Confessions of an Unrepentant Generalist: An Interview with Douglas Lochhead

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Douglas Lochhead's books have enriched Canadian letters for almost forty years. Since 1950, he has contributed steadily to literature and literary studies, approaching poetry and scholarship with equal zest. He has published 13 books of poetry, he has three others in various stages of publication, and he is at work on two more; he has taught poetry writing; and, with Raymond Souster, he ran the League of Canadian Poets during its first crucial years. His scholarship ranges widely—his *Word Index of* In Parenthesis *by David Jones*[1] is a monumental demonstration of this—but he is most prolific in the field of Canadian literature. He was general editor of the University of Toronto Press series Literature of Canada: Poetry and Prose in Reprint (21 volumes), and of the Toronto Reprint Library of Canadian Prose and Poetry series (25 volumes); he edited the *Bibliography of Canadian Bibliographies,* second edition (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1972); and he is the compiler of "A Checklist of Nineteenth Century Canadian Poetry in English," which is not yet in print. He has also compiled and edited anthologies and selections of poetry for classroom use.

Since he began his professional career, Douglas Lochhead's interests have converged in appointments at six universities. The library collections he helped to build will influence scholarship for generations. Working as a librarian, as a teacher, as an administrator, or as all three at once, he has directed students and organized instructors in the fields of bibliography, literary and publishing history, literature, and the writing of poetry. As he begins his official retirement with a three-year tour of duty as Mount Allison University's first writer in residence, he continues to work on bibliographies and concordances, to give readings and meet with students, and, above all, to write poetry.

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[1] Douglas Lochhead, *Word Index of* In Parenthesis *by David Jones* (Sackville, N.B.: Harrier, 1983).

On February 25, 1988, we chatted in his second-floor office in Barrett House, the elegant old mansion he secured a decade ago as a home for the Mount Allison Centre for Canadian Studies. Our conversation began with a discussion of the position of Maritime writers in Canada.

DL: It's my observation that, really, the number of Atlantic Provinces poets represented in Canadian anthologies is very small; they are very few in number.

LB: Few in proportion to the population, or to the number of writers, or . . .

DL: To the quality of the writing. We're either ignored or not known . . . . Many poets and novelists, for instance, are published by small regional publishers, and the marketing isn't too good, and for one reason or another the material isn't read. Books aren't bought, and they're not reviewed. So I'm a confirmed regionalist—as well as being a Canadian, of course, there's no question about that. But since I've been in the Maritimes, and even before that, I've been conscious of the need for a far better exposure and appreciation of what's being done. Soon after I moved to Sackville, a very savage review of my book *The Full Furnace* in the *Fiddlehead* labelled me a "Toronto poet." It was a revelation to me to come to the Maritimes and receive a review like that in a Maritime journal about a book which was published by McGraw-Hill Ryerson but which contained a lot of Maritime poems.

LB: Do you tend to see yourself as a Maritime poet, or as a poet who lives in the Maritimes?

DL: Yes, as a poet who lives in the Maritimes and is very committed to the area. And my geographical range is getting smaller and smaller all the time. Sackville has everything I need as far as writing poetry is concerned, whether it's the long poem or the short poem or something else. One might even extend it to Westmoreland and Kent counties and let it go at that. I am restricted to this area because of family problems, but I still feel—and this has always been my way, whether it was in Toronto or Victoria or anywhere—that I've got to know, or try to get to know, a place—not only the geography but the creatures great and small. And I've gone on from there. I think one gains confidence in this way. Certainly I felt at home here from

1975, when I arrived, simply because I'd been in the Maritimes every summer of my life, pretty well.

LB: Is that so? Had you been coming to this particular region?

DL: To Fredericton and to Saint John. Mother was born in Saint John, and I still have first cousins in Fredericton. We spent the summers at Duck Cove, just outside Saint John. It overlooks what we used to call the Shag Rocks and Partridge Highlands. At that time there were some very nice cottages there that we used to rent. Really, we lived in Ottawa as far as school was concerned, but we were waiting with the expectation that we'd be on the CPR on July 1st, or as soon as school was out, to get down to the Van Warts and the Morrisons, our relatives in Fredericton.

LB: So you went to school in Ottawa, but your heart was in the Maritimes.

