

THE HISTORY OF THE NEWFOUNDLAND WRITERS GUILD

FIFTY YEARS OF ACHIEVEMENT 1968-2018

“Its goals are to encourage and promote creative writing in Newfoundland and fellowship among writers. Membership is open to anyone with a genuine interest in writing regardless of skill level”(*Winston Ruby: A Way with Words, 1987: Introduction*).

HOW DID THE GUILD BEGIN?

“... in 1962-63 I went to an evening writing class at Memorial University. It was taught by Dr Aldus...”
(Helen Porter, 2018)

In that class were Helen Porter, Bernice Morgan, Rae Perlin, and Geraldine Chafe Rubia, each a lonely writer at the beginning of her writing journey. “Dr Aldus was a gifted teacher. As I recall, there was excitement and electricity in that class, part of which came from him and part from those of us who were riveted by the possibility of words” (Bernice Morgan, 2018). These writers came to know each other and soon became active in the Newfoundland writing community. At that time Mike Cook, Grace Butt and Paul O’Neill were writing stories and plays for the CBC and the local theatre companies. Harold Horwood, who had been a journalist with the Evening Telegram, published his first novel, *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, in 1966.

In 1968 there was no Newfoundland organization for writers. Many belonged to the Canadian Authors’ Association. However, “For some time now there has been a muttering about what we get for our membership in the Canadian Authors’ Association....Some people think that if we had a completely Newfoundland organization we would be able to get government funding and have a permanent office like the people in Nova Scotia do” (Bernice Morgan: *Life Sentences*, 1993:15). At a gathering of writers at The Press Club on Springdale Street, October 16, 1968, it was decided to form a provincial organization: The Newfoundland Writers’ Guild. Paul O’Neill was the first President. He generously mentored the Guild and welcomed would-be writers. Other founding members- Helen Porter, Bernice Morgan, and Jean Edwards Stacey - have continued to support it throughout their professional careers.

At that first meeting, the purpose and structure of the Guild were defined: Its focus would be to encourage the creativity of the writer; its practice would be regular workshops, sometimes with guest speakers, at which writers would read their work, receive constructive criticism, and be given encouragement to reshape their work and to seek publication. This is the enduring experience of participation in the Guild to this day.

Participation, “regardless of skill level”, has encouraged membership in the Guild and has greatly increased the number of confident writers in Newfoundland. “It is and has been, from the very start, a place to help and encourage writers at all levels, a place where veterans work side by side with fledglings” (Peggy Smith Krachun, *Life Sentences*: xi).

THE GUILD EARNS ITS PLACE IN THE WRITING COMMUNITY

The early years of the Guild were lively as it sought to make a place for itself in the writing community. Some of its members found an outlet for their writing through broadcasting on the CBC. Other members fostered a close association with Memorial University (MUN), accepting invitations to read their own work at MUN and attending public lectures given by the professors. In one year alone, 1969-1970, these lectures included: CBC Writing Markets, How the Library Serves the Writer, Theatre in Ireland, Harold Pinter, The Short Story, Poetry of Yeats, A Critical Analysis of the Writing of Samuel Johnson.

Guild members took advantage of the rich succession of visiting authors who came to the university, and, with the aid of Canada Council grants, they invited writers from the mainland to come to them. Imagine hosting Elizabeth Smart, Lesley Choyce, Timothy Findley, Judith Merrill, Rudy Wiebe, and Margaret Laurence! Typical of the Guild's efforts was an invitation to Betty Jane Wylie, playwright, to come to Newfoundland in 1983 for a play writing workshop for the Guild, a session in a high school, and an evening seminar for teachers! This was made possible by a grant from The Educational Drama and Spoken English Council.

Many Guild members made their mark in the Arts and Letters competitions which had been established in the new province of Newfoundland in 1951 to foster and promote the creation and enjoyment of the arts. The Guild began to reach out into the community to encourage would be writers. They sponsored a short story contest for high school students and another competition for Young Writers, age 16 to 21.

During the 1970s the Guild members themselves created new opportunities to have their work published, often in collaboration with others. In 1973 the Guild invited "The Open Group", a theatre group, to join them in reading plays written by Guild members. The Guild's first publication of the members' work was *Newfoundland Writers, 1974*. Its eighty pages included sixteen authors and twenty-two entries of poetry and prose. The CBC read many of these entries on the air and paid the authors for that access. At the same time, many of the members were successful in publishing their work across a range of journals. Other members published books, a number of which are classics today: Percy Janes: *House of Hate*, 1970, Cassie Brown(with Harold Horwood): *Death on the Ice*, 1972 and *A Winter's Tale and The Wreck of the Florizel*, 1976. Paul O'Neill's *The Seaport Legacy and The Oldest City*, 1975 have become standard reference books.

