

Breaking the Silence

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The Mysterious Mummer and Other Newfoundland Stories. Bert Batstone. Illustrated by Stuart Aldridge. St. John's: Jespersen Press, 1984. 123 p. \$8.95. *Floating Houses.* Gordon Rodgers. St. John's: Creative Printers and Publishers, 1984. 61 p. \$4.95. *Landings; A Newfoundland & Labrador Literature Anthology.* Ed. Eric Norman, Stanley Sparkes and June Warr. St. John's: Breakwater, 1984. 143 p. \$5.95. *The Atlantic Anthology* Vol. 1/Prose. Ed. Fred Cogswell. Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1984. 229 p. \$12.95.

MARY DALTON

Look, he is
the nth Adam taking a green inventory
in world but scarcely uttered, naming, praising. . . .
A. M. Klein, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape"

SILENCES, AMERICAN WRITER Tillie Olsen's exploration of the links between circumstance and literary creation, contains a double dedication: "For our silenced people, century after century their beings consumed in the hard, everyday essential work of maintaining human life" and "For those of us (few yet in number, for the way is punishing), their kin and descendants who begin to emerge into more flowered and rewarded use of our selves in ways denied to them;—and by our achievement bearing witness to what was (and still is) being lost, silenced." Like the women, the blacks, the urban and rural poor of America of whom Olsen writes, Newfoundlanders have been silenced people; our own experience has gone largely unrecorded because we have lacked the time, the means, the encouragement to take "a green inventory"—or for us, perhaps, a blue inventory, cataloguing seas and sorrows. Now voices are gradually breaking the silence, mainly through

the efforts of local publishing houses, Jespersen Press, Breakwater Books, Creative Printers and Harry Cuff Publications.

Yet the attempt to bear witness to a culture does not in and of itself guarantee success. The voices we hear are too often like the noises of the isle that return Caliban to his sleep. Local bookstores are crammed with Newfoundland fiction and poetry, but few writers have managed to fuse content and form or to attain to the ideal condition described by Fred Cogswell in his introduction to *The Atlantic Anthology*: few “have remained true to their regional culture and experience and have found here the universal qualities of human thought, feeling and action which transcend regional differences” (6). Many recently published works are not much more than caricature; they depict little claret-faced, rubber-booted fishermen, the literary equivalents of the Toby jug. Stereotyped in content, imitative in form, such creations give only the illusion of a breaking of the silence that lies all around. While such forms may prove of interest to the historian or sociologist, bastardized Ted Russell is not, finally, of much literary interest.

Bert Batstone’s *The Mysterious Mummer and Other Newfoundland Stories* falls into this unhappy category. Many of the pieces in this collection are neither story nor essay; the characters are like little stick men made for tourists; there are problems with narrative control and tone; the prose lacks texture, the occasional efforts at description are much too predictable and the language is often clichéd. Batstone is best when closest to his own childhood experience as in “The Wine,” a simple anecdote about boyhood attempts to make the stuff. Perhaps an autobiographical account or a series of descriptive essays would have served his purposes better. As it stands, the book has little to offer. “‘De toime of me life,’” an account of bayman Charlie’s going to St. John’s to serve on a jury, contains echoes of Ted Russell but none of his rich humour and humanity. “A Love Story” tackles the topic of divisions between Catholics and Protestants in a Newfoundland outport, but the characters have no blood, the dialogue is wooden, and one is left with nothing but preachments. For a work which does re-create an outport childhood from a distance in time and space, look to Ron Pollett’s *The Ocean at My Door* (excerpted in *Landings*). Its simplicity, its detailed observations, its *authenticity* all make it a rich ground for exploration.

Like *The Mysterious Mummer*, Gordon Rodgers’ *Floating Houses* seeks to articulate a vision of the Newfoundland past—of women as well as of men. Rodgers literally gives a voice to our silent forebears—he has them speak in his poems. Sometimes the voices seem quite false, born only of an idea, as in “Back in St. John’s,” and in other cases, “Sam Norman, School

Teacher," "Ted, the Notquiteright," the poems are obviously derivative of Edgar Lee Masters and are only partially successful. More often, however, this strategy of monologue works for Rodgers, as in "Homecoming," "On the Ice" and "Flying Past," three of the strongest poems in the collection. At their best Rodgers' poems are reminiscent of Frost in their double awareness of the wheeling cosmos and the daily craft; as in Frost, images of light, of ice, of work and story make a picture of the everyday and echo of the universal. Rodgers' themes are creation and survival ("in the rage of the wind. . . a / little dance"), "the old triple tyranny" of merchant, church and state, and the transmutation of history into poetry ("Memory. A floating house."). His preoccupation with cuffers (stories) leads one to suspect that narrative modes may prove congenial. As it stands, his poetry shows an awareness of formal possibilities and, at its best, fuses the local with the eternal. To that extent, it succeeds in breaking the silence.

