



NEWFOUNDLAND WRITERS' GUILD

P.O. Box 1133 – St. John's
Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada A1C 5M5

THE PAGE

February 2009

Special Issue to Mark the Centenary of Grace Butt



Grace Butt - Photo by Paula Butt

Editorial

Since our last issue we have been gearing up for the celebration of the Grace Butt Centenary on her birthday March 8th, which coincides with

International Women's Day, much to her delight. Grace died in 2005, at the age of 94. If she had only lived six years longer she would have been able to enjoy the evocation of her life and work in *A Touch of Grace*, in the Basement Theatre of the Arts & Culture Centre, where some of her own plays had been performed. In the true spirit of Grace, who dedicated so much of her life to the betterment of the arts, tickets are free, but must be obtained in advance from the Arts & Culture Box Office.

In January we had a play reading of Grace's appropriately titled *Winter Scene*, hosted by Marilyn Porter, and featuring a huge winter storm (only on the stage, fortunately). We appreciated Marilyn's blazing log fire. The theme of the play was typical of Butt's work: set mainly in an outport kitchen, where the old rural values of community and sharing predominate, a young couple struggles to define their future. Will the ambitious young man take a city job at the Universal Loan Company and get the snazzy car he yearns for, or will he devote his life to community development in the North? The former tempts him, while his idealistic teacher fiancée wants the latter.

Since then we have been focused on rehearsals of *A Touch of Grace*, under the able direction of Agnes Walsh, dramaturge and Poet Laureate of the City of St John's. The alternation between memories of Grace by those who knew her, and readings from her work, should provide an informative and enjoyable evening. Bobbie Brennan and Sheilah Roberts will provide music.

Every year the Guild makes a donation of books published by our members in the preceding year to the Agnes Cowan Hostel at the Health Sciences Centre. Last year all the books were stolen. There was some debate as to whether we should continue; it was decided we should. We were delighted that people at the hostel were so interested in reading our books that they took them away with them! A high compliment to the authors. Accordingly in December, Joan Scott, Don Steele and myself went to the hostel. We showed our books in the downstairs sitting room, and Joan made a short speech. A little boy soon approached and happily took Paul O'Neill's *When Dog Became a Friend*. Don took photos of the occasion. The bookcase we had donated for our books was nowhere to be seen, so Joan put them in a tall shabby bookcase containing rather worn-looking books. Joan did go back later, and found our bookcase in the sitting room upstairs.

Roberta Buchanan, with Joan Scott and Esther Brown.

Memories of Grace Butt ...

I met Grace a few times, early on when I joined the Guild. She was very friendly. Then she moved to Corner Brook. I got to know her daughter Judy a bit, and she was fun too. I thought Grace was an excellent writer

and a very warm and interesting woman. It was sad when she lost her sight ... that's why she moved away I guess, to be with her daughter who looked after her.

Judy Gibson

I realize how lucky I was to know Grace and how every conversation I had with her and every letter I received from her was chock full of grand ideas that made my life and my writing life richer. Grace spent two periods of time away from St John's while I knew her, in Corner Brook and Halifax. Both times she was with her daughter Judy. Grace and I corresponded on both occasions. From three paragraphs from a letter I wrote to her, in November 1992, you can get some idea of the content of her letters to me, and how stimulating they were:

Thank you for the story of Hildegard von Bingen. Yes, I know her work, she was a genius, had to be to have her work survive. And worthy of a long and wonderful poem.

I am very interested in the "thread descending to the pregnant woman" in that painting. It can be anything really: the mind in accord with "the Other", supernatural grace, the descent of the Holy Spirit; all ideas capable of firing the imagination. I've never seen the painting. Of course you could write a great poem about that subject much better than I. You have the depth.

And yes, I know Leonard Cohen's poem on Joan of Arc but the definitive Joan of Arc Poem was written, I think, by the nineteenth century French poet Charles Peguy and I rather resented Cohen for writing his and not in some way recognizing Peguy. But of course that may be mean spirited on my part. I just got up from the computer to quote a bit of the Peguy poem but realized I didn't have the right book.