Kevin Major, a teacher and an established author of young adult books, was anxious to have Newfoundland literature incorporated into the school curriculum. Working with publisher Clyde Rose, he edited the anthology *Dory loads. Newfoundland Writings and Art Selected and Edited for Young People*, 1974. A number of Guild members had their work included in this book. Another opportunity for Guild members to publish was Clyde Rose's editorial initiative to create and publish *The Blasty Bough*, anthology of Newfoundland Writing, 1976. Breakwater issued a three volume series in 1980: *Openings*, *Stages*, and *Passages*. Guild members were well represented in this educational series and later read their work on stage at The Barbara Barrett Theatre in the Arts and Culture Centre.

One of the first resolutions of the Guild was to recognize and honour the work of Margaret Duley (1894-1968) and to bring it to wider attention. Although she was the first Newfoundland novelist to gain an international audience, her descriptions of the poverty of outport Newfoundland did not draw a Newfoundland audience in her lifetime. Encouraged by Geraldine Rubia's dramatization for CBC of two of Duley's novels, *The Eyes of the Gull*, 1936, and *Highway to Valour*, 1941, the Guild organized two Margaret Duley Short Story contests. And, to celebrate International Women's Year, designated by the

United Nations in 1975, Bernice Morgan, Helen Porter and Geraldine Rubia edited an anthology of women's writing, *From This Place*, 1977. The editors included a selection from Margaret Duley's *Cold Pastoral*, 1939, in this book. At the Canadian Conference of Teachers held in St John's in 1978, Lillian Bouzane examined Duley's novels from a feminist point of view (*Life Sentences*: 7). At the same time Alison Feder was writing a critical analysis of Duley's published works: *Margaret Duley: Newfoundland Novelist a biographical and critical study*, 1983. Roberta Buchanan made Margaret Duley the subject of a monologue which won a prize in the WANL writing competition in 1988. It was included in *Digging into the Hill*, 1990, and was bought by CBC and played on national radio under the title "Speaking Volumes". "Many people believe that it was the attention given to Duley by the Guild, ...that encouraged Griffin House in Toronto to reissue all of Duley's books. A few years later Breakwater Books, St John's, bought the rights to the books from Griffin House" (*Life Sentences*: 8).

During the 1980s, several institutional supports for the literary community were created. The Guild had representatives on the working group which advocated for an Arts Council. This was put in place by the provincial government in 1980. Its critical piece was a granting programme to which the Guild has applied a number of times over the years to help finance its events and programmes.

The Guild, working with other writing groups, Women and Words, and The Thursday Group, began to discuss forming an organization to advocate for writers in the province. This came to fruition at a conference called "Overcoming Isolation" in 1987. The Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador was formed "to create a community and network of communication among writers of Newfoundland and Labrador, to provide advice and assistance to anyone seeking information and knowledge about the literary arts, to encourage and develop public awareness of and appreciation for the work of writers in the province and to enhance the quality of writing in Newfoundland and Labrador through our many services and programs." Guild members were heavily involved in the early days of WANL. Founding committee members of WANL included Lillian Bouzane, Peggy Krachun, Linda Green, Isobel Brown, Roberta Buchanan, and Bernice Morgan.

With the formation of WANL, there was some discussion regarding the value of continuing the Guild. However, the thought of disbanding it was never seriously considered. The enduring commitment of the Guild was, and still is, the monthly workshop where members' writing can be submitted for serious and considered critical review.

The Guild marked its twentieth anniversary with the publication of its second book, *A Way with Words*, 1987. Included in this anthology were forty-three entries written by twenty-five Guild members. By this time the Guild could proudly say: "Guild members have been published locally and nationally in all genres – stage, radio, television, and some have published internationally" (*A Way with Words*: Introduction).

The Guild partnered with other writers to host an ambitious Provincial Writers' Conference in 1987. They were especially mindful of those writers who worked in isolation and found funding for them to travel to St John's. Guild members participated in the National Book Festival, 1988, by giving writing workshops in the schools. And Guild members participated in advocacy: they took action to protest against censorship of literary works in high school text books; they suggested changes to the rules and regulations of the Arts and Letters competition; they advocated for a Writer-in-Residence position at MUN; they participated in the Federal Task Force into Broadcasting held at Gander; they protested against a sales tax on books. Some other initiatives were more difficult and not completed: anthology of children's literature, the publication of Newfoundland plays, and the establishment of a literary magazine.

