

Two Newfoundland Poets

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Two Newfoundland Poets

Love and Savagery. Des Walsh. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1989.
54 pp. \$8.95

The Time of Icicles. Mary Dalton. St. John's: Breakwater, 1989. 80 pp.
\$19.95.

STUART PIERSON

AT THE RECEPTION that launched Walsh's volume, at the LSPU Hall in St. John's, I asked Anita Best if she thought "love and savagery" would turn out to be twins or enemies — polar opposites. She seemed to believe that the two went together. Now that I have read the poems, I am not so sure. Walsh's love (or loves) varies (or vary) over a broad range of feeling. What, I wonder, will readers expect? The emotional brutality, for example, the egotistical gall and manipulativeness of Leonard Cohen?

you know I'm a god
who needs to use your body
to sing about beauty
in a way no one
has ever sung before
you are mine
you are one of my last women.

Whoever does want that kind of braggadocio (from Cohen's poem "You are mine") will be disappointed; those who might vaguely fear that kind of heartlessness will be pleasantly surprised. These are tender poems, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they are poems that convey

tenderness; for as poems they are (nearly all) tough, tough on the author, tough on the reader.

Walsh has grown. Not a trace remains of the paranoid, world-weary, sophomoric facility of, say, “The Night the Wine Overcame the Reality” from his first book, *Milk of Unicorns* (1974):

Sitting in this room
is like sitting in a room
full of watchful eyes
where the tired sigh
is some echoing cry
trailing through the sky
there’s no way
I’m going to find you in here
is there
you’re hiding from someone . . .
or is it something?
can it be me?

Compare these lines from *Love and Savagery* on the same theme:

She wanted more air in the room,
her heart was being crushed.
He wanted more love,
his flesh was being discoloured.
When the windows opened, all of St. John’s
ached itself in between them,
it was all so familiar. (40)

How much more present is *she*; how the inevitable world at last enters; and how far, finally, the poet has come from the deep influence of what Harold Horwood, in introducing a series of Walsh’s poems in the anthology, *Voices Underground* (1972), termed “rock music at the sophisticated levels reached recently by such experimental groups as Pink Floyd.” The days of “eyes sigh cry sky” are over.

Love and Savagery is well and carefully made. *Milk of Unicorns* had a little of everything: long, short, major, inconsequential poems; *jeux d’esprit*; all sorts of voices and points of view. The title says a lot about it — the easy surrealism of the young. *Seasonal Bravery* (1980), Walsh’s next book, was more personal and more controlled:

Each moment that
has been good to me
demands more caution . . .
I’ve begun to study distances . . .

And now the poems under review, all presented from an oblique angle. Walsh never says “I” or “me” or “mine” in *Love and Savagery* unless he is quoting someone (though there is a “we” in one of the two political poems that

make up the epilogue). He has created a character to whom he refers as "he" or, more rarely, "the poet." There are, naturally, *à clef* elements throughout the text — the poet's towns are St. John's, Toronto, and Gander; he has a daughter named Monica; he has lived exiguously on Gower Street and so forth — but the abstract, universalizing spirit predominates. "He" loves women, more of them I think than in the earlier books, and the quality of his love for each "she" or "her" differs, offering us an extended catalogue.

First sight:

He looked for an historical mention,
some reference to her blinding light,
her effect on an empire. (7)

Frightened, helpless, protective:

He needed to imagine her helpless . . .
Only then would he be sure of his place . . . (8)

Intimation of being trapped:

All of the sweetness had left him nauseous
and he was almost ready to ignore her,
he wanted her damaged and lonely. (12)

Or rejected:

why did you leave him wet and cold,
no trumpets for the parade
no announcement from the window. (13)

And so on. Love and savagery. The phrase occurs in a rich and dishevelled poem entitled "The Kitchen, 127 Gower Street, St. John's, February 21, 1985":

The coming season is finding a way into his heart
and he plans for another summer of love and savagery.
Once again he will be spiritually reckless
and remove his soul's armour
letting her do with him
what any other season has done. (14)

The phrase figured before, in "I Am Strong in Their Eyes," from *Seasonal Bravery*:

I know by my habits
I haven't lived enough
they always persuade me
to give it one more summer
of love and savagery.

Maybe Anita Best was right after all. Maybe the two terms together simply mean shirking emotional responsibility, or going free and easy in the manner of Huddie Ledbetter:

Last Saturday night I got married
 Me and my wife settled down
 Now me and my wife are parted
 Gonna take a little stroll downtown.

