

*October 14, 1952 - To Mr. Hefferton, from Maisie Robinson:*

*I am a girl at the age of sixteen. I work at the Canadian Telegraph Service here at my home, Little Bay Islands.*

*I am very fond of making up poems and a very good art drawer. The people tell me I could make an artist out of myself. So while sitting here in the CNT office with very little to do, I thought I would make up a poem which contains twenty-two lines.*

*So by the time I got the twenty-two lines, I had a title for it and named it "The Wandering Boy." I had to use my brains a little but I found it very easy. I don't guess it's the best original poem, but I did my best.*

The Arts and Letters program was established in 1952 to encourage and acknowledge artistic expression in Canada's newly minted province. This initiative can easily be taken for granted when failing to consider the number of people who, under more oppressive political regimes, are denied this basic human right. The letter above exudes both the confidence and insecurity. It is written by a young artist seeking compliments and criticisms that are perhaps more constructive than those commonly found among friends and family. Then, as now, the competition is blind-judged. Perhaps most importantly, it is open to everyone in Newfoundland and Labrador, with no academic prerequisites. For most Newfoundland and Labrador artists, the Arts and Letters Awards is the first province-wide institution to acknowledge and encourage the artistic merit of their work, and this early recognition has been crucial in helping many artists attain subsequent national and international recognition and awards.

The contest became an immediate success after its inception. Given the princely sums in prize-money, this perhaps came as no surprise. Much more remarkable, though, is the extent to which entrants sought detailed and honest criticisms and adjudications for their submissions. This proved, for many, to be at least as valuable as prize money or prestige. Especially in more isolated areas of the province, entrants viewed the contest as an educational tool and a significant source of artistic feedback. After the first year, many wrote letters complaining that the commentary provided with submissions was sparse and unhelpful. One letter asked, "...would it be feasible, or entirely outside the scope of the judges to pencil helpful criticisms about where we erred or why we were successful for us who live outside the influence of university teaching?" In 1953, a young Michael Harrington wrote to G.A. Frecker, Deputy Minister for the Department of Education, requesting more emphasis be placed on adjudication, suggesting that, "some thought be given to the setting up of a qualified panel or board of critics to deal with all phases of the Arts and Letters and to offer guidance to the aspirants in these fields."

The adjudication process remains an important factor in the integrity of the competition. Most artists who have entered can vividly recall the critique provided

with their submissions and, whether they considered the assessment fair or not, this is further proof of its centrality to the program. Author Gerald Collins has noted that adjudication is ultimately of little value if it fails to address why unsuccessful pieces did not win.

The quest for constructive criticism of one's art can be a difficult and frustrating process. Many artists have noted that the creation of literary and visual art is often a very solitary process, with the developing product seen by hardly anyone. Bernice Morgan has described how writing can be a "lonely and closeted activity." Unlike musicians, writers do not work within the performance setting wherein they can receive feedback and observe audience reactions. For these reasons, making the first effort to exhibit finished or developing works can be an incredibly daunting step for a young and aspiring artist, yet it is essential to their growth and development. The Arts and Letters offers the opportunity of a blind adjudication from a professional observer, and this has proven invaluable to countless Newfoundland artists. For Morgan, the Arts and Letters Awards was, "...the first confirmation I'd ever had that I could write." The program has helped encourage some of the province's most talented young minds, helping them discover themselves.

Morgan, along with an enclave of contemporary literary artists such as Geraldine Rubia and Helen Porter, were pivotal in the formation of the Newfoundland Writers Guild. Formed in 1968, the Guild continues to sponsor workshops for writers, providing an active forum of debate and criticism surrounding their work. During the formative days of the Guild, both Helen Porter and Bernice Morgan participated in a number of exhaustive workshops leading up to the annual deadline for submissions, in an effort to critique and polish works to be submitted. Through continued involvement with the Arts and Letters Awards, the Writer's Guild has played a significant role in the professionalization of the literary arts in Newfoundland. In 2000, the program introduced the Percy Janes First Novel Award at the request of the Writer's Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador, although the Writer's Guild had sought such an award since the 1970s. This award has provided encouragement and incentive for aspiring writers to make what is often the hardest leap in their budding careers – the publication of a first major novel.

While literary artists sought literary criticism and feedback, visual artists sought venues where works could be hung. Early program adjudicators such as Robert Pilot and Reginald Sheppard had remarked that the province was sorely lacking in gallery space. Aside from the Ernie Mauskopf Gallery on Duckworth Street, the availability of gallery space was quite slow to improve in later decades. Winning works were hung in a public exhibition featured in both St. John's and Grand Falls, and this served as an enormous incentive for visual artists to enter. Many of the province's most successful artists first experienced the thrill of exhibition through winning the Arts and Letters Awards. When seventeen year-old David Blackwood won the competition in 1958, an admirer saw the winning piece and inquired if it was for sale. Blackwood replied, "Yes for sale for \$20.00. If Ms. Roche thinks that's too high,

may consider reducing price.” The program granted merit and value to the work of young artists all over the island, allowing the work to be examined and appreciated. This annual exhibition continues today at the Provincial Art Gallery in The Rooms.

The strict deadline imposed on submissions also serves to demand a level of punctuality and decisiveness from prospective entrants, and this helps to motivate young artists to complete submissions before any second-guessing or uncertainty looms. For self-critical artists who are uncertain about unfinished works or ideas, the Arts and Letters Awards is an exercise in efficiency and punctuality, and is often cited as one of the program’s best qualities. Writer and musician Ed Kavanagh cites the deadline as quite beneficial to his work, as the urge to continually perfect and tinker with a piece can often inhibit productivity. As a teacher of creative writing, Kavanagh stresses the program to his classes, as it forces students to produce at least one full-length piece of work on which they can receive adjudication.

The program has also encouraged entrants to explore different artistic forms, allowing artists to hone skills in new areas. Perhaps no winner in the history of the program has shown such an eclectic mastery of both literary and visual categories than Tom Dawe. Tom recalls that in 1974, after being successful in both the visual and literary categories, he challenged himself to produce his first dramatic script.

*I've always felt that if I was making poetry, I felt better teaching it. If I was writing the short story, I felt better teaching it. I dabbled like that. Because then I got up to the place years later where I said, "Geez, I've never written a play." You know...and that was 1974. So I wrote a play and sent it to the Arts and Letters to get some validity. And 1974, I won first prize for the Drama. See? So I was dabbling like that, just testing myself.*

To truly understand the impact of the Arts and Letters, one must know how the notion of a professional artist has slowly developed over the past sixty years in Newfoundland and Labrador. For example, schoolchildren growing up in Newfoundland after Confederation were generally exposed to a strict diet of Canadian and English writers and poets, with perhaps the exception of the work of E.J. Pratt. The Arts and Letters Awards was among the first initiatives to generate professional artists out of local people who otherwise might have seen their artistic work as mere hobby or pastime. As Kevin Major has pointed out from his own experience growing up in Stephenville, “...your concept of a writer was somebody who lived far away or was dead.” By offering feedback and acknowledgement, the competition has encouraged countless local artists to keep going.

Written by Allan Byrne