

# MODERN ACADIAN POETRY

*Introduced and Translated  
by Fred Cogswell*

**S**CHOLARS INTERESTED in obtaining a detailed knowledge of modern Acadian literature may do so by reference to a remarkably limited number of sources.

The first serious representation and treatment of Acadian poetry in a Canadian magazine occurred in Volume II, number 5, of *liberté*, published in Montreal in the Fall of 1969. Poets represented in this issue are: Léonard Forest, Raymond LeBlanc, Roger Savoie, Marie-Josée Marcil, Herménégilde Chiasson, and Romeo Savoie. Other Acadian material included a French translation by Léonard Forest of extracts from Longfellow's *Évangéline* accompanied by an article entitled "Évangéline qui es-tu"; an extract from Placide Gaudet's "Le Grand Dérangement"; "Survol historique de l'Acadie" by Michel Roy; "La Récupération d'un Passé Ambigu" by Camille Richard; "Notes sur l'Acadie" by Dorval Brunelle; "La Répression en Acadie" by Roger Savoie; "La Violence" by Monique Gauvin; "Interview avec Michel Blanchard" by Dorvel Brunelle; "L'Art en Acadie" by Pierre Villon; and "Journal de Bord" by Jean-Guy Pilon.

In January 1972, *La Revue de l'Université de Moncton* presented a 118-page anthology devoted to Acadian poetry. Not only did it present a large collection of verse in which almost every modern Acadian poet was represented, but it included two excellent articles on modern Acadian poetry, "Bilan des 20 Dernières Années" by Pierre Roy and Gérard LeBlanc, and "Sur le Production Poétique au Nouveau-Brunswick" by Alain Masson. Featured as well by extensive extracts from their work, interviews, articles and bibliography are two of the leading Acadian poets, Ronald Després and Raymond LeBlanc.

*ellipse*, No. 16, brought out in 1974, in Sherbrooke, Quebec, an issue devoted to Maritime poetry in both French and English. In it Acadian poetry is represented in translation. The poets selected are Raymond LeBlanc, Herménégilde Chiasson, André Arsenault, Ulysse Landry, Guy Arsenault, Léonard Forest, Calixte Duguay, and Guy Letendre. There is, moreover, an excellent article by Pierre-André Arcand, translated into English and entitled "Poets from the End of the Earth".

Also published in 1974 was *Ecrits du Canada Francais* No. 38, in which Pierre-André Arcand presented selections from the work of Raymond LeBlanc, Herménégilde Chiasson, Ulysse Landry, Guy Letendre, André Arsenault, Guy Arsenault, Calixte Duguay, Raynald Robichaud, Rino Morin, and Melvin Gallant.

Readers whose curiosity about Acadian poetry is whetted by a reading of these periodicals are referred to Les Editions d'Acadie, P.O. 2006, Moncton, which is issuing attractive, paperback volumes of the leading Acadian poets in series. The series to date comprises the following books: *Acadie Rock* (1973) by Guy Arsenault; *Mourir à Scoudouc* (1974) by Herménégilde Chiasson; *Paysages en Contrabande* (1974) by Ronald Després; *Saisons Antérieures* (1973) by Léonard Forest; and *Cri de Terre* (1974) by Raymond LeBlanc.

In order to give readers some idea of the nature and extent of the revolution that has occurred in Acadian poetry over the past two and a half decades, I have included in the representative anthology which accompanies this article two poems from a book, *Poèmes de mon Pays*, privately printed in Moncton in 1949 by the Reverend Napoléon P. Landry. Father Landry's work is representative of the Acadian poetry which preceded it. Written in quatrains of alternately rhyming alexandrine and using language that is formal and stilted, this work illustrates the insidious partnership that can exist between a conventionally accepted art-form and a conventionally accepted idea of a society, both of which bear little or no relationship to the reality that they are supposed to represent.