But no. Love, although as protean as mushrooms or varieties of influenza, pulls mainly in two directions in these poems, towards savagery and dissolution, chaos and pain and the cruelty of momentary delight, but also towards poetry and form and redemption, towards “the ecclesiastical frames of poetry” (49). The poet has to go the distance with the one, not exactly for the sake of the other, but because he *will*:

Knowing how love becomes history
 before it becomes legend,
 he chooses instead to try it again

as he writes, in a poem called “What love costs him (approximately)” (43). What it *really* costs is revealed two pages on:

Soon, Jesus in his wisdom
 tired of him and his constant pain,
 threatened his family with eternal sorrow
 and then beat him on the pitiless steps of worship,
 in front of every memory he had ever held,
 in front of the only moments he had ever considered holy. (45)

Note the play of rowdyman, we’ll rant-and-we’ll roar, Lawrentian certainties:

So now he turns,
 his back to the magnificent lupin,
 his thighs arched toward his lover
 where there are no horsemen,
 there is only embrace (37)

— interwoven with the inner fear, the shrinking before love’s Dionysian acid:

A weariness comes from loving,
 like something that has
 refused to die,
 longing to be let loose,
 to tear apart the things that hide,
 that are almost hidden,
 deep, near the centre (21)

— and played off against the restraints familiar in the holdings-back and refusals of modernism. There are echoes of Yeats in:

He’s never seen her
 take the hair from her eyes
 and place it behind her ear;
 that slow movement
 That makes men run
 from their reason. (25)

And of Eliot, of all people, in:

Why would she have turned around
and with her crow black eyes
cripple an already wounded child?
These are the things that need assessment and approval.
These are the things that need appropriate action. (14)

Enough of comparison. These tense and sometimes funny poems are a pleasure, though sometimes a puzzle, to read. One could go on quoting.

Tense:

This mist does not cover every street
this sleep is never permanent.
Wait for daybreak, the brightness will
make this beauty less obvious. (18)

A pleasure:

She wrote her story in a diary,
he looked for fresh cement
and cast her name in urban stone.
That she might someday trip on her own syllable
and fall back in his arms
was all he could hope for. (40)

A puzzle:

Listen to this, he tells the architects of love,
long after the angels have forgotten their favourite prayer
and stopped criticizing Jesus bravely for keeping them apart,
he will be the first to wash his lips with rain. (16)

It is difficult, disciplined, rewarding poetry.

It is also a handsome book, with a well-designed cover and two just-right photographs by Justin Hall, one a simple and acute portrait of the author, leather-jacketed, his back against a clapboard wall, calling to mind lines from *Seasonal Bravery*:

I approach all of you with hands in pocket
shrugging off any rumours
about nervousness and surrender.

The other photograph, on the front, is an arresting long shot taken from the upper levels out over rooftops and chimney pots to the moon over Signal Hill, Cabot Tower illuminated below the moonlit clouds, a wooden row-house in the foreground, all in focus. It is an urban revision of Ansel Adams' famous photo "Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941," and a pointed reminder that Des Walsh is an urban poet, a poet of stone and streets and "the cold steel rail"(7).

I have a complaint, however, about the book's innards. The poems are not centred on the page. A petty detail, one would think, but as one goes

back and back to the poems, the fact that each starts at the top of the page and runs its own length begins to suggest, falsely, that the poet was not sure how long the thing was going to run on. One poem, on p. 42, occupies 2 cm. of a page 23 cm. long; it is all scrunched up at the top. The pages of Walsh's other books are much better looking. The contrast between his careful composition and this haphazard framing of the words is most annoying.

To turn to Dalton's *The Time of Icicles*.

In a recent essay Murray Kempton reaffirmed Aristotle's dictum that poetry is "more philosophic and of graver import" than history, because, as Aristotle wrote, "its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars." The one deals with what merely happens, the other with what must happen. Kempton takes it a step further, claiming that poetry, or fiction, is also superior *history*: Chekhov the best Kremlinologist, Conrad's *Nostromo* the best book on the civil war in El Salvador. Exaggeration for effect aside, Kempton is right; and, increasingly, historians admit it. In recent visits to various college bookstores around North America, I notice that more and more instructors are assigning works of fiction as required reading in history courses: *Madame Bovary* for nineteenth-century France, for example, or Kafka for early twentieth-century central Europe.

