

Mary Dalton. *Red Ledger*.

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HAVING READ ALL FOUR of Mary Dalton's poetry collections, I think that her fourth book, *Red Ledger*, being greater than the sum of its parts, is her best collection to date. There is no subtitle to let readers know that this volume is an artful mixture of new poems and poems culled from her first two books, but those who know Dalton's work do not have to look at the publisher's acknowledgement to realize that the book editor has done a magnificent job pulling together what is best in her poetry. As a result Mary Dalton has achieved an intensely focused social and geopolitical take on Newfoundland such as has not been seen since the days of Percy Janes, Harold Horwood, and E. J. Pratt.

To try an analogy of olympian effort and competition (because I do believe that many Newfoundland writers are attempting to become the next internationally recognized Great One), it is as if Dalton won bronze with her first two books, silver with *Merrybegot*, and has stepped up to the podium for gold with *Red Ledger*. There are no stand-out poems in this collection because each poem blasts out of the gate and wins the race with perfect form and passionate determination. No matter whether the poem is comic, romantic, ironic, or satiric (and Dalton knows her Frye!), no matter whether the poem is broadly social/political, geographic, or autobiographical, Dalton's aim is always to carry forward what she knows and feels about Newfoundland.

And what knowledge, what feeling! There are the opening love poems, with their saucy invitations ("What sort of woman would you fancy, Nelson?"), meteorological linguistics ("It's too hot for irony — / the yarrow droops / in a bald declarative" — from *Here in the Dog Days*) and salty images and metaphors:

Desire
has the taste of salt,
pulses like the sea-anemones —
a salt orchestra —
the cool-green swing of Keith Jarrett.
(*To Conjure the Salt*)

Although Dalton rarely enters autobiographical territory, I am interested in reading more poems like *The 'Forties* and *Paterfamilias, A Portrait*. I'm still thinking about Dalton's beautiful young Dick Tracy and Ingrid Bergman parents and the end of their days, Mother setting immaculate tables and tying her crippled husband's shoelaces and Father "moving in the cage of his days".

My favourite poems are the two long and wildly imaginative sequences, the geographical *I'm Bursting to Tell: Riddles for Conception Bay* and the homage to fellow icon of the imagination, the Frygian poet James Reaney, *Reaney Gardens*. What I love best about Newfoundland writers is their ability to make one laugh out loud. (Recently I had the delightful experience of reading Agnes Walsh's essay on

her father's fridge box and laughing hysterically in the middle of a busy library.) I was holding my stomach as I read Dalton's "Ignoramus" in *Reaney Gardens*.

Of course Dalton's political poems are brilliant, funny, poignant and rousing. I have only one quibble. It seems to me that Dalton does not take risks in her political poems. She attacks the many injustices that have been heaped on Newfoundland by mainland Canadians and who could argue with that? But the tone of the poems indicates to me that the poet does not consider the fact that most of these injustices have also been perpetrated on her fellow mainland Canadians. Also, she takes aim at goofy, ignorant, arrogant, and usually well-intentioned mainland social workers and tourists. What about the fact that many urban Newfoundlanders have become arrogant and ignorant about their fellow rural Newfoundlanders? And why is there no mention of all of the lazy, useless academics from the mainland who have spent their adult lives at Last Chance U making big bucks and hating the place?

Perhaps I am not being entirely fair to Dalton. I love the last poem in the book, *Gallows*.

I myself was one who could see only gallows driving through the wind-swept and bleakly beautiful Gallow's Cove. Dalton is hard on herself, the sixteen-year-old "vastly superior" Newfoundlander who cringed at the names rolling off her neighbours' tongues. But now the poet who leapt into the mainland world that malignantly caricatures her country (not province!), has grown to love her people and their language.

Now she can hear
how they kept safe with them
Maire and Seamus, even
those far-off Normans of Autun —
swaying in time, in the intricate
galliard of their gallous, gallous tongue.

(Gallows)

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Alison Pick. *Question and Answer: Poems*. Vancouver: Polestar/Raincoast Books, 2003, ISBN 1-55192-623-7

ALISON PICK'S POEMS seem to start almost as an exercise. In the first section, "Q & A," a question is taken from some other writer, isolated from its context, and an answer composed, on the principle that all one need do is "ask a question / and the marvellous answer appears." The questions are ominous: "How is one to speak with the dead?" "What colour's the future?" "What can you believe in?" A "thin shadow of death," sickness, and sadness hangs over some of the poems.