It is well realized that words, particularly symbols, can on occasion be revolutionary. What is not so well recognized is that words, particularly symbols, can weigh like a dead weight upon creativity in any real sense. Symbols may crystallize out of the warm and volatile broth of experience, but by the time they have taken shape the broth has cooled considerably and the ferment has died down; in fact the very solidity of symbols makes them the ice that keeps future ferment to a minimum. So it was in Acadia. The remnant of a people, for the most part poor and engaged in primary industries, a Francophone enclave in an Anglophone world, eked out, through hard work and self-denial, an underprivileged temporal existence for approximately two centuries. In their symbolic and eternal vision of themselves, however, they were, reinforced by the sacraments of their Church, God's chosen people, expelled like the ancient Hebrews from the promised land, and on their return, compelled to live in the nooks and crannies that the Canaanites had not filled up in the interim. At the same time, in their religion, in their language, in their family solidarity, and in their primary pursuits, they enjoyed a moral superiority over the English, a superiority which, if they remained patient and obeyed their God, would be translated miraculously into a temporal Acadia that was, somehow or other, one with their spiritual vision. And their poets, like Father Landry and the Abbé F. M. Lanteigne, celebrated in their poems not the

matter of every day — there was really very little to celebrate there — but the eternal myths that were embodied in the words: Church, home, and language, and for that purpose, the alexandrines devised at the French court for myths as far from reality as their own were as good a form as any to use — particularly since their rhythms had both the formal stiffness and sonority that were associated with the religious service that stood at the core of their mythical structure.

This mythical structure collapsed after World War II, when for the first time in their history, the Acadians were presented with a genuine opportunity to develop in other directions than the symbolic. World War II had broken down considerably the relative isolation in which so many Acadians had lived and had led, particularly in Moncton, Fredericton, and St. John, to an increased urbanization of the Acadian population. These trends were enhanced by the expansion, then inaugurated and still continuing, of both the Provincial and Federal government services — an expansion in which all Francophones enjoyed a built-in advantage — and by the equality of opportunity programme introduced by the Louis B. Robichaud government, which by a reorganization of the tax structure and the administrative base of the school system, and by the establishment of the University of Moncton provided the Acadians with educational opportunities comparable to those which their English-speaking counterparts in the Maritime provinces had long enjoyed. As a result, large numbers of Acadians were not slow in exchanging the myths of their fathers for the very pragmatic advantages of living in the present and accepting the values of the present, whatever those values may be. Among these were the new poets.

It seems to me that the current crop of Acadian poets, Herménégilde Chiasson, Ronald Deprés, Léonard Forest, Raymond LeBlanc, and Guy Arsenault, represented here, have been able, in a way that few poets of any culture or generation have been able to do, to “put first things first, and second things second, and so on”. What strikes one about their work, in both form, sensibility, and content, is the way in which it expresses primarily a personal reaction, and only secondarily, incidentally, or at a distance, a doctrinaire or dogmatic conviction. These poets have been incredibly lucky in their appearance in Acadia at this particular time. Emancipated at one and the same time from both the alexandrine and from the Acadian myth in which it had been enshrined, they can be their non-rhetorical and non-traditional selves in poetry to a degree and extent impossible to any other poets writing currently in Canada’s cultural milieu.

There are signs, however, that they are not content with such freedom — which is a heavy responsibility for any one to bear — but are turning for direction in both an ideological and formal sense to their contemporaries in the province of Quebec. Here again they are fortunate. Had their renaissance coincided with the heyday of the existentialism of which Saint-Denys-Garneau and Anne Hébert were the chief representatives, it is doubtful whether they would have accom-

plished more than exchange one high-sounding vacuity for another. Fortunately, they discovered the new Quebec poetry under the aegis of Gaston Miron and his successors, a poetry often doctrinaire and rhetorical but committed to an essentially personal and honest response by the individual to the circumstances of his immediate surroundings. Since the struggle between the Francophones and the Anglophones in the Maritime provinces has been much less acute than it has been in Quebec, the mixture of personal experience and doctrinaire opinion which characterized poetry in French in Canada today is better balanced in the work of Acadian poets than it is in that of their Quebec contemporaries. I am reminded in this connection of a joint reading I once gave at Edmundston, New Brunswick, a few years back. On this occasion, I read translations from various Quebec poets while a member of the staff of the Collège de St. Louis read the originals. After the reading I was talking to an Acadian woman about the readings and she said: "When you read those poems, they sounded like Canadian poems, but when he read them they were *séparatiste* poems."