It would be Kemptonesque to claim that Mary Dalton's is one of the best books yet to appear on the *history* of post-Confederation Newfoundland. But I hope that historians and, for that matter, everybody else, will consider these poems as serious reflections on culture here in Newfoundland in the last generation.

For her book can be read as the biography of a generation, the story of pre-Confederation beginnings and memories and associations, followed by — various versions here as elsewhere — a loss of innocence, a sell-out, a loss of ancestral strength and virtue, overcoming of naïveté, coming out into the light of the 20th-century, and so forth. She's written a poem with subtitle "living with contradictions" after all, and would probably ask "who's not"?

We begin and end with a vanished way of life, an order:

who'll tell us now
 eyes dark, in pity and scorn
 my duck, sure you don't know
 what work is.

That is from the first poem, "the old men are dying" (9); at the end is one called "the hens are gone wild":

they're ploughing the gardens
 meeting in circles . . .
 they drop eggs
 in the hayloft

up on the hill
abandoned in grasses. (80)

In between those two pylons which signal loss, decline, and dissolution, there are meditations on girlhood and innocent gaiety (not a lot of this), on the city, on being a teacher and a formalistic poet, on sex, on family and ancestry and old houses, and on the way we live now. The historical dimension is not an occupational imposition of my own. One of the book's epigraphs is from the American critic Harold Bloom: "The aim must be to gain a past from which we might spring, rather than that from which we seemed to derive."

To seek what American pragmatists used to call a "usable past" has its dangers, inasmuch as it often reduces to wishful thinking and to denial of unpalatable and home truths: to calling the skeleton in the closet an anatomical instruction kit. In Dalton's case, however, I don't think she has truly succeeded, if indeed she really tried, to escape the past from which she seems to derive. One of the reasons her version of Newfoundland pastoral is so affecting is that she has been a Canadian all her life, so that her looking back, like Ray Guy's (he has been a Canadian *most* of his life), simultaneously takes in the personal arc of time and that of her province. Thus the autobiographical and the historical fuse: the hopes of childhood yield to sober summing of limits to possibilities, the illusions end up in the "thrift store" with "the yellow silk dress":

a rhapsody of curves and of silk
breathing out mothballs, faintly,
'forties romance — (10)

and the resilience of youth imperceptibly slackens, as on

light-hazed hills of Greece
the eroding nymph
pitted by wind and snow
a shadow of her old self —
in her lap a dust of snow —
lifts again
one thin arm to the sky. (79)

At the same time, what glories can be celebrated? Those of the Empire?

the wind gusts, swirling
soot in billows —
a dark cloak
over horses and paupers —
motes from Newgate
the black dome of St. Paul's
Smithfield's
blood and foam

their rags flap —
 Goyaesque —
 empire's other flag. (14)

Those of the Bastion of the Free World? Dalton on her parents:

The 'forties had swept them away
 To Argentina, silver city,
 The streets paved with Americans.
 They wore badges with faces on them.
 He moved large objects
 From one place to another.
 She wore a frilly apron
 And waited on tables.
 She learned restaurant *mores*.
 A crane dropped on him
 One smashing block of concrete. (55)

She returns to this last incident in "paterfamilias 3":

weekdays, with his shattered knee
 he stood on concrete floors
 listing, doling out bits of machines
 for McNamara's, then for Golden Eagle
 (cousin to the warbirds at Argentina
 money for limbs money for limbs they cry) . . .
 one of the baffled ones
 bones picked by merchants and warbirds . . .
 looking across twenty years
 at a world with time to read and play. (70-71)

So neither U.K. nor U.S. It reminds one of the opening moments of the choral movement, in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: *Nicht diese Töne!* How about Canada? I would like to quote "Larry's Nightmare" in its entirety — this is the one subtitled "or, living with contradictions" — but it is too long and it is almost too tight to take excerpts from. It pits a "creative-writing professor," who, calling upon "the spirits of CBC/Of Canada Council of Hockey Night in Canada," counsels his class, "if you want to be professional, you've got to go where the bucks are," against "three Newfoundland harpies," who protest

poetry is of place, poetry
 Is of presence, you are a huge absence, you wear the colour of void
 You dream television commercials and your touch is the kiss of deodorant. (33)

I refer to Newfoundland pastoral rather than to nationalism, because there isn't much politics in it. Its politics consists in a vague regret that Newfoundland did not try to make a living as an independent, perhaps poorer, but more dignified country. Newfoundland artists, writers, comics, and poets

share an attitude formed partly of revulsion against the excesses of what comes to us from the mainland via television, and partly of shame (this is CODCO's special bailiwick) over how popular these very excesses are. Another component of Newfoundland pastoral is the romantic reaction against the fortresses of official culture — the Arts and Culture Centre, and Memorial University with its transferred payroll, its affectations, and its Hill Station pretensions (see "Evaluation Rag," p. 39).

