

**Mary Dalton. *Edge: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*. Windsor, ON.: Palimpsest Press, 2015. ISBN 978-1-92679-427-3**

Mary Dalton. *Edge: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*. Windsor, ON.: Palimpsest Press, 2015. ISBN 978-1-92679-427-3

Robert McGill

---

Volume 31, Number 2, Fall 2016

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds31\\_2br04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds31_2br04)

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this review

McGill, R. (2016). Review of [Mary Dalton. *Edge: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*. Windsor, ON.: Palimpsest Press, 2015. ISBN 978-1-92679-427-3 / Mary Dalton. *Edge: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*. Windsor, ON.: Palimpsest Press, 2015. ISBN 978-1-92679-427-3]. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 31(2), 384–388.

Mary Dalton. *Edge: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*. Windsor, ON.: Palimpsest Press, 2015. ISBN 978-1-92679-427-3

In a note introducing this collection of her prose writings, Mary Dalton observes that “the *raison d’être* of a book of this kind is the way in which it speaks to the works for which its author is known — in my case, the poems” (14). Indeed, admirers of Dalton’s poetry will find much in *Edge* that sheds light on it, especially as she discusses writers who have influenced her, from Eavan Boland to Charles Bruce. But to approach *Edge* merely as a supplement to Dalton’s poetry would do the book a disservice, for the volume is much else besides as it draws together essays, interviews, and reviews published over the past 30 years. The opening essays alone make *Edge* worth reading, offering a compelling perspective on Newfoundland’s literature and language. Dalton recalls that when she was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, she and her fellow students “were taught that our accents were wrong and that our expressions belonged at home” (20). In the face of such judgments, she amply demonstrates that Newfoundland English is a treasure trove of wordplay, rhymes, and figurative phrases conducive to the creation of literature. Dalton is a fierce advocate of that literature, declaring that since the sixties “Newfoundland has produced a body of imaginative writing as accomplished as any in the country” (42).

Just as the essays shed light on Dalton’s poetry and Newfoundland culture more broadly, so do the 10 interviews with her in *Edge*. In them, she is especially keen to assert that although Newfoundland has been marginalized on the world stage in manifold ways, this situation need not be understood as disempowering its writers. Rather the opposite, she suggests. Addressing Newfoundlanders’ particular penchant for satire, Dalton insists that it need not be seen as emerging from “a sense of inferiority.” Instead, she argues that because Newfoundlanders are “writing from a space that has a long and complex and rich history,” they are “writing out of confidence, writing our satire out of an impatience with what we see sometimes as the arrogance of this Canadian entity, the condescension towards Newfoundland” (81).

After the interviews, a second set of essays turns to specific writers' work, beginning with an article first published in 1992 in which Dalton examines Newfoundland literary representations of the Beothuk and their extirpation at the hands of the island's European colonizers. Ranging over literature from an 1836 lament, "The Beothicks," to John Lewis's 1991 poem "Newfoundland Museum," Dalton is unafraid to criticize Newfoundland writers for aligning the Beothuk with the Romantic stereotype of the noble savage and for focusing on the genocide's significance for its perpetrators rather than for its victims. As she recognizes, her critique of white writers' attitudes towards Indigenous North Americans is significantly indebted to the work of critics such as Leslie Fiedler, but Dalton's essay stands on its own merits as convincing, politically committed, and engaging even for those who aren't normally readers of literary criticism.

The same thing can't quite be said of a subsequent essay on the novels of I. Compton-Burnett and of two articles on Samuel Beckett. These pieces were originally delivered as talks for scholarly audiences in the 1980s, and although Dalton is a lucid commentator even when writing for academics, the essays are too focused on close textual analysis to be pleasurable for those who have not recently spent time with Compton-Burnett's and Beckett's oeuvres. More interesting for a non-specialist audience is Dalton's essay on the *Boatman* paintings of Newfoundland artist Gerald Squires, which he created during the 1970s. Noting that critics have seen the paintings variously as commentaries on "the destruction of Newfoundland culture at the hands of post-Confederation governments" and as depicting "a spiritual and psychic journey," Dalton embraces both viewpoints while further identifying the works as "about the journey of painting, self-reflexive excursions of the artist" (175–76). She proceeds to undertake an extensive exegesis of the series that pays close attention to its symbolic elements and allusions to other artists' work. It would seem that Dalton the poet has found a soulmate in Squires, someone who likewise cherishes intertextuality and in whose art, as she puts it, "Newfoundland imagery and situations are fused with archetypal ones" (183).

Dalton's rigorous attention to pictorial detail might seem excessive at points since the reproductions of the paintings in *Edge* are so small and murkily reprinted as to obscure many of the details she describes. As it stands, her essay takes on the quality of an ekphrastic epic, offering its own poetic beauty as she articulates the aesthetic power of Squires's work. For example, when addressing *To the Fisherman Lost on the Land*, a painting in which the boatman in his vessel descends magically from the heavens, Dalton does not merely state that the clouds around him resemble the sea; rather, she says of the boat: "All about it is the whirl and smash of water: a great crashing symphony of spume and spray, curves, coils, wild dark drifts and currents" (194).

