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Memorial Address for Malcolm MacKenzie Ross

By Mary B. McGillivray

I have been invited by Julie Ross to talk for a while about Malcolm Ross's accomplishments. A couple of years ago I was privileged to be able to speak about Dr. Ross in his presence on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday. Today I miss, as we all do, what I then called his "shining presence." But I believe in the same Spirit as did Malcolm Ross, and that belief assures me that he is with us now. I don't really need to tell anyone here what a remarkable, extraordinary man he was—but I'm going to try.

From early in his life in Fredericton, New Brunswick, where he and his sister Margaret were born and brought up, he showed himself to be a scholar, a visionary, and a man who knew his mind. Because of his refusal to do the compulsory military training required of an Honours student at UNB in the thirties, he was nearly denied his first degree. He stood his ground; the University Senators held a hasty meeting, and the rules were changed so that this remarkable young man could graduate. An astonishing demonstration of his sense of appropriate duty. He knew his mind and saw his path.

He went to the University of Toronto for an M.A. in 1933, where he discovered his lifelong passion for Milton under the tutelage of A.S.P. Woodhouse, a man whose influence Ross generously acknowledged at every opportunity. In Toronto he was a regular visitor at the home of his fellow Fredericktonian, Sir Charles G.D. Roberts. Roberts introduced Ross to the cultural life of Toronto in the thirties—and Roberts also vetted some of the young Malcolm's poetry. For in those days, Ross's sense of place, a sense that in some ways would shape all of the large accomplishments of his later career, found expression in lyric poems. Some of these were published in literary journals, such as *The Canadian Forum*. The poems are full of a keen passion for life—and a keen passion for the Maritimes.

But at this stage of his life, the lure of the seventeenth century and its fascinating intersection of art, politics, and theology drew him to leave his poetry and his beloved Maritimes behind for further scholarship. He married Lois Natalie Hall of Toronto in 1938 and went with her to Cornell in 1939, where he studied Milton and his era. He received his Ph.D. there in 1941. In the years between the MA and the PhD he taught for brief periods

in several places—among them his alma mater UNB, and, remarkably, the University of Canton in China—a term that ended abruptly when revolutionary soldiers ousted foreigners, Ross included.

Early in World War II, he was teaching at Indiana University and longing to return home—typically for the scholar that he was, it was a book that convinced him to act—Donald Creighton's *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence*. The book awoke in him an excited sense of belonging—he and Lois returned immediately to Canada where he tried to enlist. Rejected by the forces for medical reasons, he turned his gaze to the broader national war effort. He contacted John Grierson of the National Film Board in Ottawa, and after an interview that involved an hour or more of discussion about Milton and the Puritan revolution, he was hired. Put in charge of distribution of war effort documentaries such as *Canada Carries On* and *World in Action*, Ross travelled the country setting up screenings in church basements and halls all across the nation. By War's end, still only in his thirties, he was director of the whole national unit for distribution of documentaries, and he was travelling to New York and Chicago for the Board, in charge of a budget of over a million dollars and of a staff of over two hundred.

The stint with the National Film Board introduced Ross to the vastness and diversity that is the Canada he eventually introduced to itself. He met farmers and artists, writers and business people. He met the Slavs of the Prairies and the Jews of Winnipeg, the Manitoba Icelanders and the British Columbia Chinese. He began to see the country whole and in parts, and his imagination was fired by it.

When the war was over Ross refused an offer to return to Cornell in order to pursue his nascent vision of Canada. He accepted a post at the University of Manitoba, where he shared his imaginative vision of the power of the arts with a group of young people who would go on to shape much of what we know as Canadian culture in the twentieth century.

