

A Selective History of the League of Canadian Poets

The following short and by no means complete or official history of the League was culled from Newsletters and some AGM minutes in the League office library; Raymond Souster's Starting Up: LCP 1966-1972 in the 1991 Who's Who in the League of Canadian Poets; Cathy Ford's Out of Con/Tex: Creating a Living Archive of Feminism in Stats, Memos & Memory (Living Archives, 1992); and brief but illuminating conversations with Cathy Ford, Maria Jacobs, and Robert Priest. Any omissions or inaccuracies are my own.
—Betsy Struthers President, 1995-1996

1966-1968

The League was born on 20 August 1966 when Ron Everson, Raymond Souster, Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski met at Ralph Gustafson's North Hatley home in Quebec to discuss founding a guild to better serve the interests of English-speaking poets in Canada. Souster asked John Robert Colombo to become the group's first organizer and he agreed. Meetings were held, often in Colombo's home in Toronto, over the next year and were attended by, among others, Al Purdy, Earle Birney and Eli Mandel who became the first Provisional Chairman. The name League of Canadian Poets was adopted that first winter.

To publicize the fledgling organization and its members, Raymond Souster came up with a very ambitious plan: to hold a week-long series of poetry readings in Toronto libraries. From March 25-31, 1968, fifteen poets read at 24 public library locations with a gala Sunday reading at the Central Library. No payment was made to anyone and audiences ranged from 4 to 575.

It was clear that the organization required elected officers and a mandate to follow up on the success of this first venture and to expand it nation-wide. The first Annual General Meeting took place in Rochdale College, Toronto, on the weekend of October 18-20, 1968. The registration fee of \$5 included that year's membership dues; 40 poets were present. Souster was elected President and Douglas Lochhead was elected Secretary, both for two year terms. By the time the League's first Newsletter appeared in November 1968, the League had 67 members, 9 of whom were women.

For the first years of its existence, the League concentrated on organizing poetry tours. Poetry festivals were held in Metro Toronto in the spring of 1969 and 1970, the predecessors of today's (W)rites of Spring League readings. Souster and Lochhead jointly edited an anthology, *Made in Canada* (Oberon Press 1970) with contributions mainly by League members. Although this was not a League publication per se, it did promote and bring attention to a new generation of Canadian poets.

1970

The League's second Annual General Meeting was held in Ottawa in 1970. (Annual General Meeting is a bit of misnomer since it appears from the admittedly scanty records that such meetings were held only every other year for a while). There was \$250 in the bank account. Two important resolutions were made at that meeting to set up a national poetry reading circuit and to hire someone to coordinate it.

1971

In 1971 Gerald Lampert became the League's first tour coordinator, his salary paid by a grant from what was then called the Province of Ontario Council for the Arts (POCA), and Arlene Lampert the first Executive Secretary. At the same time, the Canada Council granted \$10,000 to sponsor a poetry tour by 23 poets who gave 10 readings at 10 universities across the country. In addition, some 70-80 readings were given in Ontario high schools, funding coming from POCA. League membership now stood at 78 poets.

In 1971, annual membership fees were raised to \$7.50/year. Chairman Raymond Souster urgently requested members to pay up to prevent the League bank account from falling into arrears.

1974

Three years later, October 12-13, 1974, the League held a rather argumentative AGM in Fredericton. Issues debated included the hiring of a full-time executive secretary and whether funds for his/her salary should come from government grant, from raised membership dues, or from some other funding source; the raising of dues to \$25/year; and the qualifications for membership and the process of nomination and selection of members. Sprinkled throughout the minutes are such comments as:

A period of confusion followed (the presentation of a slate of candidates for Council positions), in which all kinds of subjects were brought up and discussed, in defiance of the declared agenda. But what the hell.

The League passed a motion supporting a scheme of library payments based on a flat fee per book per year. However, it wasn't until August 1986 that the Public Lending Right Commission was established and began to pay authors for books held in Canadian public and institutional libraries. Finally, it was moved that the Executive attempt to hold annual meetings of the full membership, whatever the opposition from the Canada Council.

1976

Before the Council met in October 1976, *Who's Who in the League of Canadian Poets*, a catalogue of League members, had been produced which did immeasurable good with the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, educational groups, other writers organizations, library and media people, and...has generally enhanced the League's prestige. 5000 copies of this catalogue were distributed to libraries, media, bookstores, and educational institutions. Since then, new editions of this catalogue with pictures, bios, publications and order forms for books in print by members appeared in 1980, 1988, 1991, and 1995. Again, threats to general meetings were noted: under new Canada Council regulations, all organizations were being asked to find additional sources of funding for such meetings.

Qualifications for membership returned as a contentious issue. In the end, motions were passed to elect Honorary Members who are distinguished poets outside Canada, either a Canadian permanently living abroad or a non-Canadian; Fellows of the League shall be elected (at AGMs) as a mark of their distinction, special achievement and contribution to the art of poetry in Canada. Previous discussions had limited the number of Fellows to two per year nominated by the Membership Committee. There was considerable debate over the category of Associate Memberships, not only their qualification but also what benefits could be offered to them.

