man and nature, they also entertained a late-Victorian optimism about the conduct of progress and the inherent goodness of humankind. Cogswell recognized the influence of such values on his own development as a writer, noting that "when I grew up as a boy on a New Brunswick farm during the 1920s and 1930s, I breathed it in so unconsciously that the revelation of reading Roberts and Carman was like the finding of words for something that was then, and still is, very much a part of me".²

He reiterated the importance of these values in his introduction to *The Collected Poems of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts* (1985), emphasizing that "The current relative lack of esteem in which his (Roberts') poetry is held is a testimony to how far we have departed from the beliefs, interests, and values of our ancestors".³ That Cogswell consistently regretted this loss was also evident in 1978 when, in a *Globe and Mail* article entitled "Until Time Erodes Bad Art, Maritime Writers Must Persevere", he championed the cause of such Maritime authors as David Adams Richards, Alistair MacLeod and Alden Nowlan by arguing that "background, heritage, and temperament" had made the best of Atlantic Canada's contemporary writers out of fashion with critics and publishers. Literature and literary values ultimately rested on good craftsmanship, in Cogswell's opinion, but in fashion-conscious times such as the

2 Gwendolyn Davies, "Fred Cogswell", in W.H. New, ed., *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. Sixty (Detroit, 1987), p. 40.

3 Fred Cogswell, "Introduction", in Graham Adams, ed., *The Collected Poems of Charles G.D. Roberts* (Wolfville, N.S., 1985).

present, he noted, “many Atlantic provinces writers can only grit their teeth and persevere for the sake of the workmanship they create rather than the fame”.⁴

If Cogswell generated Canadian critical awareness because of his analysis of the foundations and structures of Maritime literature, he also contributed to the evolution of that literature by his active participation in *The Fiddlehead*, the literary magazine which the Bliss Carman Poetry Society of Fredericton began publishing in 1945 and which, for 22 years afterwards, was edited, proofread, printed and distributed by Cogswell. *The Fiddlehead*, like its later offshoot, Fiddlehead Poetry Books (which Cogswell even subsidized), became a catalyst for many writing careers in Canada by pursuing a practice of publishing both known and unknown writers. As Roger Ploude and Michael Taylor have pointed out in the introduction to their collection, *Fiddlehead Greens* (1979), *The Fiddlehead* “has always considered the encouragement of new and promising talent one of its main functions, if not its *raison d’être*”.⁵ By 1966, Fred Cogswell was reading as many as 6,000 poems per year submitted to *The Fiddlehead* and was trying to answer each poet personally while also teaching, supervising theses, writing his poetry, preparing scholarly articles, translating Québécois and Acadian poems into English, editing volumes in the Fiddlehead Poetry series and giving public readings. Regional writers such as Alden Nowlan, Milton Acorn, Elizabeth Brewster and David Adams Richards all found voice in *The Fiddlehead* over the years as Cogswell continued publishing a vehicle for talented writers, while at the same time pursuing a policy of eclecticism. “What I attempted to do”, he explained in an interview with David Galloway in 1985, “was to put into every issue representative poems of almost all the different types and schools of poetry which were then current, including the traditional one”.⁶ “Fred was the first person I ever met who read poetry or cared about it”, noted Alden Nowlan; “That was when I was twenty-five. It was almost a frightening experience to meet Fred, because suddenly something that had existed almost in pure imagination became concrete and real. But he published things of mine in *The Fiddlehead*, he encouraged me in many ways. I owe him a great debt. Many other writers here owe him this kind of debt”.⁷

If Cogswell has made an enduring contribution to the field of Maritime literature, so too have Douglas Lochhead and Malcolm Ross in their sundry involvements with major editorial and scholarly projects. As general editor of the University of Toronto Press’s “Literature of Canada” series (20 volumes), as co-editor (with Shirley Elliott) of the *Atlantic Provinces Checklist* (1957-58), as a writer for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* on 18th-century printing figures, and as one of the co-founders of the *Maritime Art Magazine*, Lochhead has played a significant role over the past 60 years in exploring and shaping conceptions of Maritime literature and culture. Perhaps one of his most significant and unsung roles lies in his contribution to the founding of the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproduction in 1978, for,

4 Fred Cogswell, “Until Time Erodes Bad Art, Maritime Writers Must Persevere”, *Globe and Mail*, 14 January 1978.

5 Roger Ploude and Michael Taylor, eds., *Fiddlehead Greens* (Fredericton, 1979).

6 David Galloway, “SCL Interviews: Fred Cogswell”, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 1-2 (1985), p. 212.

