

REVIEWS

Mary Dalton on the Edge

Edge: Essays, Reviews, Interviews. Windsor, Ontario: Palimpsest Press, 2015, 344 pp.

I once heard a young bartender at the Victory Tavern in Toronto go on about the glory of Mary Dalton's poetry. Could I hear the like in a bar in Winnipeg? Saskatoon? Dalton herself has doubts; at least she did in 1995: "I sometimes think that despite all the energy expended," she says in *Edge*, "we don't truly have a literary culture in Canada; we poets don't have the general reader in Canada you will find in Europe.... Newfoundland itself does not pay much attention to its writers. So we're all marginalized" (56). Twenty-odd years later, more books of poetry than ever are published in this country, and there are way fewer reviews. How does a poet attract an audience? Well, *Edge* is a substantial collection: thirty-five years worth of one fine poet's prose. It's well worth reading, period, and a worthy companion to the poetry. Let this book travel. Let it raise the profile of a poet folks should be reading in Vancouver and Whitehorse. May what follows push the project, since, in a small way—Dalton invites this in her "Introductory Note"—it enters into dialogue with her poetry. Of the prose, *Edge* lacks only the latest essay, "From Colonial Tropes to the Vernacular Muse: The Poetry of Newfoundland," though an excerpt on the poetry of Carmelita McGrath does appear. That's a significant omission, since the essay is an excellent survey of Newfoundland poetry from earliest times to the present. The whole thing appears in María Jesús Hernández Lerena, ed. *Pathways of Creativity in Contemporary Newfoundland and Labrador* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015). *Edge* is a collection of extra-poetic work to something like mid-career, since Dalton is far from finished, certainly not with poetry. A new chapbook, *Waste Ground*, has already been announced from *Running the Goat Books and Broadsides*. For those who know the range Dalton has already covered in poetry, with sources all the way from Newfoundland dialect to cosmopolitan world culture, curiosity will be high. What's she up to now?

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The fourth section of *Edge* is "A Colyumnist, Her Colanders: Reviewing." A reviewer might well begin with the reviewing section, since it opens

with an essay about reviewing itself. “Colymnists and Colanders of Zeitgeist: On Poetry Reviews and Reviewing” is a how-to piece, a response to the bad rap reviewers have so often had with front-line writers, and the sort of review that justifies the rap. It offers thirteen suggestions for responsible reviewing, then adds an extensive annotated bibliography of other compatible writing on the subject. There are at least two reasons to like this piece. One is its function as the theory on which Dalton rests her own reviewing. The other is its necessary corrective to the nasty, self-interested reviewing that has far too much airing, in this country and elsewhere. “Is the author or the reviewer’s readership well-served,” she asks, “if the book becomes a mirror reflecting the face of the reviewer?” (201) The question is rhetorical, but later Dalton advances what Paul West has called “the genial mode.” “The genial mode,” she says, “is harder than the hostile mode. It eschews the flashy put-down; the liveliness of the writing derives from sources other than the witty sneer” (203). “Reviewing at its finest,” she concludes, “is an act of love, not simply for a single book but for books and for a literary culture” (204). So the look-at-me approach is what’s being proscribed, not a reviewer’s individuality. Dalton never sneers, though she gets off a few good ones. Wit can live with love. A point she makes simply by embodying it, is that a reviewer’s credibility is secured by the quality of her own writing. Dalton’s style is deftly economical, nary a feather out of it. The tone is judicious and moderate; the style has its sparkle. Negative judgements are telling *because* she doesn’t show off. She praises what she can about so-so work, but—in a kind of edge she doesn’t claim for her book—she calls out the truly bad. Gordon Pinsent’s play, *John and the Missus*, adapted from his so-so novel, is “a complete failure” (276). “Why expend so much money, time and talent on such an awful script” (277)? Because Dalton doesn’t stint on criticism when it’s warranted, a reader is the more likely to take proper notice of her raves. “To review a book such as this,” she says of John Steffler’s 1998 *That Night We Were Ravenous*, “is to try to pour the ocean into a thimble. Perhaps you can glimpse the beautiful life of these poems through the passages quoted” (229). In such disclaimers, you hear Dalton’s humility as a critic. She knows when a subject is beyond the grasp of words, hers or anyone’s. “Words about a painting,” she says, gearing up to speak about the *Boatman* pictures of Gerald Squires, “are like words about a poem—a description, an admiration, a conversation, always a circling around the thing itself. May no one substitute them for the living energies of the painting, for the act of standing before the painting and looking. The words that follow are acts of exploration that seek to send the reader out to the paintings themselves” (174). As