DL: [Laughs.] Yes, my heart was in the Maritimes! We heard so much about it from my mother, who was a great Maritimer, but not overbearing, not tiresome—she had a healthy, natural enthusiasm about where she was from.

LB: *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* says you grew up in Ottawa and Fredericton. That doesn't mean first one and then the other, it means both at the same time, is that right?

DL: Yes, that's right. I was born in Guelph, but, I was told, I was rushed to Fredericton at the age of two or three months to be baptized, on the corner of George and Westmoreland Streets.

LB: At St. Anne's Church?

DL: No, in my maternal grandparents' house, which has now been made into apartments. It used to have a great L-shaped porch in front; it was quite a fine home. That's where I used to hang out from that time on.

LB: *The Oxford Companion* says you were Librarian at Massey College, and you were also a librarian at Dalhousie University. How did you become a librarian?

DL: Well, I took a BA in pre-med at McGill and was admitted to medicine, but instead I joined the army. Then I was in the army for almost three years during the war, but I was readmitted to medicine at McGill almost the day after VJ day. I was on leave in Montreal, you see, on my way to the Pacific with the Canadian forces. I thought I was pretty well organized. But while I was still in the army, I went to my former roommate's wedding in Toronto. I just dropped into the University of Toronto and suddenly decided I was going to take English instead. So that's what happened. I took an MA in English, and afterwards I worked as a copy writer and as an information officer in the government for two or three years.

Then I decided that I wanted to get back to university work, so I went to McGill for a library degree, which I received in '51. I was Librarian of Victoria College—later to become the University of Victoria, of course—from '51 to '52. A problem arose there about salaries and control of the college and so forth, and I thought I'd either go to the University of Washington to get a PhD in English or continue with my library work. But first, I asked myself, what is reputedly the most beautiful library or university campus in the States? And so I wrote to Cornell and I got a telegram back (this was in the days when jobs were all over the place—I hasten to say that). Sight unseen, without an interview, I went to work at Cornell in '52-'53, and I planned to stay there. I liked Cornell very much. Ithaca, on the Finger Lakes, is a wonderful place, and close to Canada. I took out first papers to become a US citizen, because I felt that, if I was going to make my career there, I was going to be a member, a citizen of that country.

However, I was offered a job at Dalhousie as University Librarian, the first professional librarian actually to be in charge of all libraries on the campus. I accepted, and I was at Dalhousie for seven years. I also did some work with the English department there. Then I was asked to go to York University when it first started. I was there for three years, as the first director of libraries and assistant professor in English. Well, I was so busy buying books, I had to work like blazes to spend the money! You can see how things have turned around. I just didn't have time to teach. Along with a number of the first people hired at York, and along with the administration there, I was under the impression that it was to be a small liberal arts college, the way Glendon College is now. Instead, we began to discover in the second and third years—'62-'63—that this was just one campus, and that there was a much larger urban university being organized out at the intersection of Jane and Steeles. I planned and helped plan two of the libraries which are now on that campus, but I began to find the job not to my liking—it was too much administration.

Just at that time, I met Robertson Davies in Peterborough—and this was at the beginning of Massey College, before it opened. He asked me if I'd be interested in going to Massey College, so I went there as librarian. The manpower alone made that a marvellous experience. For various reasons, mainly financial, I had to teach. I had a joint appointment at University College, University of Toronto, and I taught English in the graduate department for ten years at least. Here I was, without a PhD but teaching nothing but MA and PhD candidates—even in those days. I also taught in the library school, teaching history, bibliography, history of printing, this sort of thing. So up until I arrived here at Mount Allison, I'd been a librarian in some way.

LB: You came to Mount Allison from Massey in 1975?

DL: Yes. I had an office on the top floor of the library. That was the focal point, and that was it as far as Canadian Studies offices were concerned.

LB: Was that the beginning of the Centre for Canadian Studies or the Canadian Studies program?

