



THE
LEAGUE OF
CANADIAN
POETS



† Junction Books
2001

Making the Damn Thing Work

An informal look at the early days of the League of Canadian Poets prepared for its 35th birthday by Raymond Souster, with the kind assistance of Carleton Wilson.



by
Raymond Souster

Copyright © Raymond Souster, 2001
All rights reserved.

Edited & designed by: Carleton Wilson

Cover photograph by: Mike Gnarowski

♦ Junction Books
c/o Carleton Wilson
568 Indian Grove
Toronto, Ontario,
Canada, M6P 2J4
www.junctionbooks.com

Souster, Raymond
Making the Damn Thing Work

Memoirs.
Ed. of 125 copies.
ISBN 0-9688057-7-9

Published with the kind assistance of:



Let them talk.

This follows an editorial invitation of the League of Canadian Poets that its member poets, 1960-1970, in which I was already involved. It was enough to give a historical account an insider's sense of an organization's strength, despite its setbacks and their own. It was a challenge to think of the League as a group of poets who were not just writing but also reading and discussing each other's work.

This book is for Rosalia, my Susi,

*& for the members of the League of Canadian Poets,
past, present & future*

It is my hope that this book will be presented especially with stronger intentions to read, with perhaps not as a reminder that the League can only be as successful as its members wish it to be. It has come through the last difficult years. The League is proud to have those who believe in our Canadian literary scene. It is a pleasure to have this book as a testament to that belief.

Raymond Souster

May 2001

To Start With

What follows is an informal recollection of the League of Canadian Poets' first six tender years, 1966 – 1972, in which I was closely involved. It will attempt to give a balanced account, an insider's view of an organization's struggle simply to be born and then survive in the face of very daunting obstacles. All opinions voiced are of course my own; but as far as humanly possible I believe the facts to be true and backed up by documents which I plan to house shortly in my existing literary archive at McGill University in Montreal.

It is my hope that this account, prepared especially with younger members in mind, will perhaps act as a reminder that the League can only be as successful as its members wish it to be. We've come through the first thirty-five years. The League is needed more than ever before on our Canadian literary scene. Full speed ahead for that fiftieth anniversary!

Raymond Souster

May 21, 2001

Making the Damn Thing Work

Carleton Wilson (hereafter Wilson):

Who had the idea to create the League of Canadian Poets?

Raymond Souster (hereafter Souster):

I'm afraid I'd have to plead guilty to the charge. But I've been an initiator, an innovator (some would say a shit-disturber) all my life, and at age 80, I'm still at it, for better or for worse. Ask my publisher, Michael Macklem of Oberon Press. He'll tell you a thing or two. Better still, ask my wife of 54 years, Rosalia, she can give you an earful.

Wilson:

How did the League come into existence? And why was it created?

Souster:

I suppose most new perceptions, new avenues of exploration in this world start with someone's dissatisfaction with things belonging to his own time or place. Here I'm referring to the general state of the Canadian literary scene during the run-up to Expo 67, to be held in Montreal, Quebec, at which Canada would be given the chance to showcase the literary talents of our two founding cultures, as well as an ever growing ethnic profusion of talent.

That summer of 1965, my wife and I were visiting old friends Louis Dudek and Irving Layton in Montreal. Here we were joined by Kenneth McRobbie, another friend I'd previously known in Toronto. Talk turned to Expo and what seemed a dismal unimaginative outlook for the cultural side of the exposition. The next day McRobbie accompanied Dudek and myself, among others, on a drive down to North Hatley in the Eastern Townships (home of poets Ralph Gustafson, D.G. Jones and Frank Scott). On our way there McRobbie and I unveiled our joint brain-wave to Dudek, namely, a world poetry conference to be hosted by Canada at Expo 67 the following summer. I don't know how Louis really felt about it, but he agreed that we should at least try the idea out on Frank, whom we understood had a say in cultural decisions up in Ottawa.

We had a very enjoyable afternoon at North Hatley. Frank Scott was our host, and we ended the afternoon with an outstanding barbecue down at Frank's "Island", along the shore of Lake Massawippi. A little later in the evening Ken McRobbie managed to draw Frank aside, and we put our idea to him with as much conviction as we could muster. He finally agreed to tackle

Ottawa on the world poetry conference theme. Then as it turned out, we would wait a whole year to learn the outcome.

