

*IN MEMORIAM*  
*GEORGE JOHNSTON*  
*1913-2004*

*A remembrance by*  
*Stephen Morrissey*



*Stephen Morrissey, Carolyn Zonailo, George Johnston, Jeanne Johnston. Photograph taken at The Cedars, Huntingdon, Quebec, September 6, 1991. Photograph taken by Jake Morrissey.*

The poet George Johnston died in his ninetieth year this past August. Nine days later, Jeanne Johnston, George's wife of sixty years, died of a heart attack.

I first met George and Jeanne when I visited their home at Cook's Lines in 1981. The large old stone house, built around 1830, was situated a few hundred feet from the American border of New York State. This was their summer home for many years, then became their permanent residence when George retired from the English Department at Carleton University. Half way up the road was the home of Fred Elliott, who appears in several of George's poems.

By the mid-1990s, George and Jeanne had moved from Cook's Lines to Huntingdon, a move necessitated by their advancing years. The last time I met them for afternoon tea, George inscribed a copy of **What is to Come, Selected and New Poems** (St. Thomas Poetry Series, 1996). This, he said, was to be his last book of poems, and it was.

In 1987 *Malahat Review* had published "A Special Issue on George Johnston" with a photograph of George on the cover and scholarly articles on George's work by William Blissett, Jay MacPherson, P.K. Page, Peter Foote, and others. In 1989 George was honoured by being made a Life Member of the League of Canadian Poets.

George is very well known and respected at an international level for his work as a translator; his poetry has a place in the canon of Canadian poetry and has been anthologized. He brought a number of things to writing poetry, all of which are important.

One was the fact that he always worked at an international level. When he was

beginning he had a literary agent in London, England. Often visiting poets from Europe and the United States were George and Jeanne's houseguests in Ottawa. He subscribed to poetry journals from England and the United States and maintained an extensive correspondence. When on sabbatical in England, he visited and befriended the Welsh poet David Jones. George's work was published in *Poetry* (Chicago) and other journals, and he was well informed of what was happening in poetry in other countries. While I knew him he traveled to Europe and the Faroe Islands to read his work and visit the many friends he had made there.

Another quality George brought to his poetry was his dedication to the craft. This is shown in his rigorous editing, the conciseness of language, and a formalistic style. George often counted syllables in his lines; his poems have a subtle rhythm; and for a while he wrote acrostics.

It is also important to remember the philosophical aspect to George's work. One of his favourite books, from his youth to his old age, was A.E. Housman's **A Shropshire Lad**. Reading Housman's and Johnston's poetry will reveal a similarity in disposition between the two poets. His approach to poetry was always inclusive and showed a love for genuine poetry. The best of George Johnston's poetry is compiled in **Endeared by Dark, The Collected Poems** (The Porcupine's Quill, 1990).

Translations of texts from Old Norse and Faroese are an important part of George Johnston's literary legacy – for instance, his highly acclaimed translation of **The Saga of Gisli** (University of Toronto Press, 1963). He also published **Rocky Shores, An Anthology of Faroese Poetry** (Wilfion

Books, 1981), **Pastor Bodvar's Letter** (Penumbra Press, 1985) and **Thrand of Gotu, Two Icelandic Sagas** (The Porcupine's Quill, 1994). George saw translating not as the equivalent of writing original poetry, but as work that used the same language skills of the poet when not engaged in writing poems.

George's method of composition was to think out his poems as he walked, which he did with his wife on a daily basis. Later, upon returning home, or when the poem was completed in his mind, he would write it down. Built into this method of composition was reciting his poems from memory, a talent his audiences always appreciated. His belief in rhyming poetry was that it was more memorable than free verse and he felt that poetry should be memorized.

George was preeminently a humble man, his religious leanings were to both Quakerism and the Church of England as he searched for an expression of his spirituality. He was a family man and many of his poems dedicated to family members were written for special occasions such as the birth of a new grandchild.

He also mentored younger poets. I was thirty-one years old and living in Huntingdon when I met George Johnston. He befriended me; gave me innumerable books of poetry and poetry periodicals; talked poetry with me; welcomed me into his home; visited my Canadian Literature class; attended book launches when I published a new book; taught me about bee keeping. George treated me with respect as a person and as a poet. Overall he enlarged my life. What greater praise can be given to someone than stating that we learn to be a better person from their example.

It was a real delight to visit with George and Jeanne. The closeness between them was always evident, and the happy memories I have of them both attest to their generosity and kindness. A habit of theirs was to read out-loud to each other on a daily basis. Together they created a happy marriage that included six children, some of whom as adults lived in different parts of the country. To maintain family ties, George and Jeanne traveled great distances to visit with each of their children. They also had many grandchildren, and at the end of their lives, great grandchildren.

At the end of his long life, dedicated to poetry, family, and scholarship, we can be thankful that George Johnston was among us for so many years, and we celebrate his life and gift. In his poem, "Farewell to Teaching", George writes:

*Good-bye good friends. Alas,  
some good-byes are like death;  
they bring the heart to earth  
and teach it how to die.  
Earth, here we come again,  
we're going out to grass.  
Think of us now and then,  
we'll think of you. Good-bye.*

(**Ask Again**, Penumbra Press, 1984)