In the current Anglophile milieu of conflicting styles and poetic theories, where almost every review is a manifesto for one school of bardolatry against all others, I envy these Acadian poets, who are able still to speak for themselves in their own way and at the same time speak in tune to most of their peers without violating the reality of their time and their place. I hope they may continue to keep their separate voices and adjure the inevitable unifying myth-making tendency to which art is prone for yet a little while longer — at least long enough to lay a sufficiently complex literary groundwork to build on as to ensure that no myths as simplistic as those of "Evangeline" and "the Lord's chosen people" will ever arise again in Acadia to support the inherent laziness of the human spirit. Although they can normally bear to look at unshrouded reality about as long as the naked eye can bear to look at the sun, poets should be encouraged, as long as possible, to remain "eagles of the spirit".

W. P. Landry

## THE VOICE OF THE ACADIAN SOIL

*following the great expulsion*

I saw, as in a mist, them leaving on that day,  
 All my proud peasants, the ones I loved so much;  
 Broken-hearted toward the shore they went away:  
 And in the sea the great sails swelled to the wind's touch.

The wind bore them off on a limitless sea  
 To the globe's four corners at the tempest's will . . .  
 And all alone in my mortal anxiety,  
 In my unending dream, I remained sad and still.

For one hundred and fifty years my nutritious land  
 Gave them without number great sheaves of wheat;  
 And all my billows brought them fish to hand  
 From silvery depths in beams of love and light.

I still can see them land upon my banks once more . . .  
 In previous times the sunshine made the young corn swell;  
 Their arms deprived the ocean of its very shore,  
 And everywhere their songs rang out a waking bell.

My fields from their labours bore their abundant best.  
 My valleys were filled with a low-pitched moaning.  
 And my orchards reblooming in a dancing mist  
 Embalmed with their odours the light airs of Spring.

I still remember hearing their laughter crack  
 That rang out so loud and mocking, yet so true!  
 Under their feet, they felt signs of an Empire's track  
 And a forest of their songs twittered in the blue.

In my ardent breast I felt life's vital sprout,  
 I felt the pain of labour in my splitting thighs.  
 And a mighty clamour that nothing could put out  
 Rose from Grand-Pré hills in evening's blazing skies.

In their cottages the hearth-logs flamed so high  
 Both day and night their doors stood wide open still;  
 So quick their table was to greet the passers-by  
 That good-luck was flowing like a noiseless rill.

How oft at night I have seen, by a flash of flame,  
 A group of children with gold ribbons in their hair  
 Singing before the altar hymns to the Virgin's name . . .  
 Like a stained-glass window I still can see them there.

I have seen my ripe ears at the Divine Sacrifice  
 Becoming the "Body of Christ" amid incense rife,  
 And the juice of my grape to my chalice-voice  
 Becoming, as God wills, "A draught of Life".

There flowed from out those souls an infinite love  
 At the breath of the Spirit which came down from the skies,  
 The goodness of the Most-High seared them from above,  
 And the truth of the saint shone out in their eyes.

And I still see once more, as I bend the bough,  
 To the holy place on a sabbath holy day  
 The gold monstrance passing in procession slow:  
 A whole people worship God the Lord in this way.

Then like a Shroud the Stillness came down over me . . .  
 The priest, alas! never returned to me to bless;  
 Full before the light I could no longer see,  
 And I saw myself dying in my own distress.

On my evening shores the sea no longer sang,  
 Alone, I died in my great sorrow and pain.  
 Was there ever so great a grief in course of time?  
 Death, with his black flag, covered my coffin again.

\* \* \*

While seeing them leave, however, as you recall  
 In one last look the supreme comfort for my grief,  
 They spoke to me softly, "We shall be faithful".  
 Love is more powerful in his ways than death.

Already I foresee under a flaming sky  
 Their bands return from what lies beyond human days!  
 O miracle of heaven! Inconceivable joy!  
 Lord, may Your name be blessed forever and always.