1966 was a busy year for me, as I was personally publishing through Contact Press, *New Wave Canada*, aided by a youthful and energetic Victor Coleman. That was also the year we moved from 229 High Park Avenue to our present residence at 39 Baby Point Road. Our moving date was April 28; two days later on Saturday, May 1st, we began collating by hand in our basement the 1000 copies of the 167 page anthology. I should add that we utilized every door in the house together with cardboard boxes to form one long, continuous sorting table. Starting out with 15 helpers, I finished sorting the last sheets alone four days later, then went to bed with a bad head cold. It would be my last venture as a poetry publisher.

So you can imagine that Lia and I were ready for a short holiday by mid-summer when we received an invitation from Ron and Lorna Everson to visit them in Montreal in August. At the same time, Ron was writing his fellow Montrealer, Louis Dudek:

Suite 404
4920 Western Avenue
Montreal 6, Quebec
11 July, 1966

Lou,

How about arranging your affairs so you could set out with the Sousters and Eversons Friday Morning, Aug. 19th for a few days of conversational motoring? We could all drive in my car. Anybody who understandingly couldn't abide my driving could take his own car and also

bring more people. I've left Mike's and Glen's addresses beyond my reach at this moment, so please note these projected doings to them! Tentative objective is Dartmouth at Hanover, as Ray and I would like to meet our mysterious publisher, Richie Darling.

Ron

Due in Montreal by the 18th, we left Toronto on the 16th, chugged along in our '62 American Motors Rambler to Ottawa, where we checked in at our favourite Kingsway motel. That evening, visiting George Johnston at his home, we met a colleague of his from Carleton University, Mike Gnarowski. Mike was a Montrealer, a close friend of Louis Dudek's, not a poet to my knowledge, but very knowledgeable with regards the Canadian literary scene. He's informed me since in a letter that I spoke to him then about my idea of the League; I have no recollection of this, but it could well be so. At any rate, Louis had written him about the August 19th highway jaunt, and he was tagging along.

Next day, Lia and I proceeded to Montreal and checked in at the Laurentian Hotel. We joined the Eversons at noon the next day, and started off right away to miss the Friday weekend traffic. Our plan now was to stop off at North Hatley, this time at the invitation of Ralph Gustafson. Louis was also driving down with Mike Gnarowski as passenger, Glen Siebrasse, another Montreal poet being unable to make the trip. It was a pleasure driving in Ron's Cadillac, a lovely sunny day in the countryside outside Montreal.

When we arrived at the Gustafson's comfortable-looking home directly on Lake Massawippi in North Hatley, we found

the Dudek car had already arrived. It was mid-afternoon, and when Ralph suggested a swim to cool his guests off after their long three hour drive, there was a rush to don bathing suits. Lia and I, who hate any kind of water we can't drink, chose instead to get up-to-date on the Montreal scene by chatting with Mike Gnarowski in the Gustafson's backyard patio where comfortable deck chairs awaited us. Apparently he and Louis had put their heads together on the drive down, and there were now two strong supporters for the idea of some kind of poets' organization being formed. When Ralph, Ron Everson and Louis put in an appearance, a lively and friendly discussion began. We were interrupted by Betty Gustafson, a registered nurse, leaving to keep a four o'clock nursing commitment. She left behind a huge chocolate cake made earlier in the day, several dozen cobs of corn already shucked and ready for the big boiler on the stove, along with an equal number of hotdog buns and weiners—all the makings of a true feast. We continued our exchange of views and also heard some exciting yet disturbing news from Ralph Gustafson and Louis Dudek. The bad news was that there was an anthology being prepared for the centennial year, edited by H. Gordon Green and Guy Sylvestre entitled *A Century of Canadian Literature / Un Siècle de Littérature Canadienne* (The Ryerson Press / Editions HMH), which would appear in 1967. Sylvestre was with the Academie Canadienne-Française, according to the boys an okay choice; H. Gordon Green was with the Canadian Authors' Association and in their opinion a very poor choice, especially when it came to selecting the poets of the past twenty years. The good news was that, probably due to Frank's persistent lobbying in Ottawa, the Centennial Commission had okayed a World Poetry Conference for Expo

67, and furthermore had appointed Frank to head the organizing committee. And to top this off, Frank had managed to get Louis appointed as a member of the Committee! Of course this to me was Montreal in-fighting in which I didn't feel I had any part. And my personal attitude to the Canadian Authors' Association is one I haven't changed to this day; different strokes for different folks...

Somewhere about this time my wife produced her trusty little camera, and invited us all to have our picture taken against the background of the Gustafson house. That is the picture that is reproduced on the front of this publication. Mike Gnarowski, gentleman that he is, insisted on being the photographer so my wife could be a part of the picture—that is why his handsome mug is not visible—and of course Frank Scott wouldn't join us until after supper.

