

W(H)ITHER THE WRITER: Is There Cyber-Space for Prince Edward Island Literary Writing?

Presentation to the ArtsNetlantic-CMTC International Conference on New Media Research Networks

by Jane Ledwell, 2004

My project today is largely illustrative: to provide some examples of how Prince Edward Island literary writers are using new media as part of their creative process, and to use these to suggest what potentials and pitfalls exist for using new media to aid the creation and dissemination of their texts. I should note first that my focus this morning is not on the collaborative possibilities that emerge for writers in new media projects, though these are legion and are exciting (In his talk yesterday, Herménégilde Chiasson discussed these collaborations, and, of course, his work is ample evidence of their potential.) My focus this morning, rather, is on the more solitary writer, creating work that is destined for publication under the traditional banner of sole authorship.

One cannot allude to the goal of publishing a literary work without discussing technology. Writing and publishing are still fundamentally reliant on old media -- in fact, the technology that made possible the emergence of literary writing as we have come to understand it, the printing press, remains the central means of publishing what is still the most valued and appreciated medium of literature: the book.

Traditional literature's continued dependence on the printing press involves it in economic and cultural processes of production and distribution that are enormously complex. But it is also fair to say that many Canadian publishing companies, large and small, have suffered these past few years, from crises that have included the rise of big-box stores (which bring the boom of large orders for books and the bust of large numbers of books returned) -- and the collapse of General Distribution Services, the nation's largest distribution company. Both of these phenomena have had implications for local Prince Edward Island small presses, though the largest of these, Acorn Press, has prevailed through the storm.



(It is interesting to note, however, that the largest local printing company, Williams and Crue, has been engulfed in a huge printing concern, ominously called Transcontinental, that prints all Prince Edward Island's newspapers and points to another threatening trend -- media convergence. As it downsizes its staff, Transcontinental no longer promises that Island publishing projects they are hired to print will go to press on the Island. They could be run through any number of printing outlets across Canada.)

Where does new media fit in a field so reliant on old media? One could point, first, to examples of continued use (or perhaps reclaimed use) of old media in the form of the hand-operated letterpress, which removes publishers from the cycle of reliance on the Transcontinentals of the world.

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Most notable in the Maritimes for its use of letterpress is Nova Scotia's Gaspereau Press, one of the major publishing successes in the region in a time of challenge and change. (Gaspereau published a limited edition run of George Elliott Clarke's *Execution Poems* that had to be extended into a larger print run and that eventually won a Governor General's award for poetry.)

Gaspereau has published several books of short stories by Prince Edward Island fiction writer J. J. Steinfeld, a prolific and well-recognized Charlottetown writer whose black humour, Kafkaesque scenarios, and Jewish literary sensibility distinguish his writing. Gaspereau will launch a collection of poetry by Island writer David Helwig later this spring.



J. J. Steinfeld, *Would You Hide Me?* (Kentville: Gaspereau, 2003)

More locally, Hazeltree Press and Paper, run by Christine Trainor who is trained in the book arts from creating handmade paper to letterpress to bookbinding, was involved in the production of the last local (and now late) literary journal *blueSHIFT*, each issue handbound in handmade paper.

She has also created a limited edition illustrated poetic memoir, written by Catherine Matthews that may someday be more widely available.



