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Compassionate Resistant Activist

David Creelman

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Herb Wyile: Compassionate Resistant Activist

David Creelman

Inevitably, in most cases, we only get to know a few sides of the people in our lives. In July of 2016, in the weeks following the news of Herb's sudden passing, I realized there were many sides of my colleague and friend that I had not experienced. I had never played a game with him, though he was a driven competitor on the ballfield and on the ice. I had enjoyed far too few post-conference conversations, though Herb was always inviting me to join a crew of people who were heading out for a beer. We knew each other for more than twenty-five years, but for all the times we shared stories about our families and our work, our face-to-face interactions were limited to annual conferences and chance meetings. Yet for that all, I feel like there were parts of Herb I knew well; that is, I knew his keen intellect, his sharp wit, and his engaging spirit, all of which were readily apparent in his critical work. In his books, articles, interviews, and presentations, we got to know his rich, urgent, attentive voice as he sought to know his world and make a difference in it.

Literary analysis and cultural criticism may at first seem like poor venues through which to encounter another person. As critics we speak about the texts of others, we bring one person's philosophy to bear against another person's creative expression, and we try to appear objective and distant. But just as Hayden White argued that historians employ the formal devices of literature to structure their historical analysis, so the best literary and cultural critics use literary tropes and devices to advance their argument, and as they do so, they reveal something of themselves in the process (White 1476).

Everyone who writes well takes a position and adopts a role. I think the best of the Atlantic region's historians and literary critics have tackled their work and employed distinctive styles that allow us to sense who they are; their work reveals something of their personality and their mission. For example, in the brilliant work of Ernie Forbes, whose writing Herb admired, a careful reader cannot help but sense

that the historian had a mission. Forbes, like a knight errant, was on a quest to oppose erroneous stereotypes and ensure that Maritimers could encounter an accurate version of themselves. He employed motifs drawn from the language of attack, defense, and challenge to make his point:

> On subjects as different as prohibition and transportation, feminism and regional disparity, the evidence led the author eventually to attack one or another expression of the stereotype of Maritime conservatism. . . . [Stereotypes] will tend to endure as long as they are useful. Why then expend the effort to confront them? Without constant challenges to the overwhelmingly dominant myths and stereotypes on the Maritimes, the public is denied access to its real history. . . . The more their perspective on the past is distorted by myth and stereotype, the less able they are to cope intelligently with the stream of decisions and judgments which our complex society sends their way. (Forbes 8,12)

In her *Studies in Maritime Literary History*, Gwendolyn Davies — whose work has influenced all of us — emerges as a rediscoverer of lost writers and a defender of their work:

> With the women writers who stayed at home in a pocket culture such as the Maritime area was before 1867, there was no distribution and no lasting fame. Newspapers and periodicals were thrown out when they were read. Letters and financial records were destroyed when the writers died. The result is that we do not know what Deborah Cottnam, Griselda Tonge, Mary Eliza Herbert, or Mary Jane Katzmann thought of themselves as writers, what their ambitions were, how they supported themselves financially, or who bought their writing. Furthermore, because of the circumstances of their publishing, they have been dismissed and forgotten in the writing of our literary histories — modest foothills . . . lying in the shadows of mountains. (Davies 87)

And in the hands of some critics, like George Elliott Clarke, whom Herb interviewed and wrote about on multiple occasions, scholarship can emerge in a voice akin to the poet-prophet, who sees new vistas emerging: "History-oriented, *engagé*, home-centred, post-colonial, ex-centric, and diglossic, Africadian Renaissance (that is post-Africville) literature resists any facile incorporation within the post-modern project of anti-nationalism and the concomitant engineering of a technology-driven, global 'free market' of goods, services, and intellectual property"

(Clarke 120-21). I include these long quotations from established scholars to remind readers that great critics reveal their inner selves not just in the topics they explore, but also in the styles in which they write. And I include them, as well, to demonstrate that Herb's critical work stands with theirs and is as precise and enlightening as the best of the scholars who have emerged before him.

Herb took a stand. He critiqued the oppressive power structures that have emerged in the last forty years, in the wake of the ideological orthodoxies of the post-Thatcher/Reagan era. He defended and advanced the interests of groups that have been too easily pushed to the margins. He effectively demonstrated how literature in the Atlantic region resists the dominant hegemonies of the current age. He wrote with precision and care, and to read his work is to be compelled to align oneself with his politics of intelligent resistance. Herb mapped out a valuable

> analytical framework, emphasizing the relations between economics, politics, and space [as] crucial for understanding the current situation of Atlantic Canada within the larger Canadian federation. During the last thirty years of economic globalization, the region has undergone a substantial restructuring of capital that is part of a broader reshaping of traditional spatial boundaries, driven in large measure by neo-liberal thinking. (Wyile 9)

Having identified some of the problems, he also pointed out the directions we might head to try to remedy current injustices:

> While they have hardly reached the Promised Land, in many respects conditions and prospects for women and minorities have substantially improved. Indeed, this can be seen in the increasing visibility and influence of the writers themselves. . . . [T]he recent proliferation of writing by Native people, people of African heritage, and especially by women is not the result of a belated, collective urge to pick up the proverbial pen, but the result of sustained and determined challenges to the monopolization of material opportunities and cultural power by an affluent, white, male elite. (Wyile 135)

Herb tackled individual writers and their texts with a sense of openness and fairness, while keeping in mind the larger cultural contexts and pressures within which we all operate. He was a compassionate, resist-

ant activist, and his books and articles remind us that writers, critics, scholars, and readers can all play a very real role in shaping the direction of our society.

There are many sides of Herb that I did not get know. But as I have encountered his exceptional mind and compelling style, my own perceptions of the region have been enriched by that experience. I am grateful that I'll be able to continue to talk with him through his works, even though the option of conversing with him over a beer has now, sadly and far too soon, vanished.

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