All the while, the Guild remained steadfast in its belief in the workshop as the basic tool to encourage writing. “Workshops are the lifeblood of the Guild” (Eileen Dicks, *Life Sentences*: 22). In the early years, every workshop began with a business meeting followed by a speaker. Next there were refreshments and then the reading of members’ writing. As time passed, the business part of the meeting was passed over to an Executive, the speakers were less frequent, and the sole focus of the meeting became the members’ writing. The format remains unchanged: the writer is silent while critical comments from others are expressed and only then may the writer respond to those comments. The writer quickly learns to trust his/her peers, to accept their remarks as fair and thoughtful opinions.

Over the years, in addition to monthly workshops, Guild members enjoyed occasional day-long summer writing retreats at members’ homes. In 1979, the members wanted more. They booked White Sails Inn at Eastport for weekend retreats in June and September. These retreats became very popular. The Guild produced a cook book, *Newfoundland Writers’ Cook Book*, 1994, edited by Lillian Bouzane and Georgina Queller, which included the delicious pot luck food favoured by members at the retreats. The Christmas Party became an annual institution – and still is – a time for fun and fellowship and word games and song and recitations.

In 1986 the Guild began to issue a newsletter (in 1997 it became *The Page*). As well as announcements of events, there was a list of members’ news. Here is an example from the Newsletter Summer 1992: Winners in the Arts and Letters competition were Libby Creelman, Shree Ghatage and Peggy Krachun. Geraldine Rubia and Helen Porter were included in Tickle Ace 23. Bernice Morgan had a story published in Pottersfield Portfolio. In 1991 the Guild instituted an annual Honours and Awards Lunch to honour those members who had published or won competitions or awards during the past year.

When the Guild decided to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary with a third anthology, *Life Sentences. 25 Years with the Newfoundland Writers’ Guild*, 1993, there was no shortage of material: ninety-eight entries from sixty-three authors. Among this abundance of poetry and prose were many memoirs of life in the Guild. The Guild also celebrated their anniversary with a performance, “Lyrics and Lilts”, a showcase for reading and reciting their poetry and prose in the informal setting of The Ship pub.

With the passage of time, it was inevitable that Memorials would be noted in the Guild’s records: Cassie Brown, Neil Murray, Vina Horwood, Joan Horwood, Andrew Horwood (*Life Sentences* 1993:51). However, when Eileen Dicks went to a Guild workshop in 1992: “I said to myself, ‘We’ve done it. We have kept the Guild going long enough for a second generation to take over.’” (*Life Sentences*: 56).

THE SECOND GENERATION OF THE NEWFOUNDLAND WRITERS’ GUILD

Through the 1990s, the Guild continued to reach out to the public in a variety of ways, not only in St John’s but beyond. Other, fledgling, writing groups began to contact the Guild for advice as to how they could set up a writing workshop themselves: Gander, Pouch Cove, Ferryland, Eastport . Some writers from around the province wanted to send in their work to the Guild for a critique because they could not travel to the workshops in St John’s. The Guild responded to these requests with enthusiasm.

As encouragement for Guild members to submit their work for publication, the Rejection Slip Lunch was introduced in 1994: “To Make a Silk Purse out of a Sow’s Ear.” The member who had the highest number of rejection slips for the year would be taken out to lunch! This annual event, “... an incentive for

everyone to send out more material”, has become a Guild tradition. The following year, another innovation was put in place – the “Designated” workshop. This allows consideration of longer pieces of writing than are practicable at the usual Guild workshops. Material has to be submitted well ahead of the workshop date for circulation to all members. Since that time, one or two designated workshops have been included in the Guild’s annual workshop series.

In 1996 ten Guild members were invited to participate in the Eastern Edge Gallery’s annual exhibition to celebrate Women’s Day. Each writer was to provide a written response to the visual art of a Newfoundland woman artist of their choice. The outcome was *Signatures*, 1996, a fine volume of poetry, prose and images of art. The following year the gallery put on an exhibit titled “Distractions and Desires.” More than 20 Newfoundland writers, including Guild members, contributed their hand made objects, photography, and paintings, to a display of non-verbal artistry.

The 1997 Cabot 500 celebrations offered an opportunity for the Guild to create “Waterfront Writing Festivals” not only in St John’s but also in Ferryland, Happy Valley Goose Bay and Sheshatshiu. These events, which were funded from a variety of sources, were crowded with readings of poetry, prose, and drama with a mix of story-telling and music and audience participation. For this project, the Guild received funding to hire a Project Manager/Publicist, Amanda Will. The Festivals were intended to increase the public profile of the Guild, and to seek recognition of the Guild as an important link in the development of the Arts in Newfoundland and Labrador. Another activity of Cabot 500 was a radio series on VOWR on Sunday afternoons. Fifteen Guild members took part, each reading from her oeuvre accompanied by music of her choice.