A Journal of Poetry



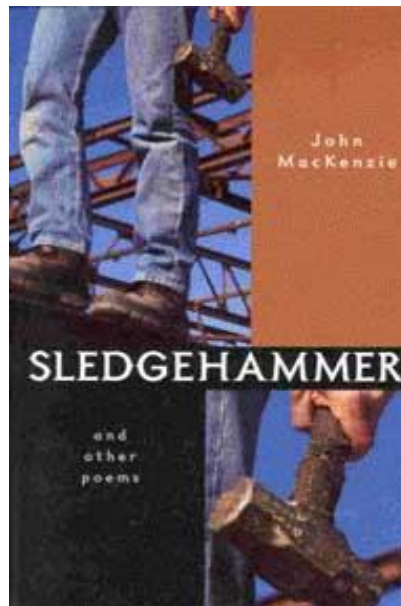
Autumn 1998

Some other island writers' publishing is oddly and indirectly reliant on new media, because it is published by publishers who have used new media effectively. As recently as two weeks ago, Island poet Brent MacLaine launched a new book of poetry, published by Goose Lane, who have only recently begun publishing poetry again on a regular basis. Gooselane's consistent success in literary publishing (and this is a publisher whose success can also be measured in G-Gs, since it published Douglas Glover's *Elle*, which was a recipient last year) is based partly on the tremendous success of its series of "Between the Covers" audiobooks, a new media innovation.



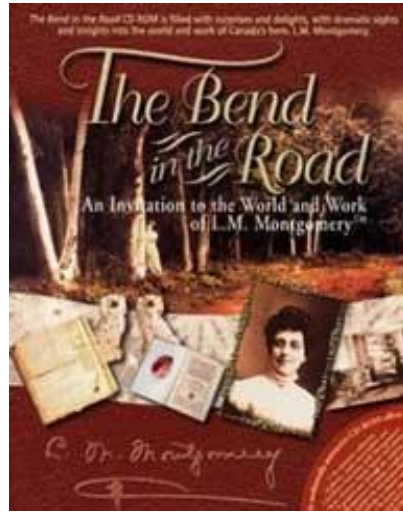
Brent MacLaine, *These Fields Were Rivers* (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 2004)

Later, I will discuss more about Island poet John MacKenzie, published by Polestar, an imprint of Raincoast whose success and ability to publish a diverse literary list is funded largely by that multimedia star, Harry Potter. Raincoast holds the Canadian rights to J. K. Rowling's unprecedentedly popular series.



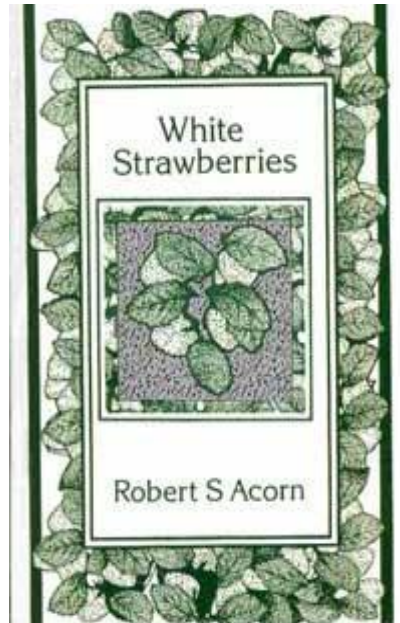
John MacKenzie, *Sledgehammer and Other Poems* (Vancouver: Polestar, 2000)

Prince Edward Island's most famous writer, L. M. Montgomery, was strongly attracted to the new medium of photography and employed it in ways that complement her literary art, as Elizabeth Epperly has so beautifully shown in her work on Montgomery's literary imagination -- work evidenced in new media projects including the award-winning "The Bend in the Road" CD-ROM and a Confederation Centre virtual art gallery exhibit. The Confederation Centre, whose program of publishing exhibit catalogues adds the important element of critical writing and visual art to Island publishing, continues to develop on-line exhibits, including the "Telling Stories: Narratives of Nationhood," designed for use in classrooms.



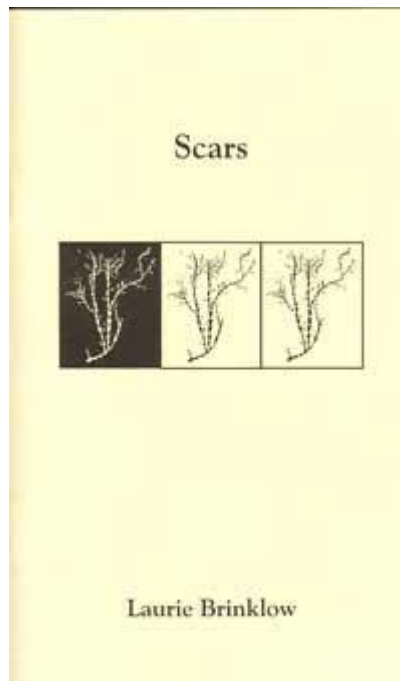
The Bend in the Road: An Invitation to the Life and Works of L. M. Montgomery. (Charlottetown: L. M. Montgomery Institute, ???)