Not long after the photo-shoot, most of us began to feel rather peckish, and we encouraged the ladies to make their way inside to the kitchen and get supper started; when the meal was ready we men would help with carrying out the food. Before too long we were all gnawing away at succulent cobs of sweet, tender corn, followed by hotdogs with toppings of mustard and relish. Washed down with belts of hot coffee, this was a simple but satisfying meal we would long remember; and would help to fortify us for the vigorous but friendly discussion to follow.

I have purposefully held off mentioning Betty's large, rich chocolate cake, the crowning touch of the feast, but it vanished so quickly that I for one missed out on a second piece. So you can imagine that when we moved our chairs into a wide circle and got down to serious business we were all in the very best of moods.

As I recall it, Ralph Gustafson started the ball rolling. He believed it was high time that some organization other than the Canadian Authors' Association speak for Canadian poetry. He said that he'd always hoped his *Penguin Anthology of Canadian Verse* would bring a nucleus of concerned poets together, but it hadn't happened. His idea of an organization was a "Guild" of poets, "a goal rather than a corral." Quality as opposed to quantity. Let's draw up a list of 16 poets, or no more than 24. A gathering of peers.

Louis Dudek followed. My recollection is that his chief concern was also that we didn't end up like another CAA. He, like Ralph, wanted a small membership; he wanted someone like Frank Scott, Earle Birney or A. J. M. Smith to represent such an organization. He wanted to emphasize again that the membership should be small, to represent the real poets who already existed, and he didn't want it to be thought that he was taking an "elitist" position (he hated that word), but simply making common sense. These were the best recognized poets; we needed a small organization to speak for them. He strongly suggested that we make a try at making up individual lists of suitable poets and see what we came up with.

As Ron Everson and Mike Gnarowski both said they had nothing to add at the moment, I spoke briefly. I agreed that a standard of excellence should be one of our aims so we would be a different kind of an organization, but I thought we had more practical problems to solve first. As I was the only one present not from Montreal, it seemed fairly obvious that our organization would have to be born there. Therefore, of those present, who would be willing to serve on a provisional committee to get things started?

I don't honestly know what response I expected to a question like that. But I was certainly surprised and considerably disappointed when not one hand went up. Of course then I really shouldn't have been—I hadn't put my own up.

I really didn't know what to say then. And it was at this moment that who should casually stroll into the meeting but Frank Scott himself. I certainly never imagined that he'd show up. No mention of him had been made all afternoon. I knew that he lived in the cottage two doors from the Gustafson's. But I'd simply assumed he'd had other plans that day.

We exchanged warm greetings—it was impossible not to like Frank, he was a real charmer. And right away we could tell he was well into his cups, but perfectly in control, as you would expect.

He was offered a chair, but rejected the kind gesture and stood there while Ralph brought him more or less up to date on the proceedings. Then he was invited to speak his mind on the idea of a possible Guild of Poets.

"I suppose I have a few things to say," he answered with a twinkle in his eye. Then he launched into what must have been a ten-minute non-stop monologue.

His initial point, which he laboured on at some length, was that poets were the most hopeless people in the world to organize anything, and any attempt they would make would be predictably doomed to premature failure.

If, however, by some virtual miracle they should be able to form an organization, it would certainly end up like another CAA or worse. The one and only business poets have is to write poems—that will take all the brainpower they can muster. For

you people to think you're any better than the pack is sheer vanity, and you know what Pound said about that.

Of course there was more, delivered in Supreme Court eloquence, but my mind by then was somewhere else. Was there still a chance to win through what was now a shambles of a meeting or was it all kaput, down the toilet, as they say today? In any event, I had to think fast. Sooner or later Frank was going to end up out of breath, and I had to have a real convincer ready.

And almost before I was ready Frank *did* finish and sat down quietly. It was now that Louis Dudek remarked something to the effect of where do we go from here?

When no one piped up with a brilliant, save-the-day idea, I took the plunge with mine, truly a desperate move.

After admitting that all of us there at the meeting probably had enough on our plate as it was, perhaps our only hope was to convince someone else to mind the store until our Guild or whatever got off the ground; I said I knew someone who might possibly help us out. The most organized man I know, John Robert Colombo. That meant we'd have to move operations to Toronto, at least until we could have a general meeting and hold an election. What did they think of that? Did they want to vote on it?