7 Marjory Whitelaw, “In Fredericton, poetry is a major industry”, *Saturday Night* (February 1971), p. 23.

since that time, the Institute has methodically made available in microfiche form the newspapers and published texts of early Canadiana (many of them Maritime in origin). Calling upon major repositories in Canada, Britain and the United States as sources for material, the CIHM now serves a world-wide clientele through the availability of its fiche, CD-ROM and internet texts. Moreover, Lochhead's bibliographical skills have unlocked the textual and contextual histories of important early Maritime publications, including Thomas McCulloch's "The Stepsure Letters" (reprinted by McClelland and Stewart, 1960) and Julia Beckwith Hart's 1824 novel, *St. Ursula's Convent; or, the Nun of Canada*, published in a scholarly edition by Lochhead with the Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts at Carleton University (1991). His essay, "Atlantic Regionalism and Literature: Some Bibliographical Comments", published in the Atlantic Literature edition of *Essays on Canadian Writing* in the summer of 1985, became a touchstone in the late 1980s for discussions of Atlantic literary research projects yet to be done. In that article, Lochhead identified the need for more available primary texts, the importance of turning to diaries and letters as sources for scholarly projects and the paucity of reliable biographies on major Maritime literary figures. "The Maritime . . . impulse or imagination is to be found in all of our literature through some three hundred and sixty years", notes Lochhead at the conclusion of his essay; "this general survey of our regional literary heritage has been made in the belief that it is only possible for us to come to grips with our future as a region and as a country if we understand the hard reality of our past by unveiling and reading the writers of almost four centuries. That there is much unveiling to be done is obvious, but it will be done so that future generations will reach an even closer understanding of what it means to be Maritime, to be Atlantic".⁸

In contrast to Lochhead's editing, much of that done by Malcolm Ross has been directed to the production of 20th-century texts. Head of the Department of English at Queen's University from 1950 to 1962, and Dean of Arts and Provost of Trinity College, University of Toronto from 1962 to 1968, Malcolm Ross returned to his native Maritimes in 1968 to take up a chair in English at Dalhousie University (where he still maintains an office as Professor Emeritus). By far one of Ross's most significant contributions to Maritime and Canadian literature was his creation of an inexpensive paperback series that revitalized out-of-print Canadian literary titles (the series now publishes recent works as well). He at first approached Macmillan with this idea and was turned down. He then took it to Jack McClelland (of McClelland and Stewart) who had reservations about the scheme but eventually decided to risk it. It is in this way that the New Canadian Library was born in 1957, and it is this series which over the years has made available to Maritime literature classes the texts of regional writers from Thomas McCulloch and Thomas Chandler Haliburton to Thomas Raddall and David Adams Richards. With the establishment of the NCL list, it for the first time became feasible for institutions to offer courses in Atlantic writing, and the popularity of these courses at institutions such as the University of New Brunswick, Saint Mary's, Mount Allison and Acadia in the 1980s can be attributed in considerable part to the fact that Ross's series had made the tools available. None of

8 Douglas Lochhead, "Atlantic Regionalism and Literature: Some Bibliographical Comments", *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 31 (Summer 1985), p. 266.

this means, of course, that the New Canadian Library enjoyed an easy path of acceptance, and it was Fred Cogswell, in fact, in the Spring 1964 issue of *Edge*, who voiced discontent with the selection, design and editorial structure of the series.⁹ More recently, the series has undergone criticism for canonizing some texts while ignoring others, but overall, as W.J. Keith has argued, “the successful continuance of the New Canadian Library has been in large measure responsible for the confident identification of a Canadian literary tradition”.¹⁰

Unfortunately, since Ross’s retirement from the general editorship in 1988, the NCL has not sustained its support for Maritime literary texts. Even under Ross’s editorship, the series was not without problems for anyone trying to set up a course. Throughout the early series there was always gender imbalance in the selection of authors published, and it appeared that the series survived its early years only by selling a hearty dose of Stephen Leacock to defray the costs of its less energetic titles.¹¹ Women writers from Atlantic Canada did not appear, and, when an influential anthology of post-Confederation poets was published in the series, it canonized the significant voices as those of four males (albeit two, Roberts and Carman, were from the Maritimes).