Reading tours were another worry. The Canada Council had taken over funding of readings in universities; there was a sense of the League doing the ground work with the Council taking over when programs were well-established. A proposal that poets should read for free at libraries was defeated on the grounds that this would undermine the poets' prestige, something the League had worked so hard to establish. Since the Ontario Arts Council had just given the League \$20,000 to fund readings in schools and BC had given \$5,000 the previous year (BC didn't renew this funding) for similar school readings, it was decided to look into the possibility of expanding readings in schools across the country.

It was proposed that membership fees be raised to \$35 in 1978 and \$50 in 1979 but this motion was tabled. In a later Newsletter in 1976, the membership was informed about several League projects; a manual of precepts and methods for the Teaching of Poetry. This project, co-ordinated by Florence McNeil resulted in the publication of *When Is A Poem*, compiled and edited by McNeil and published in 1979. It is one of the first League publications and an enduring bestseller and fundraiser for the League. In 1995 Pembroke Press published *Poets in the Classroom*, edited by Betsy Struthers and Sarah Klassen, a new League anthology of essays by members about teaching poetry to students of all levels.

Other announcements dealt with a proposal for the foundation of a League Poetry Award to be given in recognition of distinguished and extensive achievements in the field of poetry; a project to record the

voices of various significant poets; the translation of books of poetry into Braille; a travelling Festival of Poetry to promote the League; and initiation of a program of international readings by Canadian poets to be funded through corporate grants.

1981

The League discussed the possibility of a federation of all writers organizations, especially an association with the Writers' Union, on the condition that the League retains maximum autonomy, meaning specifically retaining control of its revenues and expenditures, and the selection of its Executive Director, but also including control of projects and programs. This motion was carried by a vote of 34 to 30 opposed.

The League also moved to continue to work with publishers and other copyright owners towards establishing a collective to administer the collection and distribution of fees for the reprographic copying of protected works, and that we do so through the Canadian Reprography Collective. CanCopy paid out its first fees to writers in 1995.

Florence McNeil was asked to collect and edit an anthology companion to *When Is A Poem*. This anthology, *Here Is A Poem*, appeared in 1983.

The League also appointed the Executive to plan and implement an annual national poetry contest. The first contest was held in 1987; an anthology of 50 winners, *Garden Varieties*, was published in cooperation with Cormorant Press in 1988. Subsequent editions of the poetry contest anthology have appeared annually under various names and in cooperation with different publishers: *More Garden Varieties* with Aya in 1989; *More Garden Varieties II*, Mercury Press, 1990; and various editions of *Vintages* with Sono Nis and then Quarry Press. The 9th Annual National Poetry Contest in 1995 received over 4500 entries and raised about \$27,000 for the League.

Associate Membership fees were raised from \$5 to \$20. The following motion was carried: That the League draw up a statement confirming its support of all basic human rights and declaring its abhorrence against discrimination of any kind including political, racial, economic, sexual, religions, and other discrimination. This was the year that the first League awards were presented: the Pat Lowther Memorial Award for the best book of poetry by a woman and the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award for the best first book of poetry. The first F. R. Scott Award for Translation of Poetry was presented in 1985.

The Feminist Caucus

The summer 1981 edition of the League Newsletter carried a long article by member Sharon Nelson on The Sexual Politics of Poetry (this has been reprinted in *Stats, Memos & Memory*. Living Archives, 1982). In this article and the accompanying statistics on LCP membership, executive and committees, readings, and school tours participation, Nelson examined the disparity in representation of men to women poets within the League. The voicing of their recognition of being marginalized within the League brought many women poets together and spurred the formation of a new committee of the League: the Feminist Caucus. Much vociferous discussion took place at the 1982 AGM, some members resigning over the motion to form the Caucus. It's wording was: 'Whereas over 20 members of the (LCP) have indicated their wish to examine the status of and the opportunities for women in the field of Canadian Poetry and, where necessary, to work for improvement; and whereas this paragraph does not imply that there is an established bias or discrimination against women (Gustafson/Howell) these members have identified a need to undertake research and develop strategies to increase participation by and recognition of women in all aspects of poetry; and whereas these members wish to encourage the (LCP) to develop working structures which will effectively represent the needs and concerns of women poets: BE IT RESOLVED THAT a committee to be called the Feminist Caucus be established.

Since this beginning, the Feminist Caucus has development a strong voice and vital place for women within the League. It holds its AGM at the same time as the general membership, elects a Caucus Chair to sit on Council, and organizes panels which discuss various aspects of feminist poetics. Shortly after its inception, it surveyed the state of poetry book reviewing in Canada, comparing book the numbers of books by men

and women reviewed as well as the gender of the reviewer. This survey was updated in 1995 and the results show that the proportion of book publication and reviews by gender are much more balanced.

In 1992 the Caucus celebrated its 10th anniversary with a gala Foremothers reading at the National Library in Ottawa. To celebrate its achievements, the Caucus began to publish the *Living Archives Series*, a collection of contributions to feminist thought, discussion of sexual politics, literary theory, and women's history as experienced or shared in, during, and through the panels organized and sponsored by the Feminist Caucus at League AGMs. In 1996 *Silences*, edited by Susan McMaster, an anthology of essays from the 10 published pamphlets in this series, will be published by Quarry Press.