Lillian Bouzane

I once went to Grace's apartment in Elizabeth Towers to interview her for an article on Feminist Theatre in Newfoundland for the *Canadian Theatre Review*. She seemed to me a rather august presence, with her elegantly-coiffed hair and pearls. I was interested in her play *Mom*, part of her *Faces of Women*, directed by Barbara Barrett and performed in the Basement Theatre. *Mom* never utters a word throughout the play - an effective theatrical device. It is breakfast time: *Mom* silently serves her husband and her squabbling children. Each makes demands on her. Husband wants her to find his shirt; Susan needs a button sewn on her jacket; Gordie has lost his hockey glove. They talk to each other, but not to her, unless they want something. "Those who are benefiting by her services don't realize it for a minute," Grace commented. When I asked her if she defined herself as a feminist, she replied that she was not an activist because she felt it would impair her "objectivity" as a dramatist; but she was interested in "the development and progress of women."

Grace Butt's view of the writer:

"She never saw her writing as work. Work is what she does, housework, library etc., a writer is what she is, her state of being." - Fran Baird Innes, "Portrait of a Playwright," *Newfoundland Lifestyle*, 1992; reprinted in *Life Sentences: 25 Years with the Newfoundland Writers' Guild*, edited by Peggy Smith Krachun, 1993.

"If I'm to be remembered I think it would be as somebody who wanted to take risks, somebody who felt you have to begin if you think you're going to get somewhere; you have to begin if you're ever going to arrive." - Interview with Bruce Porter, *TickleAce*, No.35. 1998.



The young Grace Butt, ca 1940

Photo from the Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives, MUN.

GRACE BUTT'S CAREER: A TIMELINE

1909 – March 8 (now IWD): Born Grace Hue at Brigus.

1919 – Around this date Butt was taken to see the visiting English actors at the Casino Theatre. Having moved to St John's, she attended the Methodist College on Long's Hill, then to Memorial College, and Normal School for a year of teacher training before joining the staff at Holloway School.

1933 – Aged 24, she married Albert Boyd (Bert) Butt, and as a result, lost her job. Soon after she began writing an Arts column in *The Daily News*, with reviews of books, films, art and music.

1937 – Formed The St John's Players – the first little theatre company – serving as president, playwright and director.

1938 – Judith, the first of her two daughters, was born.

1945 – The St John's Players performed Grace's first full-length play, *The Road through Melton*, about a politician campaigning in rural Newfoundland. Grace courageously used local subjects including political conflict. Packed houses greeted the play and *The Daily News* reviewed it favourably. Fran Baird Innes describes this year as "the beginning of the end of 15 years of Commission Government," a period when, Butt says, "No one was vocal about politics, which is what my play is about." Her husband, Bert Butt, was personal assistant to Commissioner Thomas Lodge, and later to Sir Wilfred Woods, and then was elected to the National Convention whose mandate was to decide Newfoundland's future.

1947 – *True Newfoundlanders*, radio play to celebrate Cabot's centenary.

1948 – Essay, "Poets and Politicians," published in *The Cap and Gown*, the student yearbook of Memorial University College.

1949 – Confederation with Canada, still controversial 60 years later. Her plays, *Good Bye, Your Excellency* and *The Confederate* were written using material from this conflict.

1950 – Grace set up a planning committee to organize the first Regional Drama Festival, and served on another committee to set up the valuable and long-lived Government sponsored annual Arts and Letters Competition.

© 1953 – Grace began her nearly 2 decades service as a full time librarian, first at the Gosling Library and later at the Provincial Reference Library.

1964 – Grace was honoured at the London, Ontario, National Playwriting Seminar for *New Lands*. She also formed the Newfoundland branch of the Canadian Authors Association (CAA).

1968 – The Newfoundland Writers' Guild emerged from the CAA. Grace was later made an Honorary Life Member.

1968 – TV documentary *The Great Birds*; commissioned to write other TV documentaries, such as *Heart's Content*.

1969 – Grace's play, *Part of the Main*, won first prize over 87 other entries at the Dublin Theatre Festival. Butt traveled to Ireland, to see the performance at the Abbey Theatre.

1973 – Grace retired from her position in the Provincial Reference Library. This was the beginning of a very productive period, remembered by Grace for her hope that the Women's Movement might bring changes in the world for women.

1975 – Her trilogy of plays under the title of *To Toslow We'll Go*, (*North Harbour*, *Good Bye, Your Excellency* and *Part of the Main*) was produced and toured, to celebrate 25 years of Confederation.

1976 – *The Fall of Responsible Government*, radio documentary, part of the series *The Bush and the Salon*.

1980 – Her radio drama, *The People's House* was nominated for an ACTRA award. The stage play, *Wheel in the Middle of a Wheel* won the Best Canadian Play Award at the Newfoundland and Labrador Drama Festival.

1981 – Memorial University conferred upon Grace Butt the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters.