Desktop publishing and diverse printing technologies -- from photocopies to other digital reproductions -- also provide more options to authors, to allow them to print larger or smaller print runs. Self-publishers and small, regional arts councils have used these media to great effect to ensure their works can find an audience and their voices are heard. Publications by writing groups such as TWiG (The Writers in Group), and the West Prince Arts Council are consistent and enduring contributions to Island writing.



Robert S. Acorn, *White Strawberries* (Charlottetown; TWiG, 2000)

Also notable is the resurgence of the chapbook form on Prince Edward Island, particularly Saturday Morning Chapbooks, a series developed, edited, and published by Island writers Hugh MacDonald, David Helwig, and Joseph Sherman, who have used the medium especially to encourage publication of women's writing (by Judy Gaudet, Julie Dennison, Shauna McCabe, Laurie Brinklow, and Beth Janzen) and young poets' writing (such as Zachariah Wells), as a step towards these writers publishing poetry monographs. Women's



Laurie Brinklow, *Scars* (Charlottetown: Saturday Morning Chapbooks, 2004)

writing on Prince Edward
Island, despite richness
and depth in the talent
pool, remains
underrepresented in
publications.

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As Herménégilde Chiasson pointed out yesterday, there are physical barriers in current new media that preclude reproducing “the book” as we know it through electronic publishing. As he noted, electronic publishing tends to fragments: it is unlikely that anyone will ever read Proust on-line, sitting at a computer in front of screens such as those currently available. (A recent experiment in assigning a free on-line version of *Robinson Crusoe* to my students proved this rather too successfully.) However, the problem of the novel in the realm of electronic publishing may be less an issue here. Prince Edward Island has produced only two locally written and professionally, locally published novels in the last twenty years. David Creelman’s recent study of Cape Breton fiction, and the conditions of industrialization that helped produce such richness in that island’s fiction, might offer a suggestion for the relative lack of Prince Edward Island novels: perhaps we did not have the industrial conditions to allow the flourishing of the novel form. Our industries are, after all, traditional rural industries such as farming and fishing, which may lend themselves in the 20th century more to creating conditions for an oral tradition, rather than a literary tradition at all.

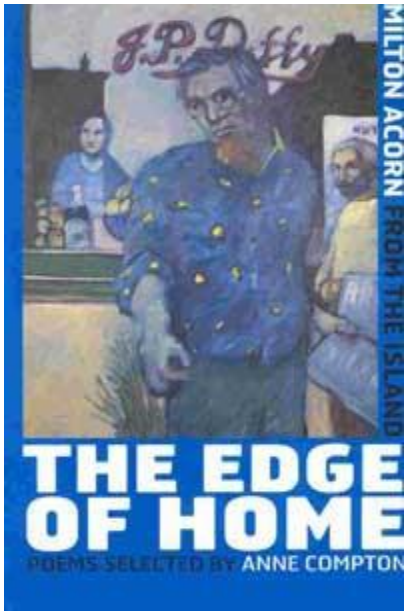
The primary literary genre being published by Islanders is poetry, which, with its emphasis on both sound and visuals, might allow for more interaction with new media. It is on poetry that the rest of my talk will focus, including aspects of performance of poetry, and performative aspects of poetic text, that make it amenable to new media applications.