They apparently did, notwithstanding Frank's eloquence. The vote was all in favour.

I then told them I couldn't guarantee John Robert would step into the breach. But as soon as I got back to Toronto I'd do my best to convince him, and would promise to help him out all I could.

With that the meeting broke up. It was eight-thirty with the summer night coming on. We said goodbye to Frank and Ralph. Suddenly I had enough travelling, and checking with Lia found that she felt the same. We asked Ron to cancel our room back at the hotel. He and Lorna would continue on with their drive to Vermont the next day. We would return to Montreal that night with Louis and Mike. We discussed how the meeting had gone, with the hope there was a chance of an organization being born. We tried hard to be positive, but didn't have too much cause for optimism.

Louis drove us through downtown Montreal to our hotel. I promised to tackle John Robert Colombo as soon as we got home, and phone him the news right away. Keep all your fingers and toes crossed, was the last thing I said to him.

That night I had a lousy sleep, turning and tossing most of the time. I was still wound up tight as a clock from the night before. Over breakfast I asked Lia how she felt about getting in the car and heading for home. We might as well, was her reply, you're going to be poor company until you get this Guild thing settled one way or another.

We reached home by early evening, and within half an hour I was trying to reach John Robert Colombo by telephone. There was no answer, and it wasn't until the next morning that I reached him. He could see me that afternoon. I didn't say what was on my mind beyond mentioning that it was something important I wanted to ask him about.

That Sunday afternoon I visited John at his new home at 60 Ellis Park Road. This was in the West End, my part of town, and we were now both living in the Village of Swansea (later it

would become part of the City of Toronto), only a five minute drive from each other.

First off, I gave him an overview of our August 19th meeting in North Hatley, leading up to where I had proposed his name as a last resort to save the day. I hadn't felt too great about mentioning his name as someone to run an organization without approaching him beforehand about the whole business, but I hoped he could see that it was a desperation move, and would forgive my impetuous behaviour.

I could see John was listening carefully to my summary, and knowing him fairly well, expected him to react fairly quickly. So when I asked him if he was willing to help on a short-term basis as secretary-treasurer of our as yet nameless organization on the understanding I would help all I could, to my great relief he replied that he'd give it his best shot, or words to that effect. To me that moment marked the beginning of what would soon become the League of Canadian Poets.

Wilson:

I'm interrupting here to let you get your breath.

Souster:

You're probably well aware by now that when I warm up to a subject, I become simply one of the biggest blabber-mouths around.

Wilson:

It seems to be a fairly wide affliction among us writers. But let's continue. How did things work subsequently?

Souster:

Much better than I'd hoped. I dropped an immediate short note to both Louis Dudek and Ralph Gustafson informing them of the good news. Armed with John Robert Colombo's new address, they both fired off long supportive letters to John Robert within the next couple of weeks, outlining their main views and any special concerns. I'm sure that after receiving them John must have felt that he had a good measure of support from at least two poets that he respected. But Carleton, before I go any further, may I recount an important moment from that historic meeting on August 19th in North Hatley that I've unaccountably forgotten all about?

Wilson:

Recount away.

Souster:

This important moment at the gathering in Ralph Gustafson's patio back on August 19th was nothing more or less than Mike Gnarowski having his comfortable canvas deck chair collapse on him right in the middle of our pre-lunch discussion. Along with being rudely dropped to the ground, Mike sustained a slight gash on one leg, which required first aid treatment from Ralph Gustafson, but that silly little accident remained firmly in our heads long after many seemingly more important matters were completely forgotten.

Now to continue the resulting struggle to keep the good ship *Poetry* afloat...

With John Robert Colombo as unofficial coordinator, things began to move that fall. He replied to the fine letters he'd

received from Gustafson and Dudek, asking them for their lists of suggested members. If I recall correctly, they replied with roughly 40 names between the two of them. That set the stage for a meeting at John's Ellis Park home to which Earle Birney came, a long-time friend of John's and, of course, a major Canadian senior poet. He was keenly interested in the new organization, but was unable to give us any of his time, like so many other busy people. We went over the names of prospective members, with all of us coming up with more possibilities. All in all, we decided on about 40 initial names. We ended the evening with a friendly argument about representation, John arguing, much like Dudek and Gustafson, for a small, select group, with me siding with Earle, who argued for a broadly based membership. We agreed to meet again in two week's time to thrash out such matters as an annual membership fee, and whether or not we should ask for news on what poets expected from the organization.