enthusiastic reviews of good books send readers to them, and credible negative reviews save us the bother. Insistence on the importance of reading for technique, and all that technique involves, runs all through *Edge*. Dalton is a poet, after all. As a practitioner of high capacity, she knows that mere content doesn't cut it. "For me, sound is what poetry is," she says in an interview. "The words themselves have a texture, a weight, a heft, a visceral sound; they're just utterly fascinating in themselves. I feel about words in a poem the way a musician feels about the possibilities of notes or a painter about the possibilities of paint" (62). Listening for word music, she hears it in poetry that makes little appeal to the understanding. "The title [of *Feeling Fine in Kafka's Burrow*] suggests something of [Jason] Holt's procedures with language: he disrupts its syntax and idioms, weaves cliché, neologism, and archaism with philosophical tag and lyrical image, to create a kind of murmuring meaninglessness that forces a reader to be carried by rhythm, to be aware of language as a symphony of murmurings.... Now and then the poems show Holt's youth: one can hear Housman's young man at two-and-twenty. But this is an intelligent and irreverent book that does new things with words...; it is, moreover, a book with a supple and assured music" (241-42). The reviews of books and plays appear late in *Edge*, which is just as well because, notwithstanding their considerable virtues, they are brief, fairly uniform, and not the meat of the book. The subjects, especially productions of plays, are somewhat ephemeral. What is important about all the reviews is exemplary method, thorough preparation, considered approach. This is a writer who realizes that in every outing she represents herself and her culture (local and world-wide; she *is* the tradition she is extending), and so embraces the responsibility, the great care, that entails. I applaud her tender toughness in these works, her edge and love, but I find her strongest writing elsewhere.

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Let's go back to two words: "colyumnist" and "colanders." Colander is a domestic metaphor for straining out what isn't wanted while holding on to what is, okay (Dalton says that "Colanders of zeitgeist" is "Anna Rumley's phrase for great reviews" (208), but what is that extra y doing in colyumnist? Dalton calls it a Joycean pun, but so far I've only been able to find it said of American journalists. Whatever the origin, it introduces a touch of humour and hints that the writer isn't taking herself *too* seriously. Acknowledging that some folks add the y, perhaps Dalton is also adding a touch of the oral. She is preoccupied with the oral aspect of language

throughout *Edge*. Knowing the importance of sounding a poem, she understands the importance of the listening ear. Almost anyone who loves poetry will come to this realization at some point, but Dalton got an early start, having grown up within an extraordinarily rich oral culture:

Before school, outside of school: the riot and ripple of language, as fluid as the music of fiddle and mandolin that spun from my father's hand, the music of song in my mother's honey-rich voice. The spit and sparkle of: *hair like a birch broom in the fits, a face like a robber's horse, the dancing play of cock of the walk and merrybegot, of ram's horn (not what you think) and devil-ma-click, mollyfoostering and moldow*. The rhyming everywhere—set ones with certain chores, with games, all sorts of games. With cad games, for instance:

Here is a very good ace for thee.
 And here is another as good as he.
 Here is the best of all the three—
 And here is Johnny-come-tickle-me.r

And always, in the speech of our part of Conception Bay (for there is a great variety of dialects in Newfoundland) the lilting watery music of Irish, flattening out the *th*'s, shortening the *ing*'s and doing glorious things with *l* sounds and with vowels. We swam in language in those pre-school and early school days. It was full of pleasure as water, as much of a natural element as water. (18-19)

See Robin McGrath's annotated anthologies, *Nursery Rhymes of Newfoundland and Labrador* and *All in Together: Rhymes, Ditties, and Jingles of Newfoundland and Labrador*. Dalton's readers will recognize in what she says here the source of some of her work, especially *Merrybegot*—a 2002 chapbook of that title was incorporated into a full-length book out in 2003—whose working title was “The Tall World of Their Torn Stories.” A few of these poems with sources in Newfoundland tradition first appeared in *Allowing the Light* (1993), under the title, “Songs from the Newfoundland Dictionary.” “Torn Stories” registers the strong-arm tactics used to strip Dalton and her contemporaries of their own vernacular. This familiar tale does not improve in the telling: insistence on so-called standard English devalues local accent, rhythm and vocabulary and, beyond the linguistic particulars, suppresses a whole culture rooted in oral tradition. Having been re-educated to speak in the standard way, having had no intellectual tools as a youngster to understand why “It feels as if something is being stolen from me” (19), Dalton now speaks pretty standard North American, though not without traces of Newfoundland accent. Maybe the

linguist could hear rhythms and pronunciation deriving from the precincts of her upbringing, “the Irish-Catholic head of [Conception] Bay,” as distinct from “the rockier English-Protestant north shore” (96). One sort of edge in Dalton’s writing about her loss, whether in essay or poetry, is anger. She laments the loss of her natural voice, now understanding and fiercely resisting the pressures of conformity that stole it from her, that still and always threaten all individuality. With W.H. Auden, she endorses the “voice of an individual against the forces that would render us all numbers, statistics, consumers” (34). “We are beset,” she says elsewhere, “by institutions that render us ghosts without a name; newspapers, television, movies, computers...” (40). Her poetry and her politics, her cultural commentary, is therefore driven by bone-deep populism. The speaking voice, the vernacular, is a perennial preoccupation. So is the common cause she makes with “the Other, the marginalized, the excluded, the sufferer, the one who must learn to dance on the edge” (“Introductory Note”). Like the extinct Beothuk in “Shadow Indians: The Beothuk in Newfoundland Literature”: “We write shadow Indians, who serve us beyond the grave”; exclusion of the historical Beothuk “helps to perpetuate a silence” (141). Like Marilyn Dumont, with whose book, *A Really Good Brown Girl*, Dalton identifies for its Métis back-talk to settler imperialism. She calls Athol Fugard’s play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, “a very special example of one of theatre’s major responsibilities in an oppressive society: to try to break the conspiracy of silence that always attends an unjust system” (300). Dalton needed to find a way back to her roots, to re-learn how to dance, as one of her body-kinetic images has it. Her writing drew support from university colleagues, George Story and Patrick O’Flaherty, but it was especially the towering accomplishment of *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* that helped her turn back to the oral culture of her childhood and youth so as to recover it for her poetry. But she was also “a book-child, biblioholic” (24). Always a reader, she became professor of English, teacher and critic. *Edge* contains some of her essays on non-Newfoundland subjects, two on the work of Samuel Beckett, one on Ivy Compton-Burnett. So she is really a dual citizen of language and literature, and she plays this duality, or yoking of contrarities, all through *Edge*. This “merrybegot” of a book (got out of wedlock, mongrel) is sometimes “goat-herd song,” she says in the “Introductory Note,” sometimes “bespectacled pronouncement or rumination.” “All my books,” she writes elsewhere, “from *The Time of Icicles* to *Red Ledger* and the recent chapbook of riddles *Between You and the Weather*, have a dual source: the language and culture of Newfoundland, and the books of the Western literary tradition” (105).