In his first classes at Manitoba were Margaret Laurence, Adele Wiseman, Patricia Blondel, Jack Ludwig, eventual National Film Board Film Commissioner Hugo MacPherson, the actor Douglas Rain, the film-maker Roman Kroiter, and the artist William Kurelek. All have acknowledged their deep dept to Ross as an inspirational and encouraging teacher and mentor. In response to creative and critical writers alike, Ross was always generous with his time and the investment of his keen intellect; Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman were the first among many to trust in the clarity of Malcolm Ross's vision. In her years at Trent, Margaret Laurence often told students that Ross was "a giant" of a man.

All through the early years of his academic career, Ross had maintained a fine scholarly life of his own. He published *Milton's Royalism* in 1943, and as the result of a Guggenheim Fellowship he spent at Harvard and at the Huntington Library in 1949-50, he published *Poetry and Dogma* in 1954. It is humbling to think that some fifty years later, Milton scholars consider his work in that field to be seminal. (In the same year, 1954, Ross compiled and edited an important group of essays on Canada, *Our Sense of Identity.* In 1958 he edited a book on the creative arts in Canada. Few scholars can claim his breadth and depth of vision.)

He joined Queen's University in 1950, editing the *Queen's Quarterly* from 1953-1956, and serving as Department Head from 1957-1962. At the *Quarterly* he generously used his position for a double benefit: he revitalized the journal, and he actively pursued gifted young writers, encouraging them to submit their works, offering criticism and publishing those he thought best. Ross published the early works of many writers who went on to become part of our national fabric: Laurence, of course, Wiseman, Sheila Watson, and Alice Munro.

While at Queen's Ross effectively delivered Canadian literature to Canadians by conceiving of and executing one of his most brilliant visions: the New Canadian Library. It is hard to realize now, when as a result in large part of Ross's efforts, Canadian literature is well established both at home and abroad, but in the early 1950s, when Ross wanted to teach a course featuring Canada's own writers, there were not enough books in print to offer a course. Enlisting the help and support of a former student of the post-war period, Jack McClelland, Ross was able to make the series a reality. In keeping with his own complex vision of Canadian-ness, he saw to it that the series encompassed writers of diverse ethnic heritage and, in translation, diverse languages. The New Canadian Library was an idea whose time had come—but it was Malcolm Ross's idea, Malcolm Ross's vision, and his passionate commitment to embody that vision that made it happen. As a direct or indirect result of Ross's impact on literary life in this country through the New Canadian Library, generations of writers from the 1960s onward found their audience. More than any other figure in twentieth-century Canada, Ross nurtured, fostered, and created our literature. In a sense, Ross's vision awoke the country to itself.

At the University of Toronto as Dean of Arts and Acting Provost of Trinity College in the mid-1960s, Ross continued to create an audience for writers, helping establish Writers-in-Residence, helping create councils for the arts.

At Dalhousie, to which Ross came in 1967, longing to return to teaching and to his well-loved Maritimes, he threw himself with his characteristic energy into all facets of the University. Continuing his editorship of the New Canadian Library until 1982, he simultaneously helped establish a sustainable cultural life here and across the country. He planned programs of music, dance and drama; he helped establish the Dalhousie Art Gallery, the concert hall, and the theatre. He served on numerous important ecumenical committees for the Church. He served on the Arts Advisory Panel for the Canada Council and on the Board of the National Library. He was President of the Humanities Division of the Royal Society. In 1986 he published a collection of his thoughtful and provocative essays under the title *The Impossible Sum of our Traditions*.

A catalogue of the many awards he modestly accepted is almost too dense to embark on: he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society in his early 'forties; in his seventies he was Visiting Professor at the University of Edinburgh. He was awarded eleven honorary doctorates at universities across the country and abroad. He was awarded the Lorne Pierce Medal of the Royal Society for distinguished contribution to the arts. He was made an Officer of the Order of Canada. Just this year he was awarded the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal in recognition of his significance to Nova Scotia and to Canada.