At this subsequent meeting we decided on a yearly membership fee of \$5.00, but still couldn't agree on a name for the new organization. John promised to make up a suitable membership notice and mail it out shortly. He was as good as his word, and by November the mail-out had been accomplished. Of approximately 40 notices sent, we had 25 positive replies with cheques enclosed, many more than expected. And we had a little cash for postage and stationery. Our first bank account was opened under the title, "Canadian Guild of Poets."

Almost before we knew it, the centennial year, 1967, had arrived. It was a year of great expectations, of a new-born pride in Canada. Early in February we mailed out a short

questionnaire to our small band of members, hoping to find out what directions they wanted their struggling organization to take. Unfortunately John, by necessity as thrifty as the rest of us, thought there was no harm in slipping into the envelopes an extra flyer announcing a new book of his. The result was a sad display of petty vindictiveness from people who should have known better. With the returned questionnaires came three or four complaint letters about John utilizing the mail-out for his own private ends. I didn't see any of these childish notes, but one especially was so abusive that John phoned me up to tell me he couldn't continue as interim coordinator, and I couldn't talk him out of it. It was the second crisis for our little poetry group before we'd barely got off the ground. He did, however, agree to remain a member. So I had to hunt around for a successor, and luckily thought of another old poet friend, Eli Mandel, then teaching at York University. To my great relief he accepted the challenge, and I promised him his term would be as short as I could make it.

My first meeting with John and Eli took place soon after, and we seemed to hit it off nicely. Almost right away we knew that Eli was the right man for the job; he would know how to handle any further situations. Then I foolishly got involved in a centennial project that was close to being a disaster. So for the next four months I spent my evenings seven days a week putting it back on the tracks again. By mid-summer I was mentally and physically exhausted. I didn't even want to hear the name Expo mentioned.

It proved to be early fall before the three of us met again at Ellis Park Road. I learned then for the first time that the World Poetry Conference had taken place, with John going as an

interested observer. Louis Dudek had predictably invited Ezra Pound as their big drawing card, but that legendary figure of "The Pisan Cantos" had been forced to cancel at the last moment because of ill health, which had put a considerable damper on things. Still, any gathering with thirty-odd international poets sitting in had been a considerable achievement. *The Centennial Anthology of Canadian Literature*, which I hadn't seen, was judged to be only a partial success. It was never heard of again.

It was at this meeting, however, that we made several important decisions. The first was to decide on a name for the company of poets from the five or six suggested by the membership. Much to my surprise, my suggestion of 'League of Canadian Poets' was selected. The name was a throwback to a very influential 'League of American Writers' of the Thirties and Forties. Next, we began to plan some future activities for our members. Because of an empty treasury, these were necessarily limited to Metro Toronto poets, who at this juncture made up most of the membership. John and Eli also agreed to sound out Ottawa on any future prospects for assistance in staging our first General Meeting.

So we ended 1967 with some accomplishments behind us, but with the feeling that 1968 could very well make or break our still very fragile creation. It would be a time for rolling up our sleeves and getting down to business.

We held our first meeting of the new year in late January. By that time, Eli Mandel had received an initial, favourable reply from Ottawa on his request for possible assistance to hold our first General Meeting later in the year. It seemed the Canada Council was prepared to bankroll part of the travelling expenses of out-of-town members coming to Toronto, plus an ad diem

meal allowance. That was the good news we needed to get our spirits up. That made me decide to try my library poetry blitz idea out on my two colleagues. My big selling point was that it wouldn't cost the League one dime. The Metro libraries would be asked to provide a quiet space and some chairs if possible; we would organize the whole event, provide three poets at each library for six days running, with a different troika of readers each night. It would be optional to provide some refreshments afterwards. If you two blokes like the idea, I'll get in touch with the libraries, then collect the poets—the whole enchilada. We could make it our Springtime project. The meeting broke up with me being given the green light to set the project in motion.

I was therefore pleasantly surprised when Mr. Harry Campbell, Chief Librarian of the Toronto Public Library system, took a personal interest in my somewhat wild scheme and helped to round up 36 libraries from six library systems to participate. Once I had a list of librarians, I was able to go ahead and ride on our local poet members. Fifteen poets signed up for the extravaganza. They were unpaid volunteers reading strictly for the fun of it.

By the time our next League meeting was held, this time at Eli Mandel's North Toronto residence, I had charted the whole week's program on a huge piece of cardboard. And a date had been set: March 25 – 31, 1968. We were even rushing spring.