Hooking, the most recent book, leans heavily on the literary side, though the title comes from the folk practice of hooked mat-making. More about *Hooking* below. Dalton makes the oral/written duality sound natural, which of course it is, or at least can be, but her own balance had to be achieved in the face of forces inimical to all that oral inheritance. The assault began from inside Newfoundland, with educational policies based on an essay, "The Problem of Speech Development in Newfoundland," by one Oswald Crocker: "Not all Professors of Education bemoaned the state of Newfoundland English—some wrote articles praising its vividness, its variety, its liveliness. But the official stance was that the children of an oral culture, one which had produced a store of songs stories, riddles rhymes, chants, proverbs and curses as rich as any to be found in the English-speaking world, did not know how to speak. They/we were taught that our accents were wrong and that our strange expressions belonged at home" (20). Then there is, for Newfoundlanders, the 1949 "cataclysm of Confederation" (44). In significant ways, this was a swap of colonial masters. Like others of her generation, Dalton grew up "a Newfoundlander in the post-Confederation era, part of an extraordinarily rich cultural entity which found itself absorbed by a much larger geopolitical entity, one that seems to view Newfoundland as some sort of ne'er-do-well relation, in need of patronage begrudgingly given, a drag on the family because of her feckless ways" (17-18). "[O]ur land conquered," says the poem called "backhome blues," "and no-one fired a shot" (*The Time of Icicles* 41). To resentment of the repressive official language stance and Newfoundland absorption by a patronizing larger polity, add alienation within a man's world. Gender discrimination is lightly touched on in *Edge*, while it's a real sharp edge in certain poems, but there are traces of defiance provoked by sexism. Twice Dalton says that she considered prefacing *The Time of Icicles*, her first book of poems, with "Despite all you bastards" (78). "I thought of it then as a gesture towards the mightily macho art scene of the time, in which women had their place mainly as acolytes" (102). Dalton is a feminist, but her characteristic both/and thinking makes her question the term. She knows that to be labelled, whether it places you in or out, is to be categorized for good or ill on the basis of someone else's criteria. Some sorts of feminism are not for her. "I don't understand the concept of language as a trap or an enemy," she says. "Language has always been play, pleasure. Everyone owns language. I can think of when I was quite small, listening to people telling a story, or singing a song, or making a joke. I felt this playfulness, this pleasure, from an early age. Language was my realm, a place where I thought I had power. I don't see the patriarchal embodied in the

very essence of language. If there are words you don't like, play with them, do something with them. Of course there are sexist and patriarchal assumptions in culture, but to argue that the essence of language is somehow polluted, that's a very different proposition" (87). Dalton is right to insist on her personal experience of language, and to resist being lumped in with a feminism she doesn't share. The resistance does seem to prevent her from appreciating that some women do find the patriarchal embedded in language and struggle to write their way out. "writing can scarcely be for women the act of the phallic signifier," says Daphne Marlatt, "its claim to singularity, the mark of the capital I (was here). language is no 'tool' for us, no extension of ourselves, but something we are 'lost' inside of" (*Labyrinths of Voice* 35). That is one lower-case sentence from one lesbian feminist's rigorous and sustained examination of exclusionary language. I find it compelling. Dalton's is a quieter, more mischievous response to the experience of being a woman in a man's world. There is room for humour in her non-system because she flirts with the irreverent, the anarchic. In Dalton's literary career, then, there has been much to relish and much to resist. The resistance issues in satirical poems with a razor-sharp edge that go after the macho, as well as abuses of Catholic priests, naïve mainland assumptions about Newfoundland, Newfoundland attempts to sell a clichéd version of itself, political incompetence and corruption, the university, and so on. In her essays, Dalton stresses the importance of questioning institutions that contain us, the better to understand how they limit or distort us. Hers is actually an inside/outside stance, if stance is even the word, since any thinking citizen of a democracy will be in or out, belonging or not, by turns. "Ambivalence is the best I can do" (64), Dalton says. "Ambiguity, two-sidedness, seeing one side and then the opposite—perhaps that can emerge in the state of detachment and close attention to whatever bit of the universe you're looking at when you're writing a poem" (64). A good example of seeing both sides is pair of poems: "backhome blues"—quoted above from *The Time of Icicles*, but reappearing revised (now with punctuation and capitalization) in *Red Ledger*—and its companion piece, "backhome blues: another tune." The first laments lost ways, lost country; the second is a sort of palinode, or retraction. It undercuts the lament, mocks the "pastoral tableau" of the first. Get over it already, it says, because "who did you think you were?"