DL: No, the program was started in 1969 by George Stanley, who was the first occupant of the Davidson Chair in Canadian Studies. It was a very good start. George retired in '75, and I succeeded him. Then it was obvious, to me at any rate, that if we were going to make any sort of impact we needed a centre. For two years, that's what I spent my time doing—teaching and trying to find a place. Fortunately, this house, the Bennett House, was given to the University. Mrs. Bennett was still alive, but she had moved elsewhere in town, and so we were able to occupy it. At the same time we changed and extended our curriculum. There are now almost 40 members of the faculty who are known as associates of the Centre, and I think it's the most active and exciting group of people on the campus from the standpoint of publication, teaching, and new ventures of one kind or another. To my mind, it's been a wonderful, cooperative kind of growth.

LB: Of course your bibliographical and library background would cut across different Canadian Studies disciplines.

DL: Oh, definitely, yes. Well, I became interested in bibliography at Dalhousie, in the old library there, not the Killam that we know now. There were a lot of eighteenth century Canadian imprints there, and these were all new to me. I didn't know what these things were all about. So really, it was a combination of that interest and the history of printing and publishing that I was intrigued with. But I was also intrigued with the book itself. Gradually I found, particularly at Massey, that I was involved in building not only a library, but a bibliographical collection. Robertson Davies and I just simply decided that the Massey College library was going to be useful for the whole University of Toronto, and that the only way to achieve that aim was to build as good a bibliographical collection as we could possibly do. That was basic. And also we considered essential the establishment of hand printing presses, so we did that. At the same time, we decided to build as complete a collection of every Canadian imprint, every impression, editon, or whatever, of Canadian poetry and prose; today, Massey has a very good fiction collection. So the Massey library and my interests both became bibliographical.

But my fascination with bibliography really began when I was teaching at the University of Toronto. That's when I learned how to work a printing press and became a hand printer, which I think is crucial to any sort of understanding of the early texts particularly. The same problems arise now, when you're using all the latest techniques—the proofing, the mistakes, the dropping of verses, lines, and so on—all of these are the same problems that confront the Shakespeare bibliographer.

LB: Have you found that administrative work and fussing with the details of bibliography and so forth interfere with writing poetry? Some might feel that it would be hard for the same person to do such dry, picky work and also write poetry.

DL: Well, I'm afraid I'm a kind of generalist to start with (and when I say afraid, I'm sort of glad), and probably my interests, my career, and my moving around reflect that. The whole question of printing, for instance—the use of the letter, the putting down of the word and the line, and so on—is really not that foreign to writing poetry, even when you're following someone else's manuscript. I found what I was doing in practical, physical terms—the mind and hand working together, the development of a form, a shape, which turns out to be a poem, a piece of prose, or whatever—I found it very close to poetry. This was in the 1960s and '70s, when there was a fair amount of concrete poetry making the rounds, and I used to compose concrete poems on the press. I would stand at the case—the container that holds the type—and compose my poems, lock them up in formes, ink them, and put a piece of paper on them—I'd have a ball. In fact, I'd use combinations of typewriter and wood type and metal type and different colors.

A&B&C&—that was a fun book, as it were, because I printed it right from the handpress, using cheap paper and putting a nice little cover on it and so on. It's an alphabet book, very Canadian in its content. There was a joy in it—I like printing! It was a nice diversion, and it was also part of my normal work as a teacher. I remember Rob Davies saying, "I was going by the printing room, and I heard your students laughing. It's the first time I ever heard laughter coming out of the class on bibliography." Well, we did laugh—we'd get ink all over ourselves, we'd make mistakes, and I also had anecdotes to tell, the things you pick up in teaching, you know. And so this kind of work was really not too foreign to writing poetry in that way.

Also, in Toronto there were people who had been printing poetry or having it printed, people like John Robert Colombo. There were other people interested in printing at the University of Toronto Press, which was just 200 yards from Massey (I actually became one of their editors), and I spent a lot of time there. We formed a wonderful little group called "Quadrats"—that's just from quadrat, a space in type. The group included some of the leading typographic designers, some hand printers, the general manager of the U of T Press printing plant, and so on. They all had printing presses in their homes, and we used to print Doug's poetry, or Will Shakespeare's poetry, or anybody's poetry.

LB: For the sake of doing the printing?

DL: Yes, exactly. We'd get together once a month. So there was this sort of happy relationship beween the printed word, printing it and also writing it. I must say, I began writing poetry when I was in high school, in Ottawa, and was encouraged there, and at McGill I was encouraged, too.

