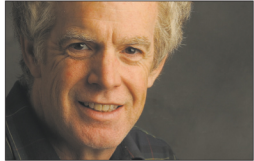


LOCAL

A towering poetic achievement

Pillar of poetry society remembers husband through verse



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The Hamilton Spectator

Experiencing a poem, one that really reaches you, can be like reading the stars in the sky, filling you with wonder, humility and a farther vision.

The points of text no longer seem ink black but bright with feeling and they shine from the page they're set on as though made of light, with the page itself, like the page of night, seeming darkened by

contrast, receding behind the words.

Back in the 1940s, Jean and Bill McCallion were a poet and an astronomer, respectively. They met at McMaster University and fell in love. They both had stars in their eyes.

It was a busy, exciting time for them on campus. Bill helped build a planetarium, the first to give public showings in Ontario. It opened in 1949. Jean helped build a tower, The Tower Poetry Society, the oldest continuously meeting poetry society in Canada. It was launched in 1951.

Named after the towers at McMaster's University Hall, it's celebrating its 60th anniversary this year. Bill died in 1998 but not before the university named the planetarium after him in 1993.

Jean still writes poetry and in November was a special presence at the Tower's big 60th celebration.

She's the oldest member, the last living founder.

And she remembers Bill.

The society's anniversary edition, Longstanding Pine, features one of Jean's latest, Shadow Poem, about a tree outside her window in winter. In the wind "your empty arms bend," she writes.

I think the tree is both Jean without Bill, and Bill, wherever he is, without Jean. In the poem, there's a memory of when the tree was lush and the moonlight "silvered green leaves in white explosions."

The last verse: "And you and I not shadows/ stood at our bedroom window/ our glistening eyes stinging." The things words can do.

There's also Love Letters to Bill, which came out in 2005. It's full of a very enduring longing and the persistence of desire. In one poem, she implores the August moon to "Fill my mouth/ with my lover's breath/ thrill my skin/ with his remembered touch."

In another poem, she addresses this curious relationship between astronomy and poetry, enterprises at once alike and contrasting, flipped images, words on white paper, equations on blackboards, translatable into each other. "At night, when you and I look hard at each other ... touch becomes our singular language."

Things have changed for the McCallions' legacies to the city. In the beginning, the planetarium "dome" was a war surplus parachute hung from the ceiling. Now the William J. McCallion Planetarium is high-tech.

In the beginning, the women of the Tower Poetry Society would wear hats and white gloves. Much of the poetry was spangled with classical or biblical allusions and erudite effects. Now both the verse and dress are freer.

Some things haven't changed. A great achievement of the society is the continuous 60-year publication of *The Tower*, with submissions from as far away as New Guinea.

If there was a stateliness to the early days, it had to do with the personality of the society's chief founder, Ida Sutherland Groom, who'd been a minor poet in England and was a forceful woman with a "mid-Victorian" manner, Jean fondly remembers. Thanks to Ida's connections, there was a preface in the first edition of *The Tower* written by British poet laureate John Masefield.

Over the decades, the society has built a kind of planetarium of verse for this city, attracting fine poets such as Marjorie Wilkinson, whose daughter Valerie Nielsen is now a prominent member, enforcing the continuity of past with present.

For more information, visit towerpoetry.ca.

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RON ALBERTSON, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Jean McCallion, left, and Valerie Nielsen of Hamilton's Tower Poetry Society.

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