## AND I DREAMED OF A GREAT BLACK SUN

### III

the pope is dead  
the king is dead  
the school master has swallowed poison.  
i have no more king  
nor master  
nor holy father to rule over me.  
the queen is dead with her king  
the pope is dead his dogma as well  
and the little school mistress no longer  
teaches anything but love.  
i have no more law  
nor fear nor restraint  
i am punished no more,  
i reign

### IV

You know what they have done.  
You know,  
Pale, at the end of the garden, the bust of Homer.  
They have killed Homer.

Do you remember at Chartres  
the blue fire of stained-glass,  
inviolate.  
They have put Chartres out

Chartres,  
Homer,  
Phedre

Phedre, you recall, wept his dainty grief aloud  
In evening discussions, and his historic plight  
Stirred up the passions of that infatuated crowd  
For his tearful mistress. Phedre is killed tonight.

They have killed Phedre

*Ronald Després (1935- )*

## HYMN TO SPRING

After deliberating in long whiteness  
The fields decided not to wait for Easter  
In order to come alive

The whip of fever lashes the forces of life  
The thickets hurry to burst their fallow  
The streams, to sacrifice their sharks of ice  
On the greedy altar of the sun.

That levelling dirtiness in the streets  
Soils equally with muddy streams  
A poodle's fastidious paws  
And the already filthy slums!

## I HAVE LOVED YOU

I have loved you  
For your simple manner of nibbling small clouds  
Of those small drops of sunshine at the nape of your neck,  
Those ripples of sap, from you  
Or from maples aflame

I have loved you  
Because of my hut you bartered for a castle  
And furnished with joy  
Decorating our bare walls and marrow

I have loved you  
As bones cling to flesh  
As oceans to a seaman  
And like the gentle sails of vanished ones,  
Replete with the velvet of the waves.

## I THOUGHT OF YOU ALL DAY

I thought of you all day

You were there, hiding behind every moment's dune  
You were behind every door  
And all doors stood wide open  
To the theatre of the four winds



I saw your brow, your lips, your hair,  
Adorning the face of every passer-by  
That I noticed;  
I saw your footsteps in every crowd  
Your hands in every prayer  
And your voice in the flow of words.

I cried out for you to give an answer, to smile at me  
To tap me on the shoulder  
But every time  
You vanished from the reach of my voice  
To be reborn elsewhere.

My day has taken root in you  
Like a tree springing from nowhere  
And see how its strange sap  
Dulls the memory  
That twilight brings to life in me.

## SILENT SAP

I am going to show you  
horrible sepulchres  
in the crannies of your laugh

I am going to make you tread  
on ferns of hate  
in your heart's flower-bed

By the fingers of our childhood  
I shall lead you to our middle ages  
And to our patient sand-castles  
that have no panic of dungeons and towers.

I shall lead you to a tree  
which we shall clasp as high as hope  
until our bony stems crack out their wedding song.

And we shall be as one  
as long as this long hunt for sap shall last.

*Raymond Leblanc (1945- )*

## WINTER

I knocked on your door with my hurt hand  
Winter having come in the human dark

I knocked on your door with my two hands  
One already frozen and red from the white crystal  
On which the moon had lain down

I knocked on your door with the wind of my mouth  
But the wind got caught on a cloud of ice

I knocked on your door with the beams of my eyes  
But these were glued to the cold wood

I knocked on your door with the silence of my body  
Straight as a tree  
But the leaves at the end of the branches were slain

I knocked on your door and I understood too late  
That there was no one at home

And the door nailed me to death with its frozen stillness

## LAND-CRY

I live in a land-cry with roots of fire  
Buried beneath the stones of loneliness

I have slowly plowed the dreadful kelp  
In a bitter season of rain  
As if to slake the thirst in a crab's heart

A phantom ship I have risen to the river's surface  
Toward the fulness of human tides  
And I have thrown the crowd to the promises of the future

Tomorrow  
We shall live as secret planets  
With slow anger and the upright wisdom of dreams