Before I ever thought of being a librarian, I was being groomed to be a doctor—that would have been a disaster for humanity!

LB: Earlier, it occurred to me that you would need a certain logical ability and an analytical habit of mind to succeed in your science courses and enjoy them enough to think that you were going to go on to medical school. It seems to me that those same intellectual qualities are necessary for a bibliographer.

DL: Yes.

LB: Your having given up medicine because you liked English better—does that show two different sides of your intellectual make-up?

DL: Yes, it does. My father was a research scientist, and quite a distinguished one in his field of microbiology, and my paternal grandfather had been a professor at McGill and had been in those days, in the early part of the twentieth century, both an entomologist and a geologist. I spent many spring breaks from high school and university with my grandmother at Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue, just outside Montreal. My grandfather had been one of the founding professors at Macdonald College there. My grandmother was a widow by then, but my grandfather's library was there, and I spent weeks just reading—the sort of thing one wants to do on a sabbatical. Here I was in high school, and in that library there was everything from Darwin to Dickens, and some of the French writers—Balzac. I can remember all these authors, and also there was a fair amount of poetry, mostly nineteenth century. It was a marvellous place, where my grandmother allowed me to sit in the study and read. I think that reading, along with having read my grandfather's papers—the ones I could understand—had a lot to do with my interest in science. I still have this sort of interest in science, with no proficiency in it that I can see. But there is that side to me which I am happy about.

LB: Do you think that side of you affects the way you write poetry? To me, your poetry seems condensed.

DL: Yes, very much so.

LB: Your poetry seems to have some object, some kind of objective reality to which the poems are attached, rather than relating solely to your own psyche. What I see as the excessive self-regard of a lot of poetry just isn't there. Your own psyche has something to do with your poetry, of course, but there's also some meat or some muscle to it.

DL: That's interesting. I have felt that just lately, say, in relation to *High Marsh Road,* which is fairly personal, but it was also whittled and condensed, as you say. It's also true of things I've done since then—*Vigils and Mercies,* which I've completed now—it's in thirty parts, prose poems. Twenty have appeared in the *Antigonish Review,* and the final ten will appear in the next issue, number 71, later this year. They're quite intense, I think in the way you describe. They're also highly personal, but I hope perhaps they're personal for other people, too. And they're very local. I could show you a picture of the house where they're located. In the poems, I am in the house. It's a very romantic, old-hat theme, but I just developed a passion for that place. It's not far from here, about ten or fifteen minutes, overlooking Cumberland Basin. Tarlane Editions (*Antigonish Review*) plans to publish *Vigils and Mercies* in book form, probably in 1989. But here is a condensation that is also highly personal. What I was getting at is simply to say that these two rather long sequences, *Vigils and Mercies* and *High Marsh Road,* are both personal, but they are both condensed.

LB: Readers need to be involved in poetry, and they become involved if the personal aspect of the poem relates to something external in which the reader, as well as the poet, can be interested.

DL: Oh, absolutely. Quite right.

LB: You say that the poetry you've written recently is in long sequences. In her article about you in the Summer, 1985 issue of *ECW,*[2] Ann Munton concluded that the form of your long poems is related to the locale. Does this still strike any kind of a note with you?

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[2] Ann Munton, "Return, Toronto to the Tantramar: Regional Poetics, the Long Poem, and Douglas Lochhead," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 31 (1985): 251-61.

DL: Yes, it does. It's not just being here in Sackville that's prompted this. I've asked myself what poets I have spent a fair amount of time reading, or looking at, or skipping through, time and time again. William Carlos Williams was one. I just liked the way he looked at things. I didn't want to look at the red wheelbarrow the way he did, but I was glad that he could find something about that wheelbarrow that made it somehow become a very strong image.

And then I thought of Pound. I like Pound in places, the way I think most people do who can tolerate him at all, but probably the poet I . . . you notice that these are all Americans. I'm delighted to say that there's a kind of North American feeling in them which I identify with far more readily, I've found, than I do with most Canadian poetry. There are very few Canadian poets that I feel have influenced me, that I want to go back to. Frank Scott, of course, I could go back to any time, and there are others I could name.