But of course, as the examples of CODCO, Ray Guy, and now Mary Dalton show, the hallmark of Newfoundland pastoral is ambivalence. Who is the butt of the jokes in "Lies for the Tourist" (42)?

That rug was hooked by a sweet white-haired grandmother
For love not money.
That fish is fresh, caught by that strapping young feller
With not a care to worry him — he loves the sea . . .
Those starlings strayed in from the mainland,
Their mad cries an alien sound on our shores.

Sometimes the longing is for what one lovingly hopes was a past less burdened than now with futilities and absurdities and tawdrinesses; sometimes the nostalgia is pretty close to the surface, as in "chapel's cove ghosts," a visit to a falling-down house (deserted houses, with their aroma of waste and uprootedness, are central and powerful emblems in this pastoral vision):

brown ribbons of wallpaper curl
signs of a lost grace everywhere
in splintered fragments of moulding
detailed as some old slow dance
white porcelain door-knob, a wallpaper rose. (24)

At other times the sense that Newfoundland has done it to itself bites very sharply, as in "St. John's Day 1987":

Step-dancing
Courtesy of
The Downtown Development Corporation. (46)

The dilemma is cruel and inescapable. A lament for a lost culture in the accents of modernism, learned at university. For Yeats (as in Walsh) is here too, italics and all:

*A fire dances before her, and a sound
Rings ever in her ears of armed men.* (13)

And Eliot

i float adrift
i plummet (31)

and Dylan Thomas, where children, their
calls shrilling down the years

chant about falling bridges

time's dark horizons, . . .
turned arches, exultant,
in their cathedral of play.

And, oftener, Emily Dickinson

And these are morning glories:
they bloom-blue-for a day.
Blue trumpets with sunshine
at the heart. (58)

These are echoes; I do not mean to suggest Dalton does not speak in her own voice. I only mean that a poet who can write a poem called "she counters Auden and others" (64-5) and another "For Rainer Werner Fassbinder" (63) stands in an ambiguous relation to the past she celebrates. Further, she knows it. Perhaps that is what "modernism" is. For most people, "tradition" has been simply given. I mean by that overworked term, patterned ways of getting on with life. James Harvey Robinson, the pragmatist quoted above, called them "habits." They carry with them interpretations of themselves in the form of song, story, and ritual. In the regime of the modern, however, one *chooses*. We have what is termed the "invention of tradition"; we have "a heap of broken images," in Eliot's phrase — "fragments I have shored against my ruins." We have pasts we can use, discard, repudiate, modify almost at whim. History as tool. We speak of "lifestyles" to indicate our opportunity to select a life off the rack. All those first names among the cast of the Cosby show . . .

Meanwhile, when Newfoundland was a Dominion, Johnny Burke wrote these lines

Now young men take a warning from me, I'll be bound,
Don't marry a girl if her grinders ain't sound.

About forty years after Confederation Dalton writes this, apropos of Barbara Frum

I recall best
the whiteness
and width
and the breadth
of your gleaming teeth . . .

Teeth are power
teeth and your judicious smile . . . (16)

Which is the better idiom for speaking of the social aesthetic of teeth? Dalton

has a phrase for this quandary: “resettlement of the mind,” she calls it, in the wrenching and anguished “backhome blues” (40-41).

So much is here that I have not been able to touch on — the love poems, for example, the nature pieces, those on themes from Classical mythology. It is a rich collection. It is also handsomely turned out: a toast to Breakwater for the weighty paper, the substantial font, the sound binding, the pleasing arrangement of the verses on the page. It is a pity that the portrait of the author and the reproduction of a Don Wright drawing called “Sea Light,” from 1987, appear only on the dust jacket, for libraries discard these, and many future readers will not see these — well, inessential, but satisfying features of this altogether satisfying book.

The Time of Icicles is part of the first line of a poem printed here on p. 57. Its second stanza is:

I am become Wolf
anew
dancing grinning among clowns
drumming
a song so vast it
pulls your world down.

I’m not sure what she means by that. I think there is a connection with the lines quoted earlier about a poetry of place, of presence. The world to be pulled down is a world the colour of void. I wish her well with the quixotic project.