As a part of their general fostering of local literature, several publishers have released anthologies, a few of which are designed for the schools. That children, for their own development as readers and writers, need to study works grounded in their own culture is a sound proposition; consequently, *any* Newfoundland collection in the schools is of some worth. That being said, however, one ought to demand an anthology which exhibits an awareness of basic literary principles—of style, organization and analysis. *Landings*, currently in use in the high schools (in a course taken in Grade 12, usually) is not that anthology. Some of the individual selections are strong (the Rockwell Kent, Pollett and Duncan), and there is an effort at an interdisciplinary approach—students are guided to maps and music, and encouraged to talk to old people about various aspects of the past. But *Landings* in general reinforces stereotypical views of the culture and fails signally as a high school text for a number of reasons. There is only a nod at women in the culture and as writers, a nod at Labrador. If the value of such a work is that it reflects the experience and culture of the students, more careful selection is needed (where, for instance, is Elizabeth Goudie?).

Landings loudly proclaims itself a textbook in its stentorian typography, its unit divisions, its lists of activities ("Find examples of . . ."), its lumps of commentary before and after selections. The format has the alienating effect of most textbooks, while lacking any real justification. Material included in one of the four units (entitled "A Part of All That We Have Met," "Ocean and Outport," "Introspection," and "Wildlife and People") could easily be placed in another—why bother, then, with these pseudo-categories? The commentary accompanying the selections is often

awkward, fatuous or inaccurate. Excerpts from longer works are chopped to ribbons, a sentence or two taken here, another few there; authors are not well served by this and readers are irritated by rows of omission-proclaiming dots marching across the page. The questions appended to the various selections are of dubious value and reflect notions of how literature works which are unsophisticated, to say the least. These are not occasional weaknesses but characteristic ones, although the "Introspection" unit is generally the poorest, the selections being mostly Wordsworth and water and the commentary verging on gobbledygook.

Landings is used in the rather unfortunately named course, Thematic Literature. That theme exists in and through technique is ignored by the compilers of this anthology; indeed, their grasp of technical terms seems rather shaky. There are several inaccuracies, all the more unacceptable when technique receives so little attention in commentary or questions. *Landings* is a leaky boat; it needs overhauling, maybe rebuilding. We do no service to our authors by presenting their work in this fashion, and certainly we do no service to our students and their teachers.

Although, like *Landings*, it tends to exclude women, a more suitable work for the Grade 12 curriculum is *The Atlantic Anthology*, edited by Fred Cogswell. This volume, subtitled *Prose*, contains short stories by writers from the Atlantic provinces. It includes strong work by Norman Duncan, Harold Horwood and Helen Porter, the latter represented by one of her finest pieces, "The Plan," a deft story about coming to terms with old age. The book is a feast of prose types—science fiction, nature essays, ghost stories, animal fiction; as well, Cogswell manages to represent a variety of narrative forms and strategies while choosing works that reflect Atlantic culture. One might have wished for a more substantial introduction, but one can only applaud Cogswell's decision not to impose on his collection a dreary textbook apparatus. He offers a chronological list of authors for teachers to follow if they wish, and biographical notes, should a reader wish to dig out collections by the authors represented. This anthology (while perhaps a tiny bit presumptuous in its use of the definite article in its title) displays literary discrimination, grace and tact.

Also, in cover design and general format it is the best produced of the four works under consideration. Local publishers need trained book designers and competent proofreaders: *Landings* has over twenty typos in 143 pages; *The Mysterious Mummer*, in addition to its typos, has pages out of order in two stories; all three Newfoundland books need improvement in general design.

For all the inevitable missteps ("the way is punishing") this is an exciting time in Newfoundland literature. At last the means and encouragement to write ourselves are becoming available. Yet much that currently exists has primary value as social document. Now that economic and social conditions are enabling our writers to break the silence, one wonders whether one of the enervating factors (only one) is a preoccupation with a past often glorified or distorted in some way, at the expense of the present, a time of dramatic transformations, of incongruities, of collisions of culture and value—all fertile ground for the writer. From here, it seems that Newfoundland writers need to move beyond comfortable conventions of thought and form, beyond formulas, to the very pulse of their own felt experience. Now we need to reach for the *hæcceity* which Del, a struggling writer in Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, works to create:

And no list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing,
every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell,
pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant,
everlasting. (210)

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