But the other poet I admire most is Charles Olson and his use of archival material in the *Maximus Poems,* the Maximus letters. That is something that I would love to do for Sackville, for Westmoreland-Kent, for New Brunswick, for the Maritimes. I'll be quite frank—I've made notes, and I've started writing a poem of this kind. I did a fair amount of it in Edinburgh, of all places. I was at the Canadian Studies Centre there, but, in spirit, I was back here with my feet in the sea. At any rate, I would love to do this, but I don't want to imitate Olson the way Robert Kroetsch did at one stage. It's like painting the way Van Gogh painted—you're just doing another Van Gogh only not as well. But I can't shake Olson, the way he looks at history, the way he looks at the present, the way he treats his personal past, all of it out of Gloucester.

And here again is another connection—New England and the whole Atlantic seabord. When I was in Halifax, one of the poets I liked very much was Robert Lowell, particularly his earlier things. I've read his later things, too, but I found that his earlier poems were very Maritime, if I may use that expression. They were very rooted in the Atlantic coast. He came out of a distinguished family, for instance, and there were comparable families in this part of the world. Everything was understandable. Well, Lowell hadn't done much in the long poem, but since then, he's done long historical sequences, various other sequences of sonnets, and so on. Another poet I like for his wildness is

John Berryman. All of these are long-poem people. I also feel that this is the way the twentieth century needs to be interpreted.

LB: Not in little bits and pieces?

DL: No, but in a kind of long succession. Everyone says, well, any poet's work is in sequence, but this can be a much more formal and contrived sequence even though it's made up of fragments of all sorts of bits and pieces. This is really what intrigued me about coming here, and yet here I found in myself this interest in these twentieth-century American poets. I had also been interested in the poems of René Char, translated from the French. He was an influence on John Thompson, too. I only knew John from my arrival until his death in 1976. I was with him the day he died. We saw a lot of each other and shared this interest in René Char. Well, there's another one: Char writes long sequences. So there was that built-in interest which had been in me before I came here. Then there was the place. I think Ann was right, that the place sort of triggered this sleeping interest in the long poem. Now I go out to the marsh because I want to run around with the birds and so forth, and also I like the diary form. When I was working on *High Marsh Road,* I could hardly wait to get home to write down one entry or two entries, or five if I had been slack over the past week—and they came out I think relatively well, without too much repetition. Actually, *High Marsh Road* goes for 365 entries, not just for four months. I kept the diary for an entire year, but Oberon Press told me that if they were going to accept it I would have to cut it—they couldn't afford the paper to publish the whole thing! Anyway, it's hard to avoid repetition when you're writing 365 entries in a diary.

LB: Yes, especially since you're thinking back over what you did before and forward over what you're going to do next, and one's life, in spite of one's best efforts, tends to be much the same day after day.

DL: Yes, exactly. You talk about the weather, and there's a lot of weather here! And I'm beginning to think it's the most important topic there is. So there was *High Marsh Road. The Panic Field* is another diary experiment, then *Vigils and Mercies* came along, and now I'm working on a long poem on Henry Alline and another on Brébeuf.

LB: Just like E.J. Pratt?

DL: [Laughs.] It's just about Brébeuf, not his brethren—they'll be lurking back in the shadows! My return to the Maritimes not only triggered the long poem, but it just triggered writing for me. I've done much more writing here since '75 than I had done previously.

LB: You've published six books of poetry since you came to Sackville. As well as poetry, do you write stories or novels?

DL: I've tried novels, and I would love dearly to write one, but. . . . Next year, Goose Lane is bringing out my edition, *Letters from Helen.* This is a collection of the letters my mother, Helen Van Wart, wrote home to her parents in Fredericton when she was studying music in Leipzig in 1913-14. It's illustrated with photos of Fredericton and Leipzig, and it tells about the bohemian life of music students at that time. Then, I've got three new poetry books done but so far not published. *Vigils and Mercies* is finished. *Upper Cape Poems* will be published by Fiddlehead Poetry Books, probably in 1990. There's another book which is quite an impressive one physically—that's "Dykelands," a collection of 26 of Thaddeus Holownia's photographs and 26 of my poems. And I'm working on the two other things I've mentioned, "Homage to Henry Alline," a series based on Alline's journal and his other writings, and my long poem "Brébeuf."