Furthermore, McClelland and Stewart may have reaped the benefits of being the initiators of the series, but, as soon as other publishers realized the potential of selling paperback classics to the Canadian populace, they created their own rival series (the Macmillan “Laurentian” series, for example) and blocked McClelland and Stewart from obtaining rights to the paperback titles that they wanted. The result, as W.J. Keith points out, was that “By the 1970s, what had promised to be something close to a national series became inevitably more limited in scope; henceforth, McClelland and Stewart, in adding to their list, could do little more than reprint appropriate M & S titles. Spiraling production costs also took their toll. What had originally been intended as a ‘quality’ series needed bigger sales, and the publishers began to think in terms of a broader and less exclusive market”.¹² What all of this represents in the year 2000 is a severely restricted NCL list, one which now contains hardly any Maritime works except for the ever-popular and ever-predictable L.M. Montgomery books. McCulloch, Haliburton, Raddall, Bruce, Buckler and a host of other Maritime writers who once held pride of place in the NCL have in the last six years gradually disappeared from the list.

In spite of the changed status of the NCL as a catalyst for Maritime literature courses, there is no nay-saying about the contribution that Ross has made to Canadian literature. Nor can one ignore the cultural importance of his essays on Bliss Carman and on Bishop John Medley’s Fredericton in his 1986 collection, *The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions*. Writing to Ross from New York about the Medley essay, “A Strange Aesthetic Ferment”, American journalist Stuart Goulding praised Ross’s style, quoting a former senior editor at Scribner’s as saying: “He’s got hold of a

9 Fred Cogswell, “The New Canadian Library”, *Edge* (Spring 1964), pp. 124-6.

10 W.J. Keith, “Canadian Tradition and the (New) New Canadian Library”, *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 21, 1 (Spring 1991), p. 71. I am indebted to Keith’s article for the background information on the birth of the New Canadian Library series.

11 Ibid., p. 72.

12 Ibid., p. 73.

Trollopian situation in his article about Fredericton which he should develop into a full-length novel. The old bishop, the young men who fall away, these are the stuff of good fiction".¹³

However, responding to good fiction as well as to Ross's good scholarship is not the total sum of the paper that I was asked to write for the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference. Instead, I must acknowledge that the panellists who were invited to participate in the conference were asked "to write of their personal route to Atlantic Canada Studies, and their reflections on the ways in which it has changed over the period of their respective careers".¹⁴ In spite of the subject of my paper, my journey to Atlantic Canada Studies did not begin with the "three wise men", although they have certainly informed my career by the nature of their research, by their generosity as scholars and by their kindness as colleagues (this is especially true of Douglas Lochhead, my former colleague in Canadian Studies at Mount Allison). Rather, my route was more personal. It began, in a sense, by omission. The omission existed in the school system in my generation. Gradually, over the years, I began to realize that nowhere in my Cape Breton or New Brunswick educational years had I ever learned of the expulsion of the Acadians in 1755 or of the role of Maritimers in the American Civil War or of the confrontations between labour and management in the 1920s in Cape Breton. I knew about the economy of the pampas of South America and about the lineage of the royal houses of England, but I did not know about my own country's history. And, like a number of colleagues in my generation, I think that I compensated for that vacuum in my own educational background by taking the directions that I did in my academic life. If my generation of schoolchildren had been denied its history, there were those amongst us who did not want to deny the next generation that privilege.

