

The World of George Johnston

Sean Kane, ed. *Inward of Poetry: George Johnston & William Blissett in Letters*. Erin, ON: Porcupine's Quill, 2011. 426 pp.

Inward of Poetry contains a generous and judicious selection from the correspondence between George Johnston (1913-2004) and William Blissett, a distinguished teacher and lecturer on modernist literature for the whole of the last half of the twentieth century. The friendly give-and-take between a poet who spent most of his life teaching Early English and Old Norse, and a truly dedicated scholar whose range extends from the beginnings of English drama to the writings of T. S. Eliot and David Jones, is absorbing and remarkable in itself; but Sean Kane (who studied under Johnston as an undergraduate at Carleton, and as a doctoral student at Toronto wrote a thesis on Spenser under Blissett's supervision) gives us far more than a standard chronological transcription of letters. He understands the crucial importance of the academic milieu out of which both Johnston and Blissett emerged—the University of Toronto English Department just after the end of the Second World War.

Johnston and Blissett met in a seminar on the Origins and Development of Romanticism taught by the redoubtable A.S.P. Woodhouse in 1945-6. They began writing to each other when Johnston, who never completed his Ph.D. thesis (on Blake, with Northrop Frye), became a founding member of what was then Carleton College in 1950. At this time, Blissett completed his own doctoral thesis (on Spenser and Milton, also with Frye) and began a ten-year stint at the University of Saskatchewan before moving for five years to Huron College in the University of Western Ontario. He then returned to Toronto in 1965, where he taught until his retirement in 1987. Both, then, became part of the Woodhouse 'empire' of Canadian English studies which, thanks to the strategic placing of Toronto graduates in expanding departments, established the pattern of English teaching in the whole country. Kane assembles here an extensive array of fact and (in the best sense of the word) gossip about such figures as Woodhouse, F. E. L. Priestley, and Norman Endicott, the generation of scholars who, along with the somewhat younger Frye, made Toronto a bastion of English studies for the central years of the twentieth century.

From the beginning of their correspondence, Johnston was developing his skills as a poet, and in his first extant letter to Blissett initiated the practice, which became habitual, of appending drafts of recently completed poems. Blissett duly responded with evaluations and advice, and before

long began to send examples of his own short stories and critical work. His talent as a short-story writer never developed, but a pattern was set up by which each encouraged the other's written work. As a result, we now have the hitherto unpublished texts of much of Johnston's early verse and can see how the finished poems evolved. This process provides an invaluable opportunity to watch the way in which one of the technically most rigorous of our poets developed and refined his craft.

But this is only the most obvious example of what Kane has to offer. As he notes in his Preface, the letters contain valuable information about "books that excited them" and "the values literature teaches" (11), information that is not only impressive in itself but eloquently demonstrates how all those for whom books and literature are important ought to interact and share their enthusiasms and puzzlements. Not least among the volume's merits is the way that, since the books that excited them cover a range of literary and intellectual experience, it properly disputes the current tendency to place excessive emphasis on the "Canadian-ness" of Canadian literature. Moreover, his occasional reminiscences, in which he describes the impact upon him of the two teachers and the training they provided during his university years, extends the *personal* element that is so important a feature of the whole book. Fortunately, too, Kane's prose-style stands up remarkably well as it intertwines with that of his subjects; indeed, it may be regarded as a doubtless unintended yet eloquent demonstration of what his mentors succeeded in teaching him.

The book's title derives appropriately from a poem by Johnston entitled "For William Frank Blissett," which praises him as a teacher "of heart and eye / and ear, / inward of teaching, inward of poetry." The dual emphasis on poetry and voice is evident throughout. "For Johnston," Kane writes, "voice comes from being himself" (12)—and the same, albeit in prose, can be said of Blissett. In their shared effort to perfect Johnston's poems, they demonstrate the sheer hard work that true poets (unlike the poetasters who fall by the wayside) put into their poems. This is also exemplified when Blissett at last succeeded in "the pushing of David Jones" on Johnston, as Johnston himself was later to describe it (186). He did so (see Chapter 7) by instituting a group-reading aloud of Jones's *In Parenthesis* ("Each reads in a soft inward voice," as Kane sensitively observed [237]). Blissett was later to write an essay on "The Efficacious Word," and although I spoil the pun by saying so (he was in fact writing about Jones's use of swear-words), it is the emphasis on efficacious words, a vigorous search for the most rhythmically apt vocabulary to complete a sentence, that distinguishes the two writers' discussions of the nature of poetry.