As editor of *The Page*, Georgina Queller remarked: “In the Guild we are all winners. Just by being a member and taking advantage of our workshops, retreats and special celebrations, we grow as writers. Such nourishment for each member’s considerable creative talent, means honours and achievements are bound to follow” (*The Page*: 1997). The achievements of members listed in that issue proves her point and are typical of the Guild’s annual successes. Helen Porter was awarded an Hon D. Litt from Memorial University: “I acclaim before this convocation a teacher, a poet, a portrayer of the culture of Newfoundland; and a politician seeking after equity within our social system” (Oration, Dr William Pryce-Phillips, 1997). Her poems were published in *Newfoundland Quarterly* and the *Antigonish Review*. The special Cabot issue of *Tickle Ace* included work by Bernice Morgan, Trudy Morgan-Cole, Libby Creelman, Janet Fraser, Gerry Rubia, Georgina Queller. Bernice Morgan won the St John’s Players play writing contest. Janet Fraser was accepted at Sage Hill Writing Workshop in Saskatchewan. Gerry Rubia and Lillian Bouzane won in the Arts and Letters competition. Lillian Bouzane did readings on the CBC in “The Arts Tonight”, profiling her novel-in-progress about the life of Mathye Caboto. The Learned Societies met at MUN and in the session of the Canadian Women’s Studies Association the following were invited to read their work: Lillian Bouzane, Roberta Buchanan, Shree Ghatage, Bernice Morgan, Helen Porter. Roberta Buchanan presented a paper on Mina Hubbard at the conference and had her poem “Santhanas” published in *Atlantis* magazine. Janet McNaughton won the IODE Award for her young adult novel *To Dance at the Palais Royale*, 1996, which also was given an Honourable Mention by the Canadian Library Association. Libby Creelman published in *Fiddlehead* and Trudy Morgan-Cole in the *Antigonish Review*. Shree Ghatage’s work was accepted by *Grain*, *Malahat Review*, and the *Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing*. Laura Morry Williams launched her first collection of poetry, *My Many Moons*, 1997.

The Guild’s exciting proposal for Soiree ’99 – a celebration of Newfoundland’s Confederation with Canada – was for “a concert in the hall”. This show would consist of skits, songs, play excerpts, poetry readings and stories read and performed by Guild members. It would link the development of the Guild

with the development of Newfoundland after Confederation. It would be an amateur production but with a hired professional director. However, it became clear that the Guild did not have sufficient resources to complete such a project and the funding was returned to the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council.

The Millennium was the source of inspiration to begin work on the Guild's fourth anthology: *A Charm Against the Pain*, 2006. In this ambitious project, twenty-nine writers were represented in eighty-one entries. The book included writers both new to the craft and those with enviable experience. The book was well appreciated and received national reviews.

With the new century came new opportunities for Guild writers to display their literary output. In 2001 WANL partnered with the City of St John's to support METRO VERSE – poetry on the buses. The poetry was displayed both inside the bus and on its exterior. Helen Porter, Lilian Bouzane, Roberta Buchanan, Janet McNaughton and others published METRO VERSE. In 2006 the City of John's initiated the position of a Poet Laureate. Which of the Guild members will be the first to fill this role?

In 2009 the SPARKS Literary Festival was founded by poet and professor Mary Dalton. It is now organized by the English Department at MUN with support from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Dalton refers to SPARKS as a "word spree" which showcases Newfoundland and Labrador writers. Guild members have read from their writings at this event.

The Guild celebrated its fortieth anniversary in April 2008 with a civic luncheon and a reception at Government House. It also treated itself to its second "Lyrics and Lilts", an afternoon of words and music and performance at the Ship pub. Another 40th anniversary project was a "Word Fest". This event was held in the coach house at Commissariat House. Members read from their works to the public and their books were displayed for sale.

There was no pause in the Guild's creative energy. The Guild sought funding to honour the centenary of Grace Butt (1909-2005): "Playwright, Author, Columnist, and Founder of St John's Players." Grace and her colleagues were intent on fostering the writing and production of plays and the creation of drama groups. Her first full length play, *The Road to Melton*, 1947, was about a politician campaigning in rural Newfoundland. In 1951 she served on the committee which established the provincial Arts and Letters Competition. Her *Part of the Main* was internationally recognized and performed at the Dublin Drama Festival in 1969. She wrote plays for stage, for radio, and for television; she wrote documentaries and commissioned works. Much of her writing was a commentary on Newfoundland political life and culture and for it she received many awards including an Hon DLitt from Memorial University in 1981.