"The week the poets took over Metro" proved to be an exhilarating, exhausting affair. But 15 poets turned up at eight venues and read to audiences from five to the 575 who attended the Gala reading Sunday night at the Central Library Theatre, at

College and St. George. I myself had been one of the readers, teamed up with Phyllis Webb and Dennis Lee. It was so enjoyable I didn't care if I read again that year.

With this successful launch of "Poetry Week in Toronto," Eli, John and I began serious planning for a fall General Meeting. Members were asked in a newsletter of July 5th to indicate their interest in attending such a meeting. Once we were over the summer doldrums, on the strength of 34 "yes" answers out of 38 received, we announced in a news release of September 21st that the meeting would be held on the weekend of October 18 – 20. It was fairly short notice, but the Canada Council had kept us waiting to the last moment for a decision, finally coming through with an emergency grant that provided 80 percent of travel fares for out-of-town members. The Province of Ontario kicked in with \$42.00 each to cover food and accommodation for the same group. Without these two grants the meeting would not have taken place.

The General Meeting got off to a happy start on Friday night, October 18th, at a cash bar reception in a King Street establishment. Forty members had a good chance to get acquainted for the Saturday morning business meeting, being held in Rochdale College, then under construction at Bloor Street West and St. George Street. Dennis Lee, one of the college founders, had got us use of the ninth floor free of charge. John, Eli and myself arrived early at the site and came out of the elevator to find a 20 mile an hour wind at times blowing through the place, possibly due to a few missing doors and windows. Before that meeting, chaired by Eli Mandel, adjourned two hours later, winter overcoats were the covering of choice, and hot coffee brought in didn't seem to drive the chill away very much.

A note was made to hold all future meetings if possible in a warmer part of the year.

A seven-man executive was elected that morning: I became President, with Michael Ondaatje as Vice-President and Douglas Lochhead as Secretary. Article Two of the new constitution read: "The object of the League shall be the advancement of poetry in Canada, and the promotion of the interests of poets," which are still two of its main goals. And among the names of members listed that November in Newsletter # One, I note Milton Acorn, Margaret Atwood, Nelson Ball, Douglas Barbour, Earle Birney, Bill Bissett, George Bowering, Elizabeth Brewster, Fred Cogswell, John Robert Colombo, David Donnell, Louis Dudek, R. G. Everson, John Glasco, Ralph Gustafson, George Johnston, George Jonas, D. G. Jones, Patrick Lane, Dennis Lee, Dorothy Livesay, Douglas Lochhead, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Kenneth McRobbie, Eli Mandel, Tom Marshall, bp Nichol, Alden Nowlan, Michael Ondaatje, Alfred Purdy, Joe Rosenblatt, F. R. Scott, Robin Skelton, A. J. M. Smith, Francis Sparshott, Miriam Waddington, George Woodcock—what a star-studded group, some of them still vigorously among us today!

Unfortunately for me, Mike Ondaatje was located in London, Ontario, so our new Vice-President could not take part in the day-to-day operations. But I soon found out that the new Secretary, Douglas Lochhead, would be the staunch ally I would need in the days ahead. Doug was then Librarian at Massey College, as well as lecturing in English elsewhere. His secretary at Massey, Pat Kennedy, would give us her unsurpassed typing and other help, which were invaluable to an organization still counting its nickels and dimes. Later, Doug would become

Secretary-Treasurer and Vice-Chairman, which meant he was taking on even more responsibility.

Besides using Doug's Massey number as a hot line, we tried to meet monthly at the Library. I'd dash up to 4 Devonshire Place after I locked up at my bank job (seldom before six), then we'd make supper in the Great Hall with not much time to spare.

With no cash in the kitty, we decided to launch another Metro poetry festival with a less exhausting schedule. Our location for two nights of readings by 20 poets was the former Personal Loan Department of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, a lovely spacious old structure on the north-east corner of Yonge and Adelaide Streets. The main floor, with a large auditorium, was rented by a genial coin dealer, who kindly donated his quarters for our two-night run. In the auditorium we featured a display of poetry manuscripts for sale, using huge display easels to mount the work of nearly 20 poets. Following the Tuesday and Thursday night readings, we staged a Sunday night Gala reading at the CBC's Carlton Theatre Studios on Parliament Street. The same happy gang of poets read here also, with the program being recorded for possible use by the CBC. The highlight of the evening for me was to have novelist Hugh Garner of *Cabbagetown* fame walk in and so meet him for the first time. That was our "Bread and Circuses" event for 1969.