Performance, Dub and Spoken Word

Since the first bards recited their poems to attentive audiences, the performance of poetry readings have been as vital to the art as writing. The League organized its first major reading in 1968 and much of its energy has been devoted to establishing and administering funded reading tours through federal, provincial, and municipal governments and encouraging universities, libraries, cafes and other venues to host such readings. Readings are an integral element of AGMs and are a fundraising source through the marathon (W)rites of Spring events held in each region to raise both money and the profile of League members and their work.

Experimenting with the sound of words as well as their meaning gave rise to performances of sound poetry. In 1973 the innovative sound poetry group, The Four Horsemen (bp nichol, Steve McCaffery, Paul Dutton, and Rafael Barreto-Rivera) were thanked in the League Newsletter for their patience in waiting to receive fees and expenses from an underfunded poetry reading tour.

Ten years later, the acceptance of performance work as poetry became a contentious issue. The dub poets were an increasingly visible and exciting element on the poetry scene. Their work was highly oral/aural, a blend of lyric, story-telling (often political in nature), insistent rhythm and repeating rhymes, often accompanied by drums and other instruments. Rooted in the speech patterns of the Caribbean, this poetry was a far cry from text-based poems. Controversy ensued over whether dub was actually poetry, song or theatrical experience. Vigorous discussion enlarged the understanding of the boundaries of the art. Dub poets became full members of the League. In subsequent years, membership criteria were expanded to include submission of cds, audio and visual tapes as well as printed books.

The definition of poetry continues to evolve as some poets combine spoken word with music and performance while others push the poetic line into prose form. As a quick overview of Newsletters and Minutes attest, criteria for full membership—the professional status of the writer as poet—has always been a subject for concern.

The League to 1995

Since the early 1980s, the League has built on these foundations to develop a strong natural voice defending, promoting and marketing the works of its members. It has not always been easy. A fiscal crisis in the early years of the decade threatened the League's very existence. To meet it, the League undertook a massive reorganization of the budget and administration under the new Executive Director, Angela Rebeiro; devised a statement of goals and purpose; and embarked on a five-year plan to balance the budget. Included in these measures were the raising of fees to bring them in line with other organizations such as TWUC and stream-lining the AGMs.

Most meetings since 1985 have been housed in university residences (from the comfortable at Carleton to the spartan Concordia experience) or in chain hotels that offer special group packages. Long rancorous business meetings have given way in large part to agenda-conscious sessions followed by panels and workshops that contribute to members professional development. Some Council meetings have been held by conference call to reduce travel and accommodation costs. Reading quotas for tours and school visits were instituted to divide existing money more fairly among members. Fundraising events such as the poetry contest and (W)rites of Spring were begun. A special one-time Investment in the Arts grant from the

Ontario Ministry of Culture gave the League a modest cushion from which to build a sustaining fund. The efforts to regain financial stability had two results: by the early 1990's League budgets not only balanced but showed a small surplus and the concentration on improving administration and services honed the League's professional status. Then government cutbacks were announced. In 1995 the Council met in a Strategic Planning Session to devise new ways and means of dealing with financial threat. By 1998 both the federal and Ontario provincial governments were poised to cut 100% of their support to the operating costs of arts service organizations. This is not an idle threat. Fundraising from the corporate sector, creative projects in cooperation with publishers and booksellers, and use of new technologies to promote Canadian poetry have become imperative goals. The League, however, did not wait for the axe to fall before embarking on innovative projects to secure not only funding from non-government sources but also to promote and disseminate the works of its members.

In 1994 the League launched a book marketing project which combined direct mail marketing of members new books through flyers distributed worldwide by mail and on the internet with a network of Poetry Friendly bookstores. A bi-monthly Poetry Spoken Here calendar detailed readings and book signings across the country and notified media, libraries, bookstores, and teachers, of poetry activities in their communities. The League website continues to spread information about Canadian poets and their work around the world. The League's head office at 54 Wolseley Street shares equipment and space with both the Playwrights Union of Canada and the Periodical Writers Association of Canada. Such cooperation ventures reduce costs in such areas as fax, photocopy, mailings and publications. The staff consists of two full-time employees, an Executive Director and a Tours Coordinator. When funds are available through project or job development grants, staff persons are hired on contract to assist in the office. But the heart of the League is the volunteer dedication of its members who serve on Council as Executive Officers, Regional Representatives, and Committee Chairs, who sit on juries for the awards and contest and who work on committees to develop and continue programs and projects approved by the membership at Annual General Meetings. And it is these meetings where poets from across the country come together to read and listen to poetry, to participate in panel discussions and workshops on aspects of our craft, to celebrate new publications and new voices, to develop programs that will enrich the cultural fabric of our nation, and to gather in rooms late at night to share the experience of what it is to be a poet in this world, that reaffirms and nurtures our fellowship.