1983 – A trilogy of plays – *North Harbour*, *Goodbye, Your Excellency* (a sarcastic farewell to Commission Government) and *Part of the Main* were published in *To Toslow We'll Go*.

1984 – She published *an ear for a fear*, a collection of poetry and drama.

1986 – the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council (NLAC) presented Grace Butt with the Lydia Campbell Writing Award.

1987 – The St John's Players celebrated their fiftieth anniversary by performing Grace's play, *The Mayor's Wife*. *Point Blank*, poetry, was published with Lillian Bouzane. At a weekend meeting Grace proposed the motion that resulted in the formation of WANL, the Writers Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador.

1988 – Husband Bert Butt died after a long illness.

1990 – Grace was 81. Lillian Bouzane arranged for Grace to sign a grant application for publication, which resulted in *Persons*, published by Harry Cuff.

1992 – Fran Baird Innes’s biographical article about Grace Butt, “Portrait of a Playwright,” was published in *Newfoundland Lifestyle* magazine.

1993 – At 84 years old, Grace was suffering from failing eyesight.

2001 – Grace died at 92 years of age.

(Joan Scott, with information from Fran Baird Innes, Lillian Bouzane, and Centre for Newfoundland Study Archives.)

The Grace Butt CBC Tape

Agnes Walsh, Joan Scott and Esther Brown went to hear a tape of Grace Butt, an interview by Ray Bellew, played by Christine Davies, Associate Producer, Music Library and Archives, CBC Radio,

Ray Bellew asked Grace what her interests were and she replied she was interested in every aspect of life. She listed all the kinds of writing she had done: her newspaper arts column, poetry, and plays. She said she felt a compulsion to write. She spent her early life in outports and wrote about that, but was not all she wrote about. *Part of the Main* was her major success, winning first prize at an international competition in Dublin. She listed many other awards, one for *From This Place*, some in the Provincial Arts and Letters Competition. At the time of the interview, her latest publication was *an ear for a fear*, containing three plays and *Faces of Women*, which she said was an unconventional play, and as such a good thing. (She was not shy). She said the act of writing demanded much emotional energy.

Ray asked her to read a poem, and she read, “Do Not Use the Word Passion,” from *Point Blank*. She read the poem brilliantly. Someone observed, if you want to know who she was, read that poem. In the poem, her mentor, a university professor, advises her not to use the word passion, while protesting passionately of needing to be hypocritical himself to advance his career. An old man, after leading a full life takes to alcohol to ease the pain of getting old. A young delinquent is angry because poverty has shut him out of consumer society. Lastly, a good wife flees from her orderly household into the arms of a man who is scruffy yet wants her wholeheartedly. Grace feels for all of these and asserts that she will write about them, passionately.

Asked if her work has a message, Grace replied that she has written about political issues, and has been accused of being Anti-Confederate, but her intention was to examine the issue. All writing is moralistic. Was she ever discouraged? She laughed and said that formerly there was very little feedback for a writer in Newfoundland, but that now there is lots. Had she ever had writer's block? She said writers' block was something with deep roots and that in her case all she could do was wait and it would lift.

The audience at the March 8, 2009, celebration, *A Touch of Grace*, will hear Grace's reading of "Do Not Use the Word Passion."

Joan Scott

Bernice Morgan,

- March 6 - 9 As part of "The March Hare" read from *Cloud of Bone* in Gander and Corner Brook.
- May 12 Short-listed, with David Adams Richard and Don Hanna (who won) for The Thomas Head Raddal Atlantic Fiction Award. Did reading at Presentation Ceremony in Alderney Theatre, Dartmouth, NS.
- May 13 Reading in Halifax at Keshan-Goodman Library.
- May 15 WANL Short Listed Writers, reading at The Studio, Water St., St. John's, NL.
- May 27 Presented with The Newfoundland and Labrador Fiction Award at Government House and did reading. This award is now sponsored by Downhome Magazine.
- June 13 - 15 At Northwords Festival in Yellowknife, NWT, did two readings and took part in panel discussion.
- July 12 Festival By The Marsh in Sackville, NB - Reading at Owen's Art Gallery.
- July 19 Reading at Guild's Wordfest at the Commissariat House, St. John's, NL.
- July 26 Port Midway Readers' Series in Nova Scotia, read at the Old Meeting House.
- Aug. 2 Reading at Cape St. Mary's Interpretation Centre.

Aug. 9 Reading at the Random Passage film site, Trinity Bay, NL.