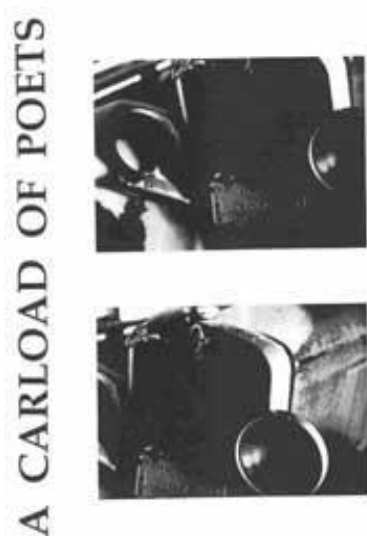
In the 1970s, Island poets were already recognizing the usefulness of new media, and produced a record (spearheaded by Reshard Gool) called seven poets from Prince Edward Island. These seven were a rough and ready bunch of performers. Poetry readings have always had an odd appeal to Islanders -- I recently attended the local event for the CBC Poetry Face-Off, at which people were turned away at the door when the 90-seat venue filled with spectators eager to hear five local poets.

Poetry performance has a strong tradition on the Island, perhaps due in part to the influence of Milton Acorn, the Island's best-known poet and a man of unpredictable performance and predictable passion. The highlight of my summers when I was a teenager were the performances of the Milton Acorn Poetry Festival, which brought poets and musicians from across Canada to perform in local venues, in Charlottetown and in rural PEI alike. This was our introduction to sound poets, to dub poets, and to the rich diversity offered by poetry in performance.

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One of the most exciting performing groups were local poets who configured themselves as the secret swarm and who collectively presented their works at the Council of the Arts, or (more famously) at the legendary bar known as The Dip. They also published their collections in small self-published anthologies such as “a carload of poets.”



These works have enduring resonance in the arts community. One of the most important Island voices to emerge from the secret swarm and to be turned on to poetry by Milton Acorn’s legend, is John MacKenzie. (PEI winner of this year’s Poetry Face-Off event mentioned above.)

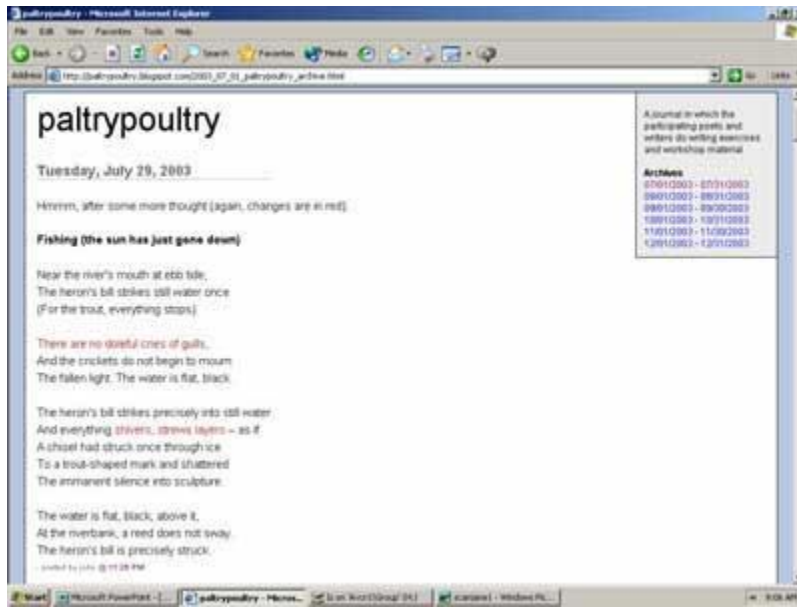
One of the most distinctive characteristics of John MacKenzie’s poetry is best heard in his performance: the combination of affect, attitude, accent, and voice communicates something that he captures on the page, but captures even better as an embodied performer. Here is an artist who cries out for new media projects.



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MacKenzie has not created new media works, but he has incorporated new media into his process in some interesting and suggestive ways. If you ask, he'll tell you first that after he gets an idea, he then spends a month on-line reading baseball statistics. This is only part of the way new media informs his process, though.

John's second book of poetry, *Shaken by Physics*, owes its central cycle of poems in part to the Internet. Feeling bored and uninspired one night, he began a thread on a messageboard, soliciting participation in writing exercises. The exercise he set as a base: having a group of poets begin with two concrete nouns, an abstract noun, a verb, and an adjective. From these exercises emerged the extraordinary sequence, *Shaken by Physics*. John has also experimented with establishing a Weblog for a writing group that he had been part of last winter and that disintegrated due to the old problem of outmigration from the Island -- two members of the group left to find work or to study. The group didn't find the Weblog as usable or as immediate as weekly get-togethers, but there is strong potential for using this medium for interaction, inspiration, and mutual critique.