The Guild held two events in honour of Grace Butt. "*A Touch of Grace*" was performed in March 2008, International Women's Day. Members of the Guild read from Grace Butt's works. A second event, "*An Evening with Grace*" took place on March 8, 2009. This "insightful and moving" play was written by, and featured, actor Ruth Lawrence. A special issue of *The Page*, February, 2009, was devoted to a profile of Grace's career and to the memoirs of several members of the Guild who had known her.

The Guild honoured Grace Butt in another way. They ordered a bookcase to be made and presented it to the Agnes Cowan Hostel in memory of Grace. Every year, the Guild contributes more books by Newfoundland authors to the hostel to fill this bookcase.

With the new century came websites, Facebook, blogs and e-publishing. Guild members joined the digital revolution for their research, writing, and publishing. However, the Guild continued to enjoy face-to-face engagements with the public. "Word Fests" in 2008, 2009, and 2010 took place at a number of

locations: Commissariat House, Bianca's Restaurant, Eastport Library, Newman Wine Vaults, Provincial Historic Sites, Eastport. A further outreach was the strengthening bond between the Guild and the Eastport Library and Eastport writers during the Guild's twice annual weekend retreats there.

In 2014 more than 100 writers and well-wishers gathered at the A C Hunter Library to honour Helen Fogwill Porter's lifelong contribution to literature in Newfoundland and Labrador. "A Tribute to Helen Porter" was hosted by writer Lisa Moore. Another exciting event was the decision by the City of St John's to name a bridge for Helen – it leads from Water Street West to the Southside. This bridge reminds us of Helen's classic novel, *Below the Bridge*, 1979.

50 YEARS OF ACHIEVEMENT

Over the half century of the Guild's life many of its members have had their work recognized across a wide range of honours and awards: provincial Artist of the Year, Hon D Litt (Memorial University of Newfoundland), Order of Newfoundland, and Order of Canada. Listed in these honours are Guild members Percy Janes, Harold Horwood, Grace Butt, Paul O'Neill, Rae Perlin, Anne Hart, Helen Porter, Bernice Morgan, Melba Rabinowitz.

Guild members have been nominated, short listed, or won a variety of literary honours. These include the Dublin Impac Award, Lillian Bouzane, Bernice Morgan; the Gabriel International Award, Lillian Bouzane; the Ann Connor Brimmer Award for Children's Literature in Atlantic Canada, Janet McNaughton.

Some Guild members who have used their writing skills to advance their work in their careers have been recognized with Citizen of the Year Awards: Paul O'Neill, for his books about the history of St John's, and Geraldine Chafe Rubia, for her advocacy of accessibility. Melba Rabinowitz has been honoured for her remarkable work in the improvements of early childhood education by the Vanier Institute, Health Canada, and the YMCA Woman of Distinction Award.

THE THIRD GENERATION OF THE WRITERS' GUILD

Over the past fifty years, members have written poetry and prose, fiction, non fiction, creative non-fiction, and memoirs. They have had their work published as books and in anthologies, journals and magazines. They have written plays and radio scripts. They have researched documentaries and created museum texts. They have become editors and publishers and journalists. By now, 2018, they have adapted to the digital age for research, for publishing, for linking with other writers' blogs and online publications.

However, the Guild remains true to its roots: the fostering of writing, the encouragement to publish, and the pleasure of a common interest in writing among its members. The monthly workshop remains the absolute definition of the Guild. It is why new members join and why older members stay. This is where the craft of writing is honed among the members themselves in open discussion with honest critique and steady encouragement.

Members today are grateful to those who founded the Guild and established the practice of workshops as a way to encourage writing and mentoring.

“When casting around for answers to explain what on the surface may appear to be a recent flourishing of our literature, we need look no further than the Newfoundland Writers’ Guild, whose contributions to the prose and poetry of our province has been as stalwart and generous as it has been significant” (Joan Clark, *A Charm Against the Pain*, Introduction, xviii).

What is on the horizon for the third generation of the Newfoundland Writers’ Guild? Members will continue with their writing, of course. It is what they do.

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* The archive of the Newfoundland Writers’ Guild is deposited with the Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

*See www.newfoundlandwritersguild.com for a list of books authored by Guild members, Memorials, and current information about Guild membership and activities

* We say “thank you” to those members who have contributed to the writing of this history. They have lent archival material, given us their memories, and offered editorial comment.

Written by Jo Shawyer and Hilda Murray, 2018

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