

**All the Best, Buffy**

Brian Busby, ed. *The Heart Accepts It All: Selected Letters of John Glassco*. Montreal: Véhicule, 2013. 272 pp.

Most potted biographies of John Glassco (or “Buffy” to his friends) begin with a list of his many vocations, artistic and otherwise: poet, novelist, memoirist, translator, bon-vivant, wit, pornographer. He moved along the fringes of the influential Montreal Group. His *Memoirs of Montparnasse* (1970) brilliantly captured the bohemian life of expatriates to Paris during the early part of the twentieth century. He won the Governor General’s Award for his *Selected Poems* (1971). His pseudonymous novel *Fetish Girl* (1972) was notorious for being, as Glassco himself put it, “the first rubber-fetish novel ever written” (199). His translations of Canadian French-language poetry, including *The Poetry of French Canada in Translation* (1970) and *The Complete Poems of Saint-Denys-Garneau* (1975), were considered some of the finest ever published. Despite these many and varied accomplishments, however, Glassco never became nearly as well known in Canadian literary circles as, say, central Montreal-Group members F.R. Scott or A.J.M. Smith. Montreal-based Canadian literary critic and historian Brian Busby has begun to reverse this trend with the recent publication of his well-received full-length biography of Glassco, *A Gentleman of Pleasure* (2011), and, as a follow-up, this edition of Glassco’s selected letters, *The Heart Accepts It All*.

Glassco was by all accounts a prodigious writer of letters, and, as Busby’s brief but informative Introduction makes clear, his extant letters can be divided into three uneven groups: a couple of “precocious” letters in 1929 to Leon Edel, followed by “a decade’s silence”; a “smattering” of letters in the 1940s mainly to Robert McAlmon, an American expatriate writer whom Glassco met in Paris; and scores of letters from the 1950s to the early 1980s, “dated up to the days before his death” (7), written to dozens of recipients, including many of the best-known twentieth-century Canadian literary figures, such as Margaret Atwood, Northrop Frye, Margaret Laurence, and Irving Layton. Busby includes a nine-page section of biographical notes on Glassco’s correspondents (15-23), which illustrates the sheer diversity of his friends and associates over his long career. Notably absent from this third group of letters is any correspondence whatsoever from McAlmon, with whom Glassco had a bitter falling out in 1947 following the publication of McAlmon’s *The Nightinghous of Paris*, a *roman à clef* featuring characters based (unflatteringly, in Glassco’s view)

on Glassco and his close friend Graeme Taylor. In a footnote, Busby describes “Sudge Galbraith,” the Glassco character, as “a weak-chinned, twittering Montrealer” (48n). Insulted, Glassco never spoke to McAlmon again.

One element that stands out in this collection is Glassco’s eclectic reading and often eccentric opinions about what he read. His letters bristle with his assessments—sometimes insightful, sometimes kneejerk—of authors as diverse as William Wordsworth (96) and W.H. Auden (190), James Baldwin (173) and Oscar Wilde (246-47). His Canadian contemporaries also receive attention. Layton’s love poetry is “sexy rubbish” (105). Leonard Cohen possesses “a 5th-rate poet’s megalomania” (114). Morley Callaghan is little more than a “Toronto hick” (174). Glassco is also capable of occasional praise, however, especially when he is writing to an author about that author’s own work. In a 1972 letter to Edel, Glassco praises his biography of Henry James: “this is the best biography I’ve ever read (I’m speaking now of all five volumes)” (209). In an earlier letter addressed to Scott (though never sent, Glassco ultimately deciding that it was “too gushy” [118]), Glassco celebrates Scott’s *Selected Poems* (1966): “I don’t find your *real* greatness in the satirical pieces—cutting, hilarious and memorable though they are—but rather in the Laurentian and the other serious poems, with their brooding and even fearsome sense of an immanence of things to come” (119). In some candid remarks about the state of Canadian poetry in the twentieth century, Glassco writes in a 1964 letter to Al Purdy about the “deleterious influence of [William Carlos] Williams... The depressing thing about it is that they are writing just the way he did in 1917, which is a little late, even for Canada” (97).