John's personal Weblog is mostly devoted to baseball and philosophy (though he might not distinguish between the two.)

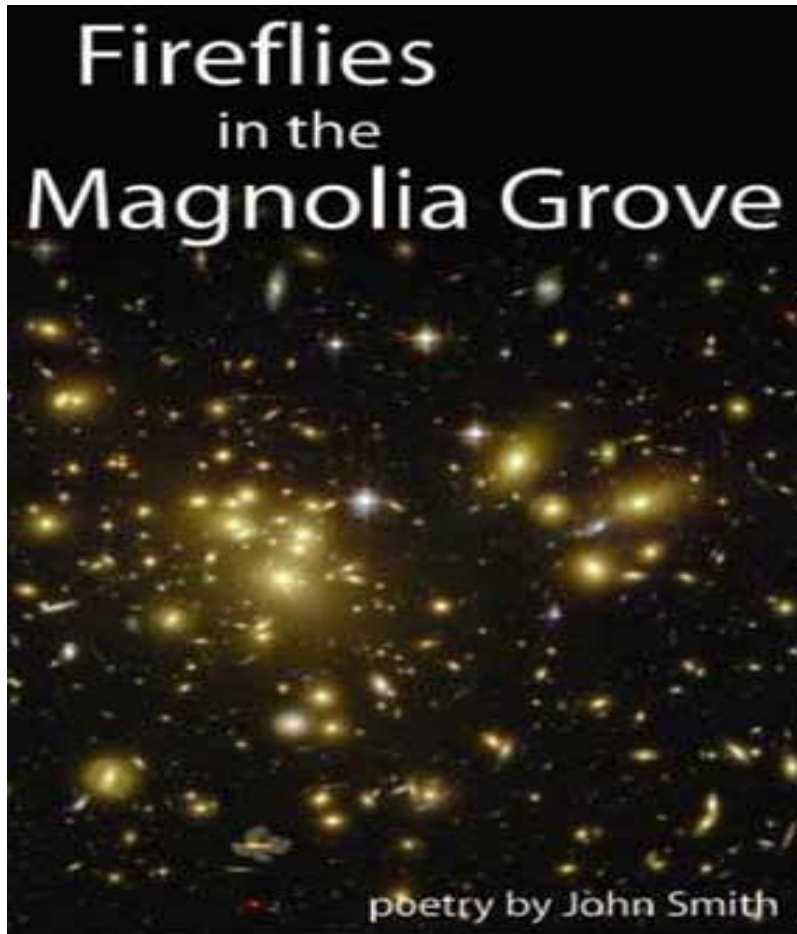


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An emerging passion among certain islanders for Weblogs could form the basis of a whole additional presentation. There are some exceptional bloggers on the Island. So far, their work has not tended often towards literary writing, but it will. My colleague here at UPEI, Mark Hemphill, a blogger and an advocate for virtual communities, has tapped into theory that likens today's bloggers to the pamphleteers who emerged as a force with the arrival of the printing press. The kinds of connectedness and possibilities for collaboration that emerge from new media are legion. In the end, they may mean the end of the model of the solitary writer or individual author

that I've discussed in this paper, but I expect to see the persistence of the book, in some form, for some kinds of writing.

The next book of poetry that will be published on Prince Edward Island will be John Smith's *Fireflies in the Magnolia Bush*. John Smith is our first PEI poet laureate and one of the great underacknowledged voices of Canadian literature. To hear him in performance adds a dimension to his work that is extraordinary. But his book will look like a book. It was written on an electric typewriter. His manuscript had to be scanned to create a digital file for design and, ultimately, for publication.



Thank you very much.

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Jane Ledwell was Director of the Institute of Island Studies at the time of this presentation.