You are just a blip, old trout.
A bit player.
It's as if a dust mote
stood on its hind legs

and howled at
the injustice of gravity.
The granite erratics are laughing.

...
[O]pen your eyes wider and
wise up.

(52)

See more, understand more: good advice as a rule, but not here. The speaker slides into irony for a moment of self-reproach grounded in chilling fact: a perfectly legitimate way to view the old trout (herself), and in fact the whole human enterprise, is as *nothing* in the vastness of Deep Time when those erratics were being formed. Think you're important? Think you're the centre? In a way, to achieve a confident sense of identity, one has to. But. Dalton's irony, detachment even from herself, makes for satire. Satire is not all she writes, and it has to be said that her essays are no sustained assault on authority. They are primarily celebrations of her native tradition and her literary inheritance, the tension and conjunction between them. She came to understand that in this linkage is strength. Memorial University of Newfoundland became a degree-granting institution in 1949, the year of confederation with Canada. In the early 1950s, Ted Russell was reading his *Chronicles of Uncle Mose* on the CBC. In one of his stories about a misunderstanding over Newfoundland dialect, Uncle Mose says, "we ought to have a dictionary of our own language. Perhaps this new university'll put one together and save us from the danger of forgettin' how to talk to one another, and our children from forgettin' their own language" (*Chronicles* 278). Uncle Mose speaks as an outporter from the fictional village of Pigeon Inlet. Dialect comes naturally to him. Ted Russell was a man of affairs, so maybe he knew that momentum was gathering at Memorial for just the lexicon Uncle Mose was calling for. *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* would eventually appear in 1982. "Let's not let [our children] grow up," Uncle Mose goes on, "not knowin a bobstay from a top 'n lift, or a killick from a piggin, a doughboy from a touten, a mashberry from a whort, or a mug-up from a scoff" (278). Maybe *DNE* has served the children of Uncle Moses' generation so well that they can still make all the necessary distinctions. It has certainly served a new generation of writers. While he was writing his novel, *River Thieves*, Michael Crummey read *DNE* from cover to cover, either finding or being reminded of vernacular words that slotted perfectly into his narrative. *DNE* is a scholarly book meant to codify what Mary Dalton calls the Newfoundland "word-hoard" (25), but she celebrates the book because it "lets in the spoken word without its having been earlier

mediated by print” (27). It incorporates the oral as well as the written in its rich quotation of sources and examples, so Dalton calls it “a book to break spells” like linguistic standardization. As such, it supports her resistance of all else in the culture that pressures people into interchangeable units. Better to be outside, better dance on the edge as oneself and not some walking ghost of a depersonalized entity. *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* was made by George Story, W.J. Kirwin and J.D.A. Widdowson, scholars who had full respect for the folk traditions of Newfoundland. They worked tirelessly to document and preserve not only the language, but also the stories and songs, the distinctive folk culture of the old country/new province. Memorial University historians, anthropologists, folklorists, musicologists and literary specialists—they all saw Newfoundland culture under threat from modernization and globalization. The interdisciplinary process of recovery and preservation is documented in a 2016 book, *Observing the Outports*, by Jeff Webb. One of his chapters deals with the collaboration that led to *DNE*. George Story was much more than a lexicographer. He was a cosmopolitan local, a specialist in literature of the English renaissance who wrote extensively on Newfoundland culture. One of his most influential essays is right up Mary Dalton’s alley. The background for Story’s remarks in “Notes From a Berry Patch” is what Dalton calls a “sense of embattlement within the Canadian context” (80), “the arrogance of the rest of this Canadian entity, the condescension towards Newfoundland” (81). Story’s particular impetus is the “dispiriting business” (“Berry Patch” 102) of looking for Newfoundland writing in the nine hundred pages of *Literary History of Canada*. In 1972, Story could not claim a distinguished tradition of art writing in Newfoundland. “Yet one is left a little uneasy,” he says, “at this dismissal of four centuries of the experience of living on this island, and skeptical of the implied ghostlike existence of an ‘impoverished,’ ‘illiterate,’ and ‘dehumanized’ populace” (103). His essay is an eloquent argument for the significance of the rich folk materials still alive in Newfoundland, and the importance of taking all that seriously in any attempt to discuss culture in general: “What, finally, I have been suggesting is not that there is no difference between ‘high culture’ and the creations of the ‘little traditions,’ between a Child ballad and the *Divina Commedia* but that an adequate literary scholarship will be informed and sensitive to the context of literature, its full range, and to its springs—whether Shakespeare’s images of the dyer’s art, observed in a Warwickshire village, or James Reaney’s berry-pickers and endless lines of children, trailing Mother Goose and the Katzenjammer kids” (109). “It is generally recognized,” says Mary Dalton, “that the great Modernist poets seriously damaged the connection between the poet and the

Common Reader” (38). Uncommon reader herself, she hears the music of poetry in those modernist greats and in some of the even less accessible post-modernists. And yet she is always lobbying for the down-to-earth vernacular. “words swim themselves,” she writes in a poem called “il dolce stil novo” (Dante: the sweet new style), after the thirteenth century Italian movement so called. In the poem, *postdating* both “Modern” and “Postmodern,” the new style is “Medieval”):

“words swim themselves,
swim you, swift currents;
move with the salmon,
the haw, the muscle
and music of word.”