Even more compelling are Glassco’s controversial views on sexuality. For Glassco, the fiction of D.H. Lawrence is most interesting because of the extent to which “the white-skinned man *washing himself*” (70) becomes a fetishized figure. “[*W*omen,” Glassco writes in a 1961 letter to his wife Elma Koolmer, “are only attractive to Lawrence as a way of making contact with men: it is the men who really interest him physically” (69). One of Glassco’s implicit criticisms of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is that this kind of thinly veiled homoeroticism, so naughtily fashionable during the *fin de siècle* and the early part of the twentieth century, is now “on the way out, and fetichism [sic] is now the in-thing” (135). In a letter to Atwood in 1971, Glassco celebrates “the chapter on rubber fetishism” in Gillian Freeman’s *The Undergrowth of Literature* (1967) and goes on to tell Atwood about his own work on rubber fetishism and the fact that he has been “a latex fan” since an early age. “[M]y true Venus,” Glassco writes, “has

always worn a frogman's suit" (194). Glassco is similarly forthright in a 1973 "love-letter" to Marion McCormick (alas, also never sent), in which he elaborates on the nature and origins of his rubber fetish in an effort to cajole McCormick into joining in with him (216). In other exchanges, Glassco replaces cheekiness with probity. In a 1968 letter to Geoffrey Wagner, a fellow writer and erotica enthusiast, he asserts that pornography is a legitimate literary genre, that it is possible to define its parameters and to subject it "to an aesthetic test" to separate "good pornography" from "the mass of rubbish" (159) that gives it such a bad name.

Busby's selection also highlights Glassco's uproarious sense of humour, always sarcastic, often R-rated. In addition to peppering his letters with numerous throwaway jokes about inebriation (33), masturbation (158), micturation (164), and other pet topics, Glassco also composed some wonderful set pieces that offer a humorous but incisive commentary on social mores and various affairs of the day. In a 1967 letter to Scott, Glassco's three-page "rundown" of a McGill convocation ceremony, in which he mocks an Anglican Bishop, a Supreme Court Justice, the Lieutenant Governor of Quebec, and Robertson Davies (129-31), is particularly memorable. In a 1978 letter to Andrew Field, a biographer of Djuna Barnes, he offers a vivid description of Daniel Mahoney, an expatriate Irish-American doctor of dubious reputation (239-40), that rivals Barnes's own colourful depiction of him (as Dr Matthew O'Connor) in her novel *Nightwood* (1936). Glassco's 1950 letter to John Sutherland following Sutherland's rejection of "The Pigtail Man" for publication in *Northern Review*, in which Glassco simultaneously defends his short story and criticizes the content of Sutherland's journal as "dreary" (53) and "rubbishy" (52), will bring a wry smile to the face of any writer who has ever dreamed of similarly berating a recalcitrant editor.

In addition to the introductory essay and the descriptions of Glassco's correspondents, Busby's apparatus includes an index and a number of explanatory footnotes. Often, these footnotes are enormously useful in filling in the gaps between the letters. Busby's explanation of the reasons behind Glassco and McAlmon's falling out in 1947 (48n), his background information about Sutherland's rejection of Glassco's short story (51n), and his contextualization of the "Slow Burn" controversy (in which a journalist called Wil Wigle got into some trouble among the literary community for writing a story entitled "Slow Burn," in which a character called John Glassco approaches a character called Margaret Atwood at a reception and tells her that "she had given him 'a great big erection'" (221n)), are just three examples. At times, however, the letters contain references

for which an explanatory footnote is not provided, which is unfortunate. This liability is owing, no doubt, not to a lack of rigour on Busby's part, but rather to the obscurity or unavailability of the other side of the correspondence. In many cases, it is simply not possible to tell what Glassco was alluding to without having his correspondent's preceding letter at hand. Busby also supplements Glassco's letters with a number of interesting photographs, many of which are rare or being published here for the first time. See in particular the image of a contemplative Scott playing on the bongos at a wedding reception (124), and of a youthful-looking Atwood and Purdy in Montreal (196), both drawn from the Avi Boxer Archives.

*The Heart Accepts It All* will be most useful to students of Glassco's work as a supplement to Busby's fine biography. However, by virtue of Glassco's broad range of correspondents, the selection also provides insight into the development of Canadian literature in general over the course of the twentieth century. Glassco's literary career was so long, his circle of acquaintances so broad, his reading so wide, his interests so varied, that his letters become a kind of mini history of modernism in Canada, narrated from Glassco's uniquely bawdy and irascible point of view.

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