That fall we put our heads together and came up with a plan for a high school poetry reading circuit. And with 1970 upon us we were casting about for a project that could involve the membership Canada-wide. The net result was the anthology, *Made In Canada*, which we persuaded Michael Macklem of

Oberon Press in Ottawa to issue. Each poet contributor would be allowed several pages, one to give a biographical sketch and a poetic statement of his own, and the others to contain his choice of poems. I had hoped each contributor would receive a \$10.00 payment, but we had to settle for \$5.00 and a copy of the book. We thought it turned out a damn interesting book.

And suckers for punishment that we were, we lined up another Metro poetry festival, again coordinated by the Toronto Public Libraries. From March 31st to April 5th our brave versifiers did their best to spread a poetic fever through hard-sell Metro, staging 22 readings throughout the week with a Gala Sunday night at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Performing Arts. As we had to gamble and bankroll this event ourselves, we decided to charge \$1.00 admission, and were lucky enough to break even after paying a stiff rental charge. Some 1200 fans were in attendance, the largest crowd we would ever draw. Doug and I resolved then and there never to risk anything like that again.

1970 was the year for our second General Meeting, and our members George Johnston and Chris Levenson of Ottawa kindly offered to host the gathering at Carleton University campus. Their offer was accepted, and the weekend of October 9 – 11 was decided on. I'll always remember the event for two reasons. Firstly, it was held, as Francis Sparscott so ably put it, in the shadow of the FLQ crisis, with its very damaging results for this country. Secondly, I had the dubious pleasure of meeting Robin Mathews, a professor at Carleton University. This gentleman buttonholed me just before the start of the League meeting on October 9th, and abruptly asked me to make him an instant League member. It seems he had a sudden urge

to attend and take part in the proceedings. I told him very politely but firmly that even if I wished to, I had no authority to act on his wishes. I suggested that he submit his request by mail the following week, and his application would be seriously considered. This didn't sit well with him and he ended up walking off in a huff. I considered the matter closed; I had much more serious concerns on my mind. But this individual wasn't to be deterred. He immediately enlisted the aid of two cronies in the membership; and these two provocateurs bided their time until the meeting was nicely under way to force the issue, citing undemocratic behaviour by an autocratic Chairman. A vote was somehow forced, in spite of everything I could say, and sad to relate, in my opinion at least, the members present caved in and voted to allow the professor to address the meeting. Then an even sadder spectacle took place when Robin Mathews entered the meeting with a flourish befitting a Roman conqueror, his two allies by his side. This farce, which showed for the first time, in my opinion, the soft, vulnerable underbelly of the organization, was not yet fully played out. Next, all those assembled had to listen to a ten-minute lecture on matters not announced for discussion at our Meeting. Beginning with the well-publicized fact that the number of American academics now holding down appointments in Canadian universities was far out of proportion to their Canadian counterparts, he finally revealed his real purpose for attending our gathering—he wished a resolution passed denying poets of American citizenship the right to become members of the League. When I heard this I couldn't believe my ears. I looked at Doug Lochhead, seated nearby on the platform. He simply looked back at me, shaking his head in total disbelief. It was not our League's finest hour.

Luckily, I believe, the members had played their little game of ruffling the feathers of the executive, and now were tired of Mr. Mathews and his misguided intentions. When a vote was taken on his motion it was soundly defeated, and some sanity returned at last to the proceedings. But this unfortunate incident, I hoped, would at least serve as a warning to all those who followed after us. Let your guard down just a little and things can start to crumble.

Outside of that, it was a good weekend all around, the hospitality shown by George and Chris and the fine University staff being all that one could wish for. My two good buddies, Doug Lochhead and Ron Everson, very quickly got me back on even keel. I remember our bank balance was reported at the business meeting to be \$250.00, which demonstrated to the gathering we still had a way to go. However two important resolutions were made that weekend: to begin to set up national poetry reading circuits, and to hunt for the right individual to manage this complicated enterprise. That fall, John Robert Colombo proved to be a lifesaver, suggesting a good friend, Gerald Lampert, a local fiction writer and owner of his own public relations firm. Doug Lochhead and I, both reelected for the 1970 - 1972 term, fondly remember interviewing Jerry at Doug's Massey College office. We had very positive vibes from that meeting. Jerry could only work half-time, which was in line with what we might expect from the Ontario Council for the Arts in the way of a salary grant. Much to our delight they agreed to pay Jerry's modest salary for one year. A month later the Canada Council came through with \$10,000 to sponsor a national tour. For Doug and I, Jerry Lampert, like John Robert Colombo in 1966, was "the right man at the right time." The

League never completely got over Jerry's early and untimely death in 1978.