(*Allowing the Light* 46; *Red Ledger* 94)

In this vision, word and reader/listener flow together. “In these [outport] communities,” George Story says, “the function of ‘literature’ is not in dispute; nor is there a problem of communication between artist and public; in the Newfoundland tradition, a singer may hold the hand of his listener and look into his eyes” (106). The reference is to male singer and listeners joining hands in a chain, as if to urge words and melody not only through the air, but also along a circuit of bodies. I still occasionally see that here. Newfoundland will not on its own be repairing the rift between contemporary poet and reader, but Dalton’s argument, in “From Colonial Times to the Vernacular Muse: The Poetry of Newfoundland,” shows that much of the best of it, from the 1970s on, is accessible without compromise of poetic power. Backer of the spoken word, the word sung, Dalton might be expected to be for so-called spoken-word poetry in the many forms it now takes. She is—as long as it works on the page. She is unimpressed with most of what appears in Jill Battson and Ken Norris’s *Word Up: Spoken Word Poetry in Print*. Notwithstanding the introduction’s proclamation of verbal energy to come, “what follows all these assertions and intimations is a perfectly ordinary piece of free verse about earth-spirit. Perhaps the element of performance enlivened these lines and the poems that follow, but they do not shine on the page. This is true for many, many of the pieces in the book; lines that verge on the bathetic are frequent. Much of the writing has a documentary thrust, recounting sexual or political repression or oppression, without mining the possibilities of language to re-create the experience” (251). Content does not a poem make. Whether naïve or sophisticated, art is required. George Story died before a new wave of what, in 1976, Sandra Gwyn called “the Newfoundland renaissance”

crested. He had in a way predicted the richness of literary production based on folk forms. This is too complex a matter to go into here, and it should not be claimed that the folk tradition is the sole driver of contemporary art in Newfoundland, but one of the fascinating things about that mature art is the many ways in which folk tradition feeds it. Dalton's concentration on the vernacular strain in contemporary Newfoundland poetry allows her to discuss almost all the important poets of the time: the likes of Tom Dawe, John Steffler, Michael Crummey, Agnes Walsh, Carmelita McGrath, Robin McGrath. She even manages, not too self-consciously, to work herself in. In "Notes From a Berry Patch," Story could not but sound a tad defensive as in 1972 he boosted the "little traditions" that Newfoundland had to offer the literary historian. So it's remarkable how much of a rise in cultural confidence can be felt between his book and Dalton's. Writing from a so-called margin, she insists that it's neither necessary nor advisable to go into "a 'defensive huddle' if one feels oneself to be on the edge of things somehow" (94). Instead, in another version of the inside/outside "stance," she declares herself to be at *both* margin and centre: "There's a map, a print, called 'The Newfoundland-centred Universe.' It's a map of the world drawn by a contemporary artist so that Newfoundland is at the centre. The map calls attention to the conventional map as only one version of reality. I live in a Newfoundland-centred universe; we are at the centre. I am becoming more and more comfortable with that notion. I don't see that as narrow at all, since my mind ranges over the globe; my reading is not by any means confined to the literature of my own culture. But in finding what Seamus Heaney calls the 'energies of generation' in my own language, I'm embarking on what is for me the necessary poetic task. It has something to do with reclaiming vital aspects of self" (82). The map is actually called "The Newfoundland Centred World," but why not embrace the universe. Or, at the very least, the local culture. Dalton quotes Heaney on "the parallel between this tension within the solitary poet and the political task of a people." "In emergent cultures," he says, "the struggle of an individual consciousness towards affirmation and distinctiveness may be analogous, if not coterminous, with a collective straining towards self-definition" (34-35). The collective consciousness to which Dalton contributes is Newfoundland's. It's Canada's too, of course, or would be if mainlanders were paying enough close attention to the art of the island. The country with Newfoundland in it is a richer cultural ecology than is often enough appreciated. There are two further dimensions to the reclamation that Dalton feels in herself and finds in the poetry of other Newfoundlanders. One is a responsiveness to the harsh beauty of the Newfoundland land and sea-

scape, “the energies of nature”; the other is aliveness to the body. Her work combines “preoccupation with process, with the kinetic, the dialectic” (69). The rhythms of her Conception Bay speech are “of the body—the hand, the eye. The idioms are concrete, sensual” (86). Dance is something more than a metaphor in Dalton’s thought, then. It embraces “process,” the “kinetic.” Those words recur in her essays. As for “energies of nature,” they enter mind in the word “geopsychical,” title of a poem in *Allowing the Light* (50) about the trauma of resettlement forced on remote Newfoundland communities. Here and elsewhere, Dalton laments what has been lost to modernization and centralization: the fading of Newfoundlanders shaped by land and sea. “adrift,” the poem that precedes “geopsychical,” has an epigraph from the Irish writer Desmond Fennell’s *The Last Years of the Gaeltacht*: “Every large rock on sea or land, every cove and field, every rise or turn on the road, has a name” (49). As with Ireland, so it is, after five centuries of occupation, with Newfoundland. But there are dead communities here, where

the names are adrift
from their moorings
...
i cannot link places and names
those who could
are themselves
turning meadow and mountain
(49)