Aug. 11 - 14 Attended Festival of the Written Arts and read at Rockwood Centre in Sechelt, BC

Aug. 31 Read at Ferryland Lighthouse, sponsored by WANL.

Sept. 3 - 6 Read at Archaeology Conference, Bird Cove and Beyond at Bird Cove on the Northern Peninsula.

Sept. 27 Read at Fishers Loft in Trinity, Trinity Bay, NL.

Oct. 7 & 9 At Boyd's Cove Beothuk Centre presented for two school groups and gave community reading at night.

Nov. 19 Reading at The Rooms in St. John's, NL.

Dec. 1 Was presented with the 2008 Heritage and History Book Award - sponsored by Historic Sites Association - and did a reading at The Ship.

Cathy Daley:

In a program sponsored by WANL for emerging writers/poets, Cathy is pleased to have the opportunity of a mentorship for a 5-month period to further develop her poetry. Her mentor is "Bookninja" George Morgan.

Janice Wells:

Her book *Frank Moores; The Time of His Life* sold out in early December and had a second printing in January. Janice is expecting to have an opportunity to challenge The Fifth Estate on national television sometime in early April.

Jo Sawyer:

In her fiction life, the following book came out in December, 2008:

TWENTY-DOLLAR REWARD Scholastic Canada.

Sheilah Roberts:

Sheilah won a grant to work with Sara Tilley's theatre company, She Said Yes!, to work on a play she wrote about a divorce, titled "Up The Union."

Joan Scott:

Joan contributed to a Planned Parenthood fundraising cookbook. Recipes could be some or all of the following: - delicious, sex-positive, erotic, and include a

safe sex tip. Joan wrote a version of a favourite tangy Balinese soup recipe in the appropriate style, and it was published in *Tantalizing Tastes*, available for \$10.00 from Joan or Planned Parenthood. This is soup redolent of the island of Bali, where, we are told, people really know how to live.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND FORTHCOMING EVENTS:

- **Awards and Honours Brunch:** Will be on 5 April. Please send list of publications, honours and awards to Georgina Queller, chair, Awards & Honours Committee: gqueller@nl.rogers.com

- **Banquet Refund:** If you have not yet received your \$20.00 refund for the Christmas Gala Banquet, please contact Georgina Queller.

- **Eastport Library Donations:** We will be taking donations of books for the Eastport Library to Eastport in June. Children's books are particularly welcome, but the children do not like marked up or shabby books.

- **The Black Book**, an important record of our workshops, has gone missing. If anyone has it, please tell Joan Scott.

Want to be on the radio? Nicholas Belanger is looking for fiction, non-fiction or poetry for his show, Cash City Now Open, Tuesdays 8.00-10.00 am, on CHMR Radio (MUN student radio).

- 20-25 minutes ideal length.
- Email: storytelling@nf.sympatico.ca

MARK THESE ON YOUR CALENDAR:

- Sunday 8 March: *A TOUCH OF GRACE*, the Guild's celebration of the centenary of Grace Butt's Birth, at the Basement Theatre, Arts & Culture Centre, 8.00 p.m. Tickets are free, but must be picked up at the Box Office in advance, due to space limitations. Please note: the Box Office closes at 7.30 on Sunday. Parking is at a premium since the Miss Newfoundland Contest will be in the main auditorium upstairs. Come early!

- Sunday 15 March: Guild workshop, Sobey's Community Room, Merrymeeting Road, 2.00-5.00 p.m.

- **Library Readings:** 7.00 A.C. Hunter Library, Arts & Culture Centre; light refreshments: Wednesday 18 March: Janice Wells reads from her biography of Frank Moores.

Wednesday 18 April: Tom Badcock.

Wednesday 20 May: Gerry Rubia.

- Sunday 5 April: **Honours and Awards Brunch** place & time tba.
- Wednesday 29 April: **Guild Workshop**, 7.00-10.00 pm, Sobey's Community Room, Merrymeeting Road.

- Wednesday 27 May: Guild **Designated Workshop**, 7.00-10.00, Sobey's Community Room, Merrymeeting Road. Submissions from 2 writers are circulated in advance for detailed discussion.
- Friday 26 June - Monday 29 June: **Eastport June Writers' Retreat**. To book a room at the Inn, contact Georgina Queller. Cabins must be booked in advance, with down payment. Phone Julia Squires, White Sails Cabins, 709-677-3400.

**Lily Bursey, Joan Scott and Roberta Buchanan
put this newsletter together.**