Inward of Poetry, as I have indicated, is a refreshingly personal book, which calls for a similarly personal response, which I shall now offer. Far from being 'objective' and supposedly distanced from the subject-matter under review, I must be one of the few people still living who can claim anything approaching an equivalent experience of the extraordinarily varied material covered by this book. On my first coming to Toronto from England in 1958 for my M.A. and doctorate, I was just in time to have known the English Department that Woodhouse had formed while it was still more or less in place, with Woodhouse himself, Endicott (who supervised my own thesis), Priestley, and J. R. MacGillivray still teaching. (R. S. Knox had retired but was still regularly seen in the Department, while H. S. Wilson died not long after I had been introduced to him in the following year.) In addition, I took Woodhouse's Milton course, and thus experienced the full flavour of his teaching so brilliantly caught by Blissett in his memoir-cum-affectionate-parody of a Woodhouse seminar (reprinted here, 33-34) that reproduces not only his characteristic tone but his equally characteristic speech-rhythms. I can therefore vouch for the uncanny accuracy of Blissett's rendition. Later, when I returned to join the Department as a teacher two years after Woodhouse's sudden death in 1964, I taught in the 'Honours' programme for a few years before it began to be watered down, and to lose its full coherence, in the late sixties.

All the above is expertly conveyed by Kane in the course of his book, though he was too young to have known it himself. Needless to say, given his own academic training, he has relayed the facts deftly and accurately, but to catch the "feel" of the earlier part is another matter, and it is important, I think, for somebody of my generation to confirm that, in my view, he has been totally successful.

I knew Johnston comparatively well in his later years, and have known Blissett (who, by the way, recently celebrated his ninetieth birthday) for forty-six years. I am privileged, moreover, to have had a considerable correspondence with Johnston, though one that was modest in both quantity and (so far as my contribution was concerned) quality by the standards of this book. But our exchange of letters, now deposited in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library in the University of Toronto, covered only the last fifteen years or so of Johnston's life. In any case, it was Johnston who commented so helpfully—with, of course, his well-known generosity—on many of my own poems. I can boast of no written correspondence of any consequence with Blissett, but I succeeded him as editor of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* in 1976, and we were subsequently office-neighbours for a number of years. I can also vouch for one more shared situation: I too

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have participated in an extended reading-aloud of Jones—this time of the *Anathemata*—organized (naturally) by Blissett, and including two of his later graduate students, Thomas Dilworth and Vince Sherry, both of whom went on to write expertly about Jones’s work. I am absolutely convinced that this kind of oral reading punctuated by discussion is the best way to become fully familiar with his complex, highly-layered work.

It is tempting to compare *Inward of Poetry* with Blissett’s *The Long Conversation: A Memoir of David Jones* (1981), but the connections seem, as often as not, to be more apparent than real. First, their friendship embraced only the last fifteen years of Jones’s life (like mine with Johnston), and there is no sense of mutual development as one finds here. Again, there the letters are almost all Jones’s; he was not a keep of other people’s letters, and only three of Blissett’s have survived—apparently by accident. Moreover, Blissett is himself the narrator throughout, and much space is taken up with descriptions—excellent descriptions, I should add—of visits. Still, a certain similarity of tone can be discerned, though Jones is always the prime centre of attention, whereas it is the shared relationship between two very different people that is so impressively chronicled here. However, both books proceed at a leisurely—and civilized—pace, establishing their effects gradually but deliberately and unforgettably. In a literary world where style, leisureliness, and civility are all at a premium, *Inward of Poetry*, most elegantly and satisfyingly produced by the Inksters at the Porcupine’s Quill, is a book to be cherished.

W. J. Keith