Still, Dalton claims a sort of geopsychical identity for herself. Her poems draw on the sort of fierce identification with Newfoundland nature that fed the later landscapes of Gerald Squires. Squires was still linking until his death in 2016. Of an early morning painting trip with colleagues George Horan and Jean Claude Roy, Squires writes: “It was still dark as we drove east along the paved road of the Witless Bay Barrens, and I could just see Split Rock on my right.... This rock that I had made paintings of in the past, the one that speaks to me every time I see it, spoke to me again out of the darkness.” “I painted these rocks for years,” he says in the Arnold Bennett film called *The Newfoundland Passion*—I knew their names and they answered me.” Squires made geopsychical pictures that dignify a harshly beautiful land. Something of what is lamented as lost and is much missed does still persist, even now. Of course, Dalton is ambivalent about the geopsychical: it’s part of her makeup, but she no longer lives it, not literally. She maintains a house in rural Gallows Cove, Harbour Main, the Concep-

tion Bay community of her upbringing, but for most of the year she lives the urban life on Flavin Street in St. John's. It should be clear by now that the material that most engages me in *Edge* is related to Dalton's own work, most of it invited by others. Essays and interviews in the first two sections of the book articulate a poetics, the experiential and theoretical underpinning in prose of Dalton's poetry. *Edge* is in fact a minimalist poetry anthology; four of the essays are accompanied by relevant poems. The interviews follow her whole poetic trajectory to date, from *The Time of Icicles* (1989) to *Hooking* (2013), a career that embraces both oral and written sources and models for her poetry. The extremes tend to mix in the poetry, which at times is a hybrid of both. The small fictions of *Merrybegot* are derived from oral sources, many of them from that anthology of speech acts, the *DNE*, but they are sophisticated confections, not at all folksy. The oral sources are raised to the level of an art quite distinct from that of the plainer folk forms, the ballads and stories, proverbs and other lore, of the outports. The same goes for the sequence, "I'm Bursting to Tell: Riddles For Conception Bay," in *Red Ledger* (2006), and the riddles in *Between You and the Weather* (2008). The language of these small, mostly first-person enigmas is spare and poetic, not solely colloquial.

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The highly artificial centos of *Hooking* (2013) are quite distinct from anything oral or folkloristic, though Dalton connects them with her rural Newfoundland background. "[O]n one level [they are] derived entirely from print culture," she says, "[but] can be seen as linked in some sense to my experience of Newfoundland culture" (106). One link, depicted on the cover of the book, is the mat-hooking of Newfoundland women like Dalton's mother and her aunts, and now Dalton herself. Hooked mats were once an outport craft. Like so much with its source in women's domestic work, hooking has since been raised by some hands to the level of sophisticated art. Despite Dalton's assertions of her inspiration and connections with Newfoundland landscape, the reader of *Hooking* will find herself in a poetic world quite remote from anything even remotely folksy or place-evoking, since the centos of the book are all made from poems of other poets. Northrop Frye said about literature in general that it's made from other literature. That is literally true of the cento. Many poets bridled at what they took to be Frye's exclusively literary emphasis, asserting that the poetry *they* wrote was derived from life. Why not both, one might ask, since who among the educated poets is not influenced by reading? "The

word in language,” says Dalton, “is half someone else’s” (*Edge* 152). With the cento, anyway, we are almost exclusively in the realm of the literary, and not only the literary but the non-sequential. “The cento, according to the *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*,” Dalton writes, “is a poetic creation made of passages taken from some major poet of the past, such as Homer or Virgil, and woven together as a form of tribute” (109). It’s not the first time Dalton has ventured in the direction of tribute or celebration based on another poet’s work. “Reaney Gardens,” in *Red Ledger*, is a series of brief prose narratives set in St. John’s, but all the section titles are of books—poems, novel, plays—by James Reaney. The centos, however, freeze out Dalton’s own voice. These poems combine “individual lines rather than passages from poems, and I was drawing from many poems, not one. As well, I was working with an additional simple aleatory [random] constraint. Each piece was constructed from the same point in the line sequence of each poem I was incorporating into the collage...” (109-110). As an analogue of her collaging, Dalton invokes the dangerous and now-discouraged Newfoundland coming-of-age sport, mainly for boys, of leaping from pan to pan of harbour ice. This was both risky fun and preparation for the seal hunt prosecuted on heaving ice well out at sea. It’s interesting that Dalton doesn’t use the term for this sport—copying—because in a sideways sense that’s what she does in *Hooking*. Copying and rearranging (cento is from the Latin for patchwork) to achieve maximum semantic leap. For Dalton, there is more at stake in *Hooking* than a game to be played with poetry in the tradition. This intense exercise in non-sequitur “seeks to enact a contemporary malaise of disorientation, alienation and drift but is nonetheless aware of beach and water and cliff, as presences that persist, even if they do so as through a scrim” (118). So the fiddling with form has a serious aim that echoes what Dalton sees in the *Boatman* paintings of Gerald Squires: “The series embodies the relentless working of time through weather on the Ferryland landscape; the journey of the history and culture and politics of Newfoundland; the anguished journey out of the dark of birth into the dark of death; and the painter’s journey both through tradition and into the fractured consciousness of the twentieth century and through the materials of the art itself” (176). Enacting malaise à la *Hooking* will not bridge the rift between poet and Common Reader. Only a few readers, even those deeply devoted to poetry, will persist in following patchwork poems, even if they fall on the page as narrative, or as units accruing lyrical sense, which the *Hooking* poems mostly do not. For me, though, one considerable source of interest in these poems is the way they make weird sentences of the most diverse kind of content.