So—Malcolm Ross was a poet. Malcolm Ross was a scholar: a Miltonist, a Victorianist, and a Canadianist. He was an editor of talent and vision. He was a cultural force, not just a patron of the arts but one of the arts' nurturers and protectors. He was a true and a great Canadian. More than anyone, he gave us a sense of *place*. Yet none of this conveys the essence of the man. He was also a man with a keen sense of social justice. He could be a caustic social critic. He had a lively sense of humour and an engaging bark of a laugh. He loved sports—especially baseball. Perhaps most important in my life, and in the lives of many people here, Malcolm Ross was a gifted teacher, a supporter, a wise counsellor, and a mentor.

It was a strange experience for me in preparing these remarks not to be able to pick up the phone and find Malcolm Ross's incisive presence at the other end of the line, helping me untangle knots and get to the core of the matter.

My own lifelong relationship with Dr. Ross began nearly thirty years ago when I was a student in his undergraduate Victorian literature course at Dalhousie. In that class I joined the generations of student whom he inspired, whom he nurtured, and whom he guided. We loved and feared him—his energy, his intelligence, his piercing blue gaze that wouldn't let

us settle for the glib or easy answer. To encounter literature with Dr. Ross was to encounter as well philosophy, art, and even theology, for Ross believed in what he has called "the holiness of beauty." Ross's classes nearly burst with the passion for ideas. He would patrol the hall outside his class, hurrying us in, eager to begin. Before long, we were as eager as he. And we were not allowed to turn away from what in one of his essays Ross called "the dread questions"—the dark shape of violence, hatred, doubt and despair that are as much a part of literature—and of life—as are the celebration of the beautiful or the good. Ross knew that not only the light, but also the dark must be faced. His gifts to all of his students, although we did not really know it, were the tools with which to face it.

It is perhaps for his generosity of intellect and of spirit that I most treasure Dr. Ross. Our learning from him did not stop at the classroom door, as all of us here know. For decades, Ross would sit of a morning in the Students' Union for coffee, encouraging students to join him for talk of philosophy, poetry—and baseball. The Ross home, thanks to Mrs. Ross and later to the Ross's daughter, Julie, became a haven for generations of students from Winnipeg, Kingston, Toronto and finally Halifax, a haven where lively thought and debate were fostered and encouraged. My own conversations with Dr. Ross continued over decades—first in person when I went on to do my Master's degree under his supervision, then, when he sent me along to Queen's for doctoral study, by a copious correspondence with which I, lacking Ross's stupendous energy, never could keep up. When I returned to Nova Scotia twenty years ago, our face-to-face conversations resumed, first over frequent lunches in the Faculty Club, then at the Ross home. When pressures of term prevented travel, Ross was always available for a talk on the phone. (I shall keenly miss this.) I know I share with everyone here the wonderful experience of Ross's loving kindness, of his personal support, of his lively and comical sense of irony, of his often fatherly concern. Once you were lucky enough to find Malcolm Ross, *he* never lost sight of *you* in thought, or—and this, he would say, is important—in prayer.

Over the years, our conversations became less about life's intellectual journey and more about its spiritual one. And here, I think, is where the key to this great man lies. The life of the intellect and the life of the spirit in him were and are utterly intertwined. I once called Dr. Ross a scholar visionary. In this place, on this day, I want to say that Ross was as much a visionary in the broad sense of the metaphysical as ever he was in the physical world he knew to be so utterly and unknowably penetrated by the spiritual. Ross wrote on more than one occasion of "the tension between the

glory of things and the dark, imponderable mystery of mortality," a dark mystery which is nonetheless pondered by means of a mystery equally enduring—the mystery of faith and hope.

This faith, this hope, is what made Ross the man he was—the profound sense underlying his essential idealism, of "the hidden unifying force behind all things, forming and informing everything." Early in his life Ross experienced what Matthew Arnold called "the spark from heaven," "the heaven-sent moment," and that vision, a vision of the living Spirit at the core of our existence, never left him. He raised families, communities and countries because of it. Because of it, he grew to be the generous and magnificent soul we all came to know, to honour, and to love. Because of it, we thought he would always be with us. And he will.