LB: Yet it was before this very productive period that you and Raymond Souster got the League of Canadian Poets going. When did that start?

DL: It's a bit shadowy in its history. The League began as a result of discussions, I think instigated by Raymond Souster. There were a lot of poets in Toronto, and they needed a voice. Poets needed some sort of vehicle, or a way of dealing with government and the monies that were being made available. The Canada Council was taking an interest in this sort of thing. Poetry readings were becoming more fashionable, and they needed organization both locally and Canada-wide and abroad. For various reasons also, there was the question of royalties, and there was the question of dealing with publishers in a united way if this were required. But among all of these factors, probably the greatest benefit was just to get this wild group of animals together. I can say, having been involved as vice-chairman of the League its first four working years, well, I felt as if I was ringmaster in a circus, let's say, or keeper of a rather well-stocked zoo. But at any rate various people have said it was their idea. Ralph Gustafson has said something about this, I understand, and also Al Purdy. I think they were all involved in the initial discussions. I wasn't.

But in 1968, at Rochdale College, when Rochdale was more or less what it was supposed to have been, Frank Scott chaired the initial meeting of the people who were interested in joining the League of Canadian Poets. I'm trying to remember the number that might have been there from across Canada—there must have been anywhere from 60 to 75, let's say. At that meeting Ray Souster was elected chairman and I was elected vice-chairman, which really meant secretary-treasurer. We had to begin from nothing. As a result we had no office, we had no secretary, we had nothing except good will, though there was some carping from people like Louis Dudek—well, he wouldn't have anything to do with it. He thought a Canadian Academy should be formed.

LB: Really?

DL: Oh, yes, consisting of about 24 select. Layton found no time for us at all—that didn't worry anybody. But carping was to be expected, really—you wouldn't expect anything else. So Ray and I being in Toronto—this is often the way the establishing of Canadian things goes—we could keep in touch by phone. Now I had the most marvellous lady working with me in Massey College library. She was the other half, or 75%, of the library. She was my secretary—she had been my secretary at York and then decided that she'd like to go to Massey, too. Her name was Pat Kennedy. She did all the paperwork and handled all the mailings. Massey College absorbed all these initial costs that would later become quite substantial items on the League's budget.

Our way of working was this. Ray was, at that time, working underground in securities in the Imperial Bank of Commerce. He wasn't free until five o'clock, and so we would have our executive meetings, Ray and I, at Massey College. He'd come up and have dinner, and then we'd meet and decide things. Or the phone would ring at home, and my younger daughter Mary would say, "Oh, I hope it's not that Ray Souster! You'll be on the phone and I won't be able to call anybody." We were on the phone many times for hours deciding on one thing or another, setting the pay structure, organizing poetry readings, sending out lists of members, bills, or membership notices. We started a little newsletter called *Poetry Canada.* I don't think it goes out now, but I designed it, gave it a title and so on, and saw it through a commercial printer. This is the sort of thing I did in addition to teaching in two faculties and running the Massey College library, which was in its building stages. Well, we lasted for four years—no one else wanted to do this dog work.

LB: Others wanted the organization?

DL: Oh, certainly, they wanted the organization—we had some very good support—and yet there were a lot of people who just didn't have time for this kind of thing.

LB: Of course, you had plenty of time.

DL: [Laughs.] Oh, absolutely! So we set up conferences, we got money from the Canada Council, and we organized tours. We had these things going, and we had the annual general meetings in Toronto. But then Ray and I decided that, after doing all this from '68 to '72, I think it was, we'd had enough. We got Doug Barbour and Stephen Scobie from the University of Alberta to take over—this would give the West a chance to get in on it—and we met with them and arranged for the transfer. At the same time, we also located someone to become an executive director. This was Jerry Lampert.

LB: So the executive director would be in Toronto, and the executive in Edmonton?