On a more intimate note, I was fortunate to grow up in a family context that valued the study of history as a road to personal and cultural understanding. Some of my happiest memories are of my father organizing picnics in the ruins of Louisbourg long before the reconstruction of the fortress, or of Sunday afternoon treks on the Tantramar Marsh to explore traces of the old French dry dock. This mentoring was reinforced by the influence of a generation that I shall dub "the great aunts". They were not all aunts. Most were my grandmother's first cousins. But they were all of the generation that had come to maturity during the First World War. They taught grades one, four and 11 in the city of Saint John and they never married. "All the young men were killed", one of them once said to me in way of explanation. They sat me down on a horsehair sofa in the summer kitchen at "Ingleside" on the St. John River or in faded parlours in late-Victorian apartments in Saint John, and they said: "This is your history". And, they talked about the Planters coming to Maugerville, about the Loyalists settling Gagetown, about great-great grandmother Rebecca Hume, who had never finished her sampler because she had married Reuben Hoben at 15, and about researching family buildings and genealogies in New England. They have left me a legacy of history as story — a story that includes my past — that has informed my life

13 Stuart D. Goulding to Malcolm Ross, New York, 8/8/76, Malcolm Ross Papers, Special Collections/Archives, University of Calgary Library.

14 Brook Taylor to Gwen Davies, 22 February 1999.

and that has helped to shape my academic directions. I would not be writing these words today were it not for the influence of my father and of “the aunts” in bringing me on a very personal journey to Atlantic Canada Studies.

My route, then, began on a very personal level, but it had the good fortune to intersect with the more scholarly path emerging from the work of the “three wise men” (and of others such as Alfred Bailey and Phyllis Blakeley) just at the time when I was in graduate school and just when I was taking up my first position in an English Department. What has emerged in my own generation of Maritime literary scholars (that which includes Carrie MacMillan, Tom Vincent, George Parker, Ken MacKinnon and Andrew Seaman) is the task of reassessing earlier textual studies, of placing literary works in a larger cultural context and of addressing the lacunae in gender, ethnic, class, vernacular and Acadian studies left untouched by their work. Diaries, letters, ships’ logs, newspapers, wills, probate papers, First Nations storytelling, folk tales and material history (for example, verses on samplers) have extended the body of poetry and fiction that traditionally formed the basis of the analysis of Maritime literature, so that today we have a much better understanding of Maritime literary activity as an expression of vernacular as well as of elite culture. Such an approach allows us to see “The Rise and Follies of Cape Breton Island” as a natural extension of a Maritime satirical sensibility that goes back to Thomas McCulloch’s “Stepsure Letters” (1821-23) and Thomas Chandler Haliburton’s “Sam Slick” sketches (1835), and it places the Rankins and the Barra MacNeils in the tradition of 18th and 19th-century Gaelic bards ranging from the “Polly” bards in Prince Edward Island to the Bard MacLean of Barney’s River, Nova Scotia.

How the next generation of scholars will respond to, build on and reshape the work of the “three wise men” and of my own generation has yet to be seen. With their background in post-colonial theory and their theoretical strategies for approaching both traditional and recent texts, I believe that we shall see in their work a new attention to individual texts as signifiers of cultural and literary sensibility. Their work promises to be less research-based than that of their progenitors, but whatever direction it takes, there remains in the variety of styles, subject matter and regional representation emerging from contemporary Maritime writers a rich vein for cultural and literary exploration. Phillip Buckner has made the point that the region has no single monolithic culture. The contemporary writing of Rita Joe, George Elliott Clarke, Maxine Tynes, David Adams Richards, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Alistair MacLeod, Carol Bruneau and Richard Lemm (just to mention a representative cross-section) clearly demonstrates that point. Not even included in that list are francophone Acadian writers whose work is winning accolades both inside and outside of the Maritimes (it is worth mentioning in this context that Fred Cogswell was one of the first anglophones in the Maritimes to translate and to celebrate Acadian literature). The “three wise men”, then, began a process of identifying a rich literary tradition in the region by their recovery of texts and by their analyses of their importance. That richness continues in the exciting quality of the Maritime literature that is emerging from the region at this time. To somewhat rephrase Cogswell’s poem, “Our Stubborn Strength”, “it grew up slow” but it will “endure for long”.

GWENDOLYN DAVIES