I live in a land-cry above hopes  
Loosened on every lip  
Already moored to the sunlight on glowing trawlers

And every word abolishes the hard lie  
The shameful caverns of our silence

## ACADIA

If it is hard for me to live in you with my shifting sky-line  
People of my land unreal through lack of frontiers and futures  
It is because I am too small to have you reborn in me  
Faceless men breastless women  
Tongueless children

If it is sad for me to reach out my two hands to you  
To rejoin you to touch you wherever you may be  
It is because you are too distant and scattered everywhere  
People of my land who lack your true identities

If it is impossible for me at this time to dance with you  
To the jiggling rhythm of your folk-songs  
People of my land do not be angry  
I dream of your illusions and your stifling dreams

If it is agony for me to look you straight in the eye  
While the dial of a misplaced sun divides the day  
It is because Acadia cradles you in her memories  
In her ghosts in her night an unreal symphony

People of my land  
Without identity  
And without life.

*Herménégilde Chiasson (1946- )*

*Between the Season of Extravagant Love  
and the Season of Raspberries*

You went away opening cracks in the April ice that melted so fast,  
without noticing the spring as it hastened to come that year with a  
moist March wind sticking the leaves to their trees.

And you went away so fast that a part of me was exiled with you;  
went away by roads among water puddles, mud-holes, gaping  
wounds in asphalt bleeding dirty water over our white clothes.

And I asked myself whether I would end by crossing the pale grass  
of burnt-over clearings and the fresh water of thaws in the voyage  
I took without a return ticket to go see a garden of untroubled  
flowers.

There were cabbages growing nearby, and they sent me a bunch of  
salad. Dusk fell and cars plunged into the darkness with all the  
racket of refugees gaining a frontier.

I closed the garden-door again. A bouquet of Everlastings had been  
put on the table. I reopened the door of the house and outside the  
raspberries had begun to get ripe.

## ALL THE KINGS HORSES

All the king's horses are dead together, my love  
All the king's horses are dead in the blue stream  
But from the bottom of my stream, crushed beneath the  
horses bodies I got up and marched, carrying the harness  
of my dead horse.

All the king's horses are dead together my love in the big  
blue stream. But there was no longer a king to own the  
streams. Kings had forgotten that they were kings, they  
had forgotten that they were alone, and that without love  
they were going to die with their horses that had fallen  
asleep to wake again no more. That, I believe, was  
yesterday.

All the king's horses are dead and we are dead too.  
We have slipped in the water on the cold soft hair of  
stretched and gutted black horses bleeding red in the  
blue of the stream.

## TO CELEBRATE SEPTEMBER

A garden ripened  
from a summer without spring  
and without autumn

I see again and again  
the fishermen return from the sea  
I drink again and again  
from their toil-wearied hands  
of earth-solitude  
I drink again and again  
out of their faint  
and faded eyes  
of a peace reflected from the sea  
I drink again and again their poetry

A summer ripened  
from a garden without flowers  
a summer ripened  
from a garden without fruit

I have hurried  
I display  
my colour changes  
I gather in my fruits  
from my summer garden  
I put a damper on time  
I shorten my days  
I have hurried

And the colour  
and the freshness  
and the frost  
of September weather  
give us a warning:  
it's there in the air  
it's there in the weather  
it's there in the earth  
it's there in the sea  
Red!!  
... the wild Summer  
of an October revolution!

## THE WHARF

wooden planks nailed  
tarred  
salted  
worn by the age of the sea

sunshine  
spangled rippling  
crinkling  
movement  
of calm water in Buctouche bay

*and the cold sea wind  
got to him  
and made him  
feel deeply*

the shadow on the ground  
of a sea-gull in the sun  
the cry of a poet sitting  
on the planks of the harbour  
in Buctouche bay

salt of soil  
sea-wind  
sea-gull sunlight  
i embrace you

and the grass-blades  
growing out of the tarred  
planks of the wharf  
let themselves be caressed  
by the sea-breeze

and the blue sky has only  
a few traces of clouds on the horizon

the sea is content with it  
and shows it  
and the poet  
sitting on the tarred  
planks of the wharf  
embodies everything