*Edge* also includes a section featuring 16 of Dalton's book reviews — most of them assessing poetry collections in the 1990s — which Dalton prefaces with an essay that offers tips for other reviewers. Included is a recommendation that they adopt what Dalton, following the novelist Paul West, calls "the genial mode" (203). In her reviewing, Dalton proves to be more than genial; she is eminently fair, eloquent, and entertaining. She reveals a passion for the books when appropriate — especially vivid is her delight at reading George Elliott Clarke's "gorgeous" *Whylah Falls* (1990), which she was one of the first to recognize as a *tour de force* (210) — but even more conspicuous is her passion for reviewing itself. That said, most of the reviews are quite short, and occasionally one senses her chafing against an editor's demand that she not exceed a certain word count. That is especially true in the case of several omnibus reviews. Reading Dalton's necessarily schematic treatments of multiple poetry collections in a single article, one tends to agree with her observation in her prefatory essay that writing about six volumes in under 1,500 words makes it "very hard to give a sense of the particularity of a book" (200). When these reviews were first published, they at least gave readers notice of what new books were out there. Some decades later, the omnibus reviews are perhaps most interesting as demonstrations of Dalton's ability to manage gracefully an ungainly task, scrupulously allotting each book its fair share of her attention.

At first blush, the inclusion in *Edge* of theatre reviews that Dalton published in the *Newfoundland Herald* in the early 1980s might seem equally to challenge the contemporary reader's interest, yet they turn out to be captivating. For one thing, because they all focus on the St. John's theatre scene, they collectively present a remarkable portrait of what Dalton calls "an especially vital period" in Newfoundland theatre history (14). It is not just that certain figures involved in the scene — various members of Codco among them — went on to become national celebrities. The reviews are also punchy and pointed. Dalton condemns the 1981 stage adaptation of actor Gordon Pinsent's novel *John and the Missus* as an "ill-conceived piece" with "an awful script" featuring "cloying sentimentality" (276–77); she expresses her disappointment with the Mummer Troupe's 1981 production *Makin' Time with the Yanks*, directed by Mary Walsh, for failing to live up to its advertised promise that it would consider how American soldiers' residency in St. John's during the Second World War affected "the Newfoundland cultural economic and social scene" (279); and she castigates Rising Tide Theatre's 1981 production of *Terese's Creed* by Michael Cook for presenting an outport resident as a "caricature" (279). She even criticizes another Rising Tide production that year, *I Was a Teenage Love Doll, Part II*, for trading in homophobia, observing that "the supposed joke of the gay movie director" in one scene "is no joke at all" (291). And those are just the productions with scripts by Newfoundlanders. Dalton is no less willing to voice her wish that a touring production of Agatha Christie's *A Murder Is Announced* had not come to Newfoundland. Dalton asks rhetorically: "What justifies the importing of this mediocre piece from a country rich in theatrical masterpieces? Is this all England can give us? And what about the many excellent Canadian productions we never get to see?" (283). In such moments, one can see that her criticisms are driven not simply by ideals of what theatre should accomplish but of what Newfoundland culture deserves and of what she believes it to be capable.

Dalton never offers patronizing praise, but she often takes care to provide encouragement. For instance, reviewing a production of *The*

*Taming of the Shrew* at the 1981 Stephenville Theatre Festival, she remarks that although “it was not perhaps the most polished or elaborate work in some respects,” the production “generated energy, excitement and spoke of future promise” (298). And she is always willing to single out newcomers in the cast for commendation. In her review of a 1981 production of Eugène Ionesco’s *The Lesson*, for example, she praises one up-and-comer for demonstrating an “understanding of her character, projecting clearly the initial cheery eagerness, the final weary bewilderment and the various stages between” (295). That talented tyro was a young woman named Lisa Moore. I wonder whatever became of her?

In Dalton’s introductory note, she calls *Edge* “an eclectic creature” (13). Its variegation in terms of subject matter and intended audiences means that it is not a book most people will read cover-to-cover with a constant level of interest. But such a diversity also means that *Edge* is liable to surprise as well as to delight, while its shifts in focus are counterbalanced by the constancy of Dalton’s intellect, erudition, and passion for words.

Robert McGill  
University of Toronto

Phillip McCann. *Island and Empire: Education, Religion, and Social Life in Newfoundland, 1800–1855*. Portugal Cove-St. Philip’s, Newfoundland and Labrador: Boulder Publications, 2016.

ISBN 978-1-927099-70-4

As the author of this volume of 13 collected essays explains, they were written over a period of 25 years for different audiences. Previous publication details are given for four of the papers. As no such information is given for the others, the reader is left to assume that they