Every poem makes good syntactical sense. One of the signs of Dalton's own touch is this construction of sentences by punctuating to merge syntactic units that share no content. Sometimes this makes for a kind of inspired nonsense:

The whuffling wino with the simplified face,
he was composing totems with a chainsaw,
including the corpses, pal.

They catch up and slam together like
God's doormat on the threshold of your mind,
and fasten a new skin around it.

("Filaments" 28)

According to the "Source Lists," these six lines are drawn from the thirtieth line in the following poems: Ted Hughes, "Here is the Cathedral"; Fraser Sutherland, "The Man Who Heard Symphonies"; John Berryman, "Silent Song"; Paulette Jiles, "Short Flight Attawapiskat" [actually "Night Flight to Attawapiskat"]; Mina Loy, "Songs to Johannes"; and Anne Sexton, "For John Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further." I suspected a typo in the last line, so I went to the source and, sure enough, there is an extra a ("and a fasten") in the book. Having located the source, I also found that Dalton had chosen only half the line: "and fasten a new skin around it as if I were dressing an orange or a strange sun." This makes me think it would be interesting, if arduous, to look up all the source poems to find out exactly what they offered the cento maker. And also what they do, on their own, in their entirety. Arduous? I guess so, because we're looking at a library of world poetry, decades of eclectic reading, dues of one devoted reader lovingly paid to the tradition. Other Dalton choices are of titles for each poem, drawn from a line in the poem in all but three cases, and arrangement of the poems into sections according to a particular formal profile. Section One is all tercets; the poems of Section Two fall into quatrains or longer stanzas. All but one are new-formalist in structure—free verse stanzas of uniform length. The exception is an eleven-line poem called "Enueg." Now what's that? It turns out to be a genre. None of my literary handbooks has it, but Wikipedia does: the enueg, or enuig, is "a genre of lyric poetry practised by the troubadours. Somewhat similar to the *sirventes*, the *enuig* was generally a litany of complaints, few of them connected topically to the others." The cento is an obscure genre—I'd never heard of it until *Hooking*—and this one is even more so. I now find that Samuel Beckett has a couple of enuegs in a suite of poems called "Echo's Bones."

Maybe that's where Beckett aficionado Dalton found the genre. A genre of disconnect fits a volume built on arbitrary associations, even as it breaks the generic pattern that has been established—breaks it or else doubles up, because this enueg is also a cento, made of ninth lines drawn from eleven very different poems. Another way to look at the place of “Enueg” in *Hooking*, is to come at it from Dalton's “I'm Bursting to Tell You” and the two *Merrybegots*, chapbook and book. All poems but the last in “I'm Bursting” begin with “I,” though that is a first-person poem too. The pattern is broken. Poems in the chapbook (all of which appear in the book) are arranged, by title, “Sterricky” to “Bridesboys,” in reverse alphabetical order, but the very last poem is “The Water Man.” “The” doesn't count in alphabetizing, but even if it did, “The Water Man” would come first had Dalton not wanted to set the system, then subvert it. Then poems in *Merrybegot*, the book, are alphabetically arranged, “After All That” to “Yet.” No Z. A writer as inventive as Dalton could surely have found a z-poem had she not preferred to leave her alphabet incomplete, open-ended. (no titles in *Between You and the Weather*.) So it looks to me as if “Enueg,” the one non-conforming poem in *Hooking*, comes out of the same system-subverting mischief. It looks as if the professor both employs and subverts various ordering systems (alphabetizing perhaps a nod to the arrangement of *DNE*). Maybe this is trickster energy at work. Revenge of the oral culture? In any case, whether the poems are dialect-based or literature-derived, a fox has been let into the henhouse of these works. “I'm wanting the poems as a whole to reflect a certain wild energy,” says Dalton in *Edge*, “something at times anarchical, in the people and the place” (90). The people and the place and the poet. One thing more might be said about the lines of *Hooking*: most of them are interesting in themselves, never mind their quick leaping, so even though the poems don't make content sense (well, some of them verge on it), the selection of lines is a sign of readerly taste in the author. She has picked out and put together a lot of interesting stuff, so there are traces of authorial touch such as Dalton finds even in Christian Bök's *Eunoia*, a literary exercise even more extreme than hers, that she considers magnificent. Bök has claimed that his poem was “devoid of subjectivity”; wanting to assert a degree of author-ity in her own impersonal poems, Dalton disputes that. I find myself thinking of the strange essay by David Bromige, called “My Poetry,” which opens his book of that title. I thought it very odd: not only weird but unusually self-involved. So much of what this poet I admired was apparently saying about his own poetry was contradictory. Some remarks are quite negative. Why would he diss his own work? I don't remember how I was tipped off that the essay was a