DL: Yes, Jerry had his office in Toronto and began to undertake a lot of the sort of thing that I'd been doing. Rather at the last minute, Ray found that he wasn't able to go to Edmonton to chair that annual general meeting, so I did. It was quite an experience, because I had to have a budget, people had to say whether they were coming or not, and I had to get money from the Canada Council. But I was beseiged with last minute requests for money. At three in the morning I'd get a call from someone in Vancouver asking, "Can I drop up for the next day of the meeting? Will there be money?" So I just said, "Sure." Somehow I wasn't thrown into jail. But at the transfer of offices, I simply went through some little formality. Frank Scott was in the audience, and he said he'd never seen any member of an executive move with such rapidity and relish as I did when I handed over the reins to Doug Barbour. I leaped off the stage into the seats, and I was never seen again!

So that's how the League got started. It was really through the efforts of three of us in the first three or four years of the League—Ray Souster, myself, and Pat Kennedy. She wasn't a member of the League, she was just doing this for us. Since then, Jerry got it done much more professionally, and after his unfortunate death, others took over the administration as if it were any ordinary kind of office.

LB: I wondered how the League of Canadian Poets developed from what I supposed must have been a little club, but I can see now that it started at a different level of organization altogether.

DL: Yes, there was a lot of discussion before '68 by the people in the North Hatley group and in Toronto, and I suppose among those corresponding with one another, but the League really didn't gel until the Rochdale meeting. It was quite a gang—Robin Skelton, bill bissett, I think Bowering was there, a lot from the west, and a lot from the far west.

LB: Do younger poets, people who are just starting to write and publish, tend to join the League of Canadian Poets?

DL: Yes. There are now two membership categories. To become a full member, one must have published. That work is submitted to a membership committee, the work is judged, and from then on, depending on what the committee says, the applicant is allowed membership or else asked perhaps to submit again in a couple of years. Then there's the category of associate membership that takes in the younger poets. I think it's done a lot for younger poets, there's no question.

LB: But younger poets do tend to join.

DL: Oh, definitely, and the older ones are in the minority.

LB: I suppose that's as it should be.

DL: Well, yes, sure it is, absolutely. One of the great people who was there for many years was Frank Scott. He chaired that initial meeting, and he was always there, and other people such as Ron Everson and Earle Birney. For me, it was a very pleasant association amongst fellow poets. It's gone through some silly stages, but it's still relatively helpful.

LB: In your 1985 *ECW* essay on regionalism,[3] you remarked on a renaissance of creative writing in Atlantic Canada. Do you think this is still going on?

DL: Well, that was sort of a wild statement in a way—it may have been born out of my enthusiasm when I wrote the article, probably in 1983 or so. I feel that there are more people involved, there are more publishers coming and going, having their ups and downs in the region than in the past. At the time, I based my remarks on a couple of years of giving an advanced writing course here at Mount Allison. I saw a fair interest in the students and younger people, and there were some good writers among them. I think really that was what prompted me. I also felt that there were people in the Maritimes, as I mentioned before, who were writing but who had not really received the recognition they should. I don't want to mention names, except that the major journals emanate from other places. Granted, we have the *Dalhousie Review*, which covers a broad spectrum. At the risk of speaking against the *Fiddlehead*, I think I would rate the *Antigonish Review* as being a little more liberal, and not only are they publishing local or regional poets and fiction writers, but they're also publishing people from the States, as the *Fiddlehead* does. But the *Antigonish Review* is concentrating on I think some of the major influences—"dead" poets, as they say in *Educating Rita*—people like David Jones, for instance, and his *In Parenthesis,* Ezra Pound, and Williams. And then they're also dealing in a literary way with some of the Canadian artists. Peter Sanger, of Nova Scotia Agricultural College, is a splendid critic—he's their poetry editor. He has done work on Borduas, Emily Carr, and others, and he also did a very fine study of John Thompson's work.

I think there's a renaissance, but we're getting a little bureaucratic. I mean, there are newsletters from the

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[3] Douglas Lochhead, "Atlantic Regionalism and Literature: Some Bibliographic Comments," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 31 (1985): 262-66.

Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia, and also New Brunswick has a part in it, and I'm happy—I'm all for supporting that sort of thing. But there's a lot of personal promotion in it, ego tripping, that becomes very very obvious and very very sick, even disgusting. Elbowing one's way ahead of others and this sort of thing—to me, it's sort of obnoxious. But it doesn't affect me personally much at all—I said it was disgusting, that's a little too strong. And it's ephemeral. As far as I'm concerned, it's something that will blow out the window quicker than the Moncton *Transcript* or the Sackville *Tribune.* So I think there is a growing awareness, what one might call a renaissance, but the big novelists aren't here now.

