

## **A “Miscellany of Discrete Amusements”: Brian Bartlett’s *All Manner of Tackle: Living with Poetry***

Bartlett, Brian. *All Manner of Tackle: Living with Poetry*. Windsor: Palimpsest Press, 2017. 303 pp.

In his Foreword to *The Essential James Reaney*, Brian Bartlett recalls Earle Birney’s first impression of the poet who, in the late 1940s, was already well on his way to becoming the father of the Southwestern Ontario Gothic: “a small packet of firecrackers set alight, he went sizzling and leaping mischievously from one guest to another, an excited child popping adult questions, bounding into the kitchen and back to the hall, and continually exploring with ideas, images, and emotions” (Birney qtd. in Bartlett 164). *All Manner of Tackle: Living with Poetry* makes a similar first impression, as Bartlett’s selected prose is an energetic miscellany that assembles more than three decades of essays, columns, and reviews from one of Atlantic Canada’s most accomplished poets.

The aim of the volume as a whole, as Bartlett outlines in his Introduction, is to present a literary criticism that is void of antagonism and that privileges instead the appreciative and the celebratory. “The idea that sympathetic enthusiasms are vapid or untested without the presence of standards-bearing expressions of disillusionment,” he writes, “strikes me as too proscriptive. We need different approaches and tones,” he continues, “different ways of being a poetry commentator” (n.p.). These “different ways” are evident from the outset, as the book’s opening section begins with an extended, meditative essay on the issue of naming and nature in the poetry of P.K. Page, only then to shift into a series of journal entries about the place of literature in popular culture—full marks to Bartlett for reminding us that the director of music programming at MuchMusic once hailed poetry as “the intellectual fast food of the ‘90s” (42)—after which Bartlett relocates the reader to the grand opening of the Sheraton Casino in Halifax, which he describes as “a world where language is used sloppily and hypocritically” (58). This cycling through of perspectives and personas continues through the book, as Bartlett is, by

turns, a literary journalist, scholar, diarist, columnist, and documentarian of contemporary events.

Even as *All Manner of Tackle* shifts through these various prose forms, the presiding demeanour is that of the attentive reader who wishes to slow down where the critical strides of others would lengthen, most often in hopes of unearthing the hidden qualities that govern a particular poem's appeal. As Bartlett establishes near the outset of the volume, the precise nature of his attraction to poetry does not hinge on overt statements of social and political intent, the various manifestations of which have, in the intervening years since the first essays in this collection were written, become a hallmark of contemporary poetry. Instead, Bartlett defines poetry as "a thing-of-words to be experienced and re-experienced for its sounds, its rhythms, its dartings of feeling and thought, rather than only for its extractable meanings" (42). This definition would likely leave a whole host of current graduate students scratching their heads, uncertain of how to approach a poem as an object of interest in itself, much less as a source of reoccurring delight. And yet, as the volume progresses, what becomes clear is that Bartlett's appreciation for the intricacies of a well written poem extends beyond the purely aesthetic. A poem is, for Bartlett, an indication that the responsible use of language is still possible in an age where words are so callously misused, and so frequently at the expense of the vulnerable. Whether addressing gamblers caught in the cycles of spectacle that confuse and ensnare, or working through the various ways in which a name too carelessly given can serve as a "straight jacket" or "a prison cell," the theme of confinement announces itself subtly throughout *All Manner of Tackle*.

In "A Long Fall for Poetry," for instance, Bartlett describes how the writing group he belongs to held one of its meetings in a provincial psychiatric hospital so that a group member convalescing there could continue to participate. Here is a description of poetry in the public sphere that is, thankfully, as far from the glitz of the Griffin Poetry Prize Readings as one can possibly get, as the small, communal scene feels corrective in its quotidian intimacy. Bartlett wonders, hopefully, if such gestures may create "some sort of oasis of community, friendship, care, and creativity in an environment of such distress and numbness" (54). Emanating from this brief passage is a faith in the potential of poetry to sustain its readers and to add meaning to their everyday lives. It carries forward the best of Irving Layton's sentiment that "[w]hatever else,

poetry is freedom,” but leaves aside the pomp of Layton’s persona, replacing it instead with frailty and grace.

The best of *All Manner of Tackle* is made up of such moments: small scenes that illustrate the value of a varied approach to writing about poetry, even if the book’s manifold nature does, at times, leave the reader wanting more. A brief essay entitled “The Gardener’s Shadow,” for example, reveals both the strengths and the limitations of assembling such an eclectic body of criticism. Using Virginia Woolf’s essay “Reading” as a starting point, Bartlett considers how the settings in which readers find themselves play a part in shaping the reactions they have to a book. He recalls the experience of reading *Tay John* during a train trip out west, during which time “O’Hagan’s words and the atmosphere of the swaying train seemed to mesh as a whole” (60). In reading this essay, I was reminded of Bartlett’s poem “All Those Train Trips,” which opens his 2008 collection *The Watchmaker’s Table*. Bartlett describes there his many journeys aboard the overnight train route from New Brunswick to Montréal, which Maritimers have long referred to as the milk run because the train slows so often through the rural townships of eastern Québec. “All Those Train Trips” not only captures perfectly the restlessness of the overnight journey, but also how a particular setting can become synonymous with the act of reading a favourite writer’s work:

[ . . . ] The coach seats never went  
back far enough for me to sleep, so after

the hobnobbers’ car closed at the border  
and we were rumbling through another country  
I read while midnight faded like some town

sped through, unnoticed in the murk and blur.  
I’ll always read Lorca’s poems in the light  
of one winter night when the world outside

was all snow — and overlap Aksakov’s memoirs  
with one summer night when heat and body heat grew

until the coach was a kitchen with three dozen stoves. (8-18)

“All Those Train Trips” reminds me of an experiment I conducted once as the train I was a passenger on tugged along the Marshlands between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. I wanted to record the view from the window while I read “The Tantrammar Revisited” out loud, entirely to see if there was something new about either the landscape or

the poem that I might notice as a result. I was surprised to learn that the train moves at precisely the same pace as the poem itself—or at least my reading of it—and so I was able to read Roberts’s entire poem in the time that it took to cross between provinces.