That fall of 1971, 23 poets got off the mark as our first cross-country tour got under way. More established poets were mixed with emerging talents, making for a fertile mix. Ten readings were given at ten universities, and the general consensus was that it was a worthwhile undertaking. In addition, readings were inaugurated in some 70 to 80 high schools across Ontario, funding generously provided by the Ontario Council for the Arts. These programs continue to this day, a valuable "seeding" operation for Canadian poetry. Of course these programs have their cynical detractors, but theirs is a decidedly minor voice.

By the end of 1971 membership had increased to 78, growing slowly but steadily. Then in May of 1972, the switch was suddenly pushed on at External Affairs in Ottawa as they discovered Canada had not made a literary contribution to UNESCO's International Year of the Book. They quickly approached the League to bail them out of the situation. A tour of the U. S. A., never before attempted, seemed the easiest and most attractive possibility. But we were too late for any of the five Ivy League schools we contacted, and couldn't get any firm dates for the fall. So without feeling much chance of success, letters were airmailed to campuses in England and the West Indies. Luck was with us this time around. Readings were confirmed in Britain at London University, Leeds University, Edinburgh and Glasgow. We selected two senior poets for the U. K. junket, and Ralph Gustafson and Doug Jones from North Hatley did us proud. Ralph reported that the London reading was a bust, but the farther north they went the more

considerably things warmed up: "Edinburgh welcomed us with open arms, while in Glasgow it was standing room only."

We were even luckier to land two readings in the West Indies, where two arriving young poets, Tom Marshall and David Helwig of Kingston, Ontario, were chosen to represent Canada. As Tom Marshall reported on his return: "We went to the University of the West Indies campuses at Kingston, Jamaica, and then on to Bridgetown, Barbados, in December, making new friends and contacts for poetry." At last we had been able to get out-of-town poets on the road, something impossible before with our tiny budget.

Finally to back-track a little, we were able to announce by April 1972 that our third General Meeting would take place in Edmonton on the Weekend of October 6 - 8. As I have stated elsewhere, the membership had grown—by the time of the General Meeting to 90—and both Doug and I had decided that we wouldn't stand for reelection. We figured it was high time that some fresh bats were brought into the game. The baby we'd nursed was now active on its own two feet, it no longer needed us. One thing was certain though—we'd always remember our years of anxious fatherhood.

Wilson:

You and Doug Lochhead must feel like two Ancient Mariners now in 2001, with Ralph Gustafson, Ron Everson, Louis Dudek and others now playing poetry poker in that great members' lounge in the sky. Any final words of wisdom for the League?

Raymond Souster:

Nothing beyond repeating some words of e. e. cummings:

"If, at the end of your first ten or fifteen years of fighting and working and feeling, you find you've written one line of one poem, you'll be very lucky indeed."

Carleton Wilson:

Amen to that.

May 2001

A Note on the Cover Photograph

Taken on August 19th, 1966, North Hatley, Quebec.

A more compact grouping of six of the 'North Hatley Nine' face the late afternoon camera from the backyard patio of Betty and Ralph Gustafson's home, a mere stone's throw from beautiful Lake Massawippi. This informal gathering of poets with their wives would later prove to be the founding meeting of the League of Canadian Poets. Left to right: Lorna Everson, Ron Everson, Ralph Gustafson, Lia Souster, Ray Souster and Louis Dudek. Not shown in picture: Betty Gustafson, working her late shift as nursing floor supervisor at the Sherbrooke Hospital, who left behind as her stand-in a huge, freshly-baked chocolate cake; Mike Gnarowski, Canadian literature authority and ace photographer, who graciously consented to take the snapshot; and Frank Scott, senior Canadian poet and constitutional law expert, who arrived later, bringing along a few verbal fireworks to an otherwise agreeable and positive meeting.

Raymond Souster is a Founding Member and Life Member of the League of Canadian Poets. He was educated at University of Toronto Schools and Humberside Collegiate. In 1964 he won the Governor General's Award for Poetry for *The Colour of the Times*. Raymond Souster was the first President of the League of Canadian Poets, from 1967 to 1971. He lives in West Toronto.

Carleton Wilson is an associate member of the League of Canadian Poets. He was also educated at Humberside Collegiate and received an Honours BA in English Literature from the University of Toronto in 2000. In 1998, Carleton Wilson was awarded the E. J. Pratt Medal in Poetry. He lives in the West Toronto Junction.