mash-up, everything drawn from reviews of Bromige's work, so it's actually a deadpan satire of reviewing by a writer who might entertain hopes of readers, but finds only scattergun opinions. Twig to where the piece came from, you'll probably find it hilarious. As a comment on reviewing, appalling. Paradoxically, generously, Bromige shows faith in the reader of "My Poetry" by saying nowhere in *My Poetry* what he was up to. Unless, as I look at the essay again, I'm noticing sneaky vestiges of authorial comment. Like this: "I've been thinking lately about some sort of code of ethics for reviewers" (17). There's confidence, even bravado, in leaving a reader pretty much to her own devices. Dalton intentionally includes no glossary for the Newfoundland vocabulary of *Merrybegot*, and, unlike Robin McGrath, in *All in Together*, she leaves a reader to solve her riddle poems. She does want her reader in on the method of *Hooking*. Her "Source List" takes up twenty-eight pages at the back of the book.

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A reader needs faith in his or her ability to winnow. I guess the question is how big should the holes be in one's colander. I want to hold on to essays like "My Poetry" and books like *Hooking* long enough to figure out how they're working—one source of pleasure in reading—honour the experiments and take what I can from them, before returning by preference to writing less conceptually, more organically created. With *Edge* as helpful companion, I have been re-reading Dalton—especially *Merrybegot*—with great pleasure.

If whiskers was wisdom,
Why he'd be the Grand Wizard,
The Master of Cuffers,
Scourge of the Gommils,
Confounder of Omadhauns, Bosthoons,
The Ownshooks
And Nunny-fudgers.

(34)

Spellcheck questions six words in the last five lines, so we go to *DNE* and find that "cuffer" is a tale or yarn, and that it's a passel of idlers and fools that deserves scourging and confounding. Not that "he" will be doing so; he's just a fellow—wonderfully overblown way of saying so—with one hell of a big beard. O brave old world that has such English in it! The old world in the new. I admire the riddles too. None of the answers are obvious,

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so a reader is agreeably challenged to rouse her faculties. About the only riddle I think I've solved in *Between You and the Weather* is the briefest one:

Coffin or cradle—
The waves decide. (np)

Boat is my guess, influenced by lines from a poem called "Maiden Vein" in *Merrybegot*:

So you'd trick death
Gallivant out to sail in, jack-easy?
...
And you a lamb to the slaughter—
Or king of the harbour.

(41)

The ocean is its own kind of riddle. Fail to solve it, it solves you.

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In "Coda," the final two-piece section of *Edge*, Dalton places two brief essays that play variations on a couple of her central preoccupations. "Michael Coady, John Murphy: A Notebook" is about a nineteenth-century notebook that fell into Dalton's hands. Among other entries, it contains an "1848 Catalogue of Books." This list of forty-seven books and magazines includes, in the writer's spelling, Nelsons British Library, Johnsons Dictionary, Shakespear Work, Debretts Peerage, Ovid's Art of Love, Old and New Testament. "There were storytellers and ballad-makers in the Chapel Cove of that day," Dalton observes, "but in generalizing about the oral tradition some forget what my tattered notebook brings vividly before us: there were readers and scribes among us" (323). Those inclined to generalize about Newfoundland musical culture will want to know about Frederick Emerson, Newfoundland cosmopolite and honorary lecturer in music at Memorial University College during the 1940s. He "introduced an entire generation of students to the Western art music tradition" (4), says his biographer, Glenn David Colton, but he also promoted, in his own words, "songs which have come from the heart of the ordinary man" (260). These included songs composed in Newfoundland but mostly considered inauthentic—not British enough—by collectors like Maud Karpeles. Here again, linked, are George Story's "high culture" and "little traditions,"

Mary Dalton's "language and culture of Newfoundland, and the books of the Western literary tradition." Both/and again, back then. "(meta)diary of a writer" "is a riffing on diaries and the interest in them" (324). It's Dalton not as writer, but as reader, fascinated by writers' diaries even while expecting to find in them no certain key to either life or work: "Maybe there is another source of readers' enchantment with letters and logs, diaries and commonplace books? A motive other than the desire to ferret out the secret of an author's ability to make compelling art or to observe with glee those feet of clay? Might that motive be love" (325)? No scrap of information about the writer one especially loves is too tiny to be of interest. We are back with the review, as written by Dalton and the reviewers she backs: "an act of love, not simply for a single book but for books and for a literary culture." These last two essays are from 2010 and 2009, respectively. One of the pleasures of reading *Edge* is the gathering sense, despite the wide variety of materials in it, of its having been shaped by theme rather than chronology. "Coda," rather than "Conclusion," is right for the final phase of this mostly very satisfying book that traces thirty-five years in the ardent intellectual life of one of our best poets.

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Stan Dragland