Because I love the idea that some part of Lorca’s poems will always reside in the woods of northern New Brunswick, and because of my own investment in the notion that reading-in-place can open up new appreciations of literature, I was eager to encounter Bartlett’s commentary on what it means to understand the act of reading in this way. “The Gardener’s Shadow,” however, abandons its own promise before it is fully developed. Instead of examining the relationship between reading and setting at length, Bartlett goes on to say that “[s]omeone with much curiosity and energy should write a book-length meditation upon reading as an act bound up with our homes, jobs, meals, music, distractions of all sorts—and with our loves, resentments, hardships, emotional highs and lows” (61). Many have, I’m sure, but engaged as I was with his essay, I genuinely wanted to hear what Bartlett made of these matters. I wanted to know how a sure-handed reader such as himself understood this process, what the implications of it were, and what studying the layers of experience that envelope a reader would actually look like in practice. Perhaps this is too much to ask of a relatively brief column that was published many years ago, but the process of assembling a collected prose surely affords the writer the opportunity to return to these ideas with new perspective, and perhaps even to extend their thinking into the present moment.

All this to say that the experience of reading *All Manner of Tackle* is, at times, a challenging one, since Bartlett speaks in so many voices—scholar, columnist, personal essayist—that readers have to adjust their expectations as they go. The title of Alden Nowlan’s only novel comes to mind, as this volume of collected prose could easily be called *Various Persons Named Brian Bartlett*, its plurality very much its defining characteristic. Measuring the effectiveness of individual inclusions is also a challenge at times, complicated as it is by Bartlett’s own inclination to position himself on the outskirts of various communities. As a literary journalist, he has little in common with the latest generation of Canadian reviewers, many of whom have been willing to make qualitative judgements about the books they write about, and who appear to have no issue balancing praise with criticism. Meanwhile, as a scholar, Bartlett writes gorgeously and expansively; his own wide reading enables him to make comparisons between Canadian writers and authors from various

periods and parts of the world, but at the same time, he appears reticent to draw from any other scholar's perspective. In both his essay on Tim Lilburn, which appeared in *Studies in Canadian Literature*, and in his essay on P.K. Page, which was published in *Canadian Literature*, the overriding impression is that of the adamic reader who prefers to rely on his own critical instincts, rather than joining a community of readers. A body of writing motivated by the desire to celebrate should also convey an appreciation for the reading and research of others that come before it. Granted, a poet like Lilburn had not, at the time of the essay's original publication, garnered a great deal of scholarly interest, but that seems coincidental to the fact that Bartlett simply prefers to go it alone, and to rely on his own critical instincts rather than incorporating the perspective of others. The overriding irony here is that many of these fellow readers would share in the joy of reading and responding to literature that Bartlett wishes to celebrate. Why not invite them in?

The most likely explanation is that Bartlett is fundamentally a literary memoirist, one for whom reading is a private act made meaningful by small details and memorable encounters. Perhaps for this reason, *All Manner of Tackle* is episodic and richly populated with the anecdotal, and while not every reader may appreciate these digressions, I delight in knowing that Alden Nowlan was happy to make visitors to his home a bacon sandwich past midnight, or that, in 1972, John Thompson sent a small bundle of poems to *The Fiddlehead*, along with an appreciative note for how warmly his previous submission had been received. Or that M. Travis Lane's modesty is such that she would refer to her own masterful poems as a "miscellany of discrete amusements" (130). A parenthetical aside that appears in "No Detail Too Small: Sandra Barry's *Elizabeth Bishop: An Archival Guide to Her Life in Nova Scotia*" addresses the experience of encountering these minor items. "I do appreciate knowing such facts and stop and wonder, with some amusement," Bartlett writes, "Why?" (152).

*All Manner of Tackle* provides its own explanation: because knowing these details and anecdotes affect how we read, and because their unassuming presence requires us to recognize that poetry is the product of journeys undertaken, meals shared, and lives lived. Along such lines, even though Bartlett's own modesty prevents him from reflecting on his poetry in this volume, *All Manner of Tackle* will prove a treasure trove for those seeking insights into the ideas and experiences that have shaped his eight full-length collections. Certainly, any serious student of Maritime poetry needs to read this book, as it provides an authoritative account of

the writers who, since *The Fiddlehead* first appeared in 1945, have together established the groundwork for the vibrant literary community that continues to exist in New Brunswick today. More broadly, Bartlett's prose will appeal to anyone who wishes to be reminded of the joys of reading, who wishes to escape the library in search of fresh air, or who wants to encounter poetry again as a rare wonder taking root in its own private wilderness.

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