LB: What about David Adams Richards?

DL: Yes, how could I forget him, a wonderful guy and an excellent writer. No, and if you have one like that, how many others do you need?

LB: I don't know David well, but I don't see him as one to participate in collective things or to organize groups. It seems to me that he simply does what he does, and does it very well.

DL: Yes. He was writer in residence at UNB, and this is the principal responsibility of a writer in residence—to write. That's what I've been trying to do as writer in residence at Mount Allison, but this is the program's first year, and we're finding out what a writer in residence should do or not do. I don't think I've done quite as much writing as I'd like to have done, but I'll make up for it in the summer.

LB: Is being writer in residence supposed to be something like being on sabbatical—generating something to show that you've used the time profitably?

DL: That's right, exactly, except that my deadlines are not going to be set by my term as writer in residence. I'll just do the work.

LB: How long is your term as writer in residence?

DL: It's for three years, until 1990.

LB: That will give you enough time to accomplish something.

DL: Oh, yes, and it's a good way to spend the first years of retirement, so-called. That's quite an adjustment—it's interesting.

LB: Do you miss teaching?

DL: Not really, no, but I gave a reading in Gwen Davies's class on Tuesday afternoon. I enjoyed that, and I've given one public reading. You don't get too much feedback from students, but they don't forget, at least, if they are anything like I was. I've always remembered the poets I heard, whether they were good, mediocre, or bad.

LB: Yes, I remember Wilson MacDonald.

DL: I remember Alfred Noyes!

LB: Well, students do tend to think that if a person's work is in a book, that person must be dead. To see the living person there, reading from a book he or she has written, gives a sense of the reality of the writer.

DL: Yes, passing the book around. You asked me earlier about the connection between being here in Sackville and writing. Now, I came from a very highly charged pool of talent in Toronto. Here are some of the writers who were at Massey: Robertson Davies, Northrop Frye, Douglas LePan, Robert Finch, Claude Bissell, Charles Stacey—historians, biographers, novelists, critics, poets. I used to have lunch with these people every day, and we were fellows of the college, so we'd be there running the college and so on together. I came from that rather highly-charged atmosphere to Mount Allison. I met John Thompson—that was great. But out of my experience here what has made it so great has been the friendship—and this may sound wild for some academic to say, but it's a fact—it's been the marvellous loyalty and friendship of a number of people in Canadian Studies. It's just made all the difference. I got the sense that, well, if he writes poetry, that's good. That came through from deans, the present dean, from people in the English department—not all of them, of course [laughs]—but this was marvellous. This helped create a kind of condition or atmosphere that triggered me.

LB: When you say that the atmosphere at Massey was highly charged, do you mean that you felt as if there wasn't too much that you could do there? or that you had to do what others expected?

DL: Well, there was a lot of that. It was a heady atmosphere, and also you could not help but—well, to work with Robertson Davies, I don't mean this in a critical way, but he's a very strong personality, he's a very productive writer. He is the finest boss I've ever had, and yet he allowed me to go on my own, make all sorts of decisions—anywhere now you'd need committees, search committees, and whatever—but Massey was dominated by his powerful personality and the personalities of others. I felt more comfortable, I think, when I was away from the place. The thing was, I just somehow felt that I wanted to do something on my own a little more. The college had been created, the library was done, and I was working too hard, I told myself. Mount Allison didn't look like any sort of haven, because I immediately began working on the Centre, establishing a Chair of Maritime Studies, this sort of thing. Then I got into different things in a locale and in a small town, which is also an experience in itself.

LB: So you were able to flower?

DL: Yes. It was quite a switch, but no culture shock, except for missing friends in Toronto. I consider the people I've mentioned my friends, but it made me so sore when Toronto acquaintances asked why I would consider living in such a god-forsaken place as Sackville. Not that I didn't have support at Massey—I had so much support I couldn't keep up with it! The thing is, when I came here, to me it was almost an open field to run in. Canadian Studies wasn't close-knit the way it perhaps is now in some respects, and I was able to do with that what I wanted. But as I say, the friendships here of the people I work with made this possible.