

Tribute by Harry Thurston on behalf of the Writers' Union of Canada

Silver Donald Cameron 1937-2020

Two months before Don's death from cancer, when neither he nor I knew that he was ill, I wrote to my old friend in awe of his continuing productivity at age 82, with the imminent release of his new true crime book, *Blood on the Water*, the recent re-release of his classic non-fiction works, *The Education of Everett Richardson* and *The Living Beach*, and his on-line environmental project "The Green Interview." In my letter, I quipped, "When I was young, I wanted to grow up to be Silver Donald Cameron." I was hardly joking for as a young freelancer in Nova Scotia, when I looked around forty years ago for a model of how to survive as a writer, the shining example of consummate craft, social conscience, and entrepreneurial savvy was one Silver Donald Cameron.

A half century later, he remained a beacon for writers, young and old, to guide their own careers, and to measure themselves by. Don could, and did, turn his hand to almost every conceivable literary form: journalism, nonfiction, fiction, and drama for stage, radio, and screen. His first two books were traditional academic undertakings, *Faces of Leacock* and *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, the latter a forerunner of his Green Interview project. But Don (the holder of a PhD. From the University of London) was unhappy with the constraints of academic life and said 'good-bye to all that' in 1971, leaving the University of New Brunswick for D'Escousse, a village in the Acadian enclave of Isle Madame, off the south east coast of Cape Breton. He adopted it as his home and in time the villagers adopted him as one of their own. "For a writer the great benefit of a village is the way you can know people," he wrote in *Wind, Whales and Whisky: A Cape Breton Voyage*, the first of three best-selling sailing books.

His new home beside the sea inspired *Sniffing the Coast: An Acadian Voyage* and *Sailing Away from Winter: A Cruise from Nova Scotia to Florida and Beyond*. But these books also went beyond the travel adventure genre to stand as love stories, respectively for his wife Lulu Terrio-Cameron, who died of breast cancer in 1996, and his wife at the time of his death, the writer Marjorie Simmins, his life and sailing mates. And they were poems to the sea and the people who live beside and on it.

The first of these sea stories was *The Education of Everett Richardson* which recounted the struggle of the Nova Scotia Fishermen's Strike of 1970-71, when 235 trawlermen from the coastal communities of Canso, Mulgrave, and Petit de Grat pitted themselves against foreign-owned fish companies and the local "cod aristocracy." It was a typical Cameron tour de force which blended oral history, epistolary form, and investigative reporting, bound together by Don's eloquence. Ranked 47th by the editors Trevor Adams and Stephen Clare of *Atlantic Canada's 100 Greatest Books*, they write, "through the lens of Atlantic Canadian history, or the labour movement, or the history of the fisheries, this is an important book. Yet few books on those subjects stand as large... that's because this book's ultimate strength is in Cameron's storytelling skills. His writing is taut, tense, and blunt, perfectly reflecting the powder-keg feel of the times."

I remember Don asking to have a chat when we were at a meeting of the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia, sometime in the early 1990s. I wondered what was on his mind and was surprised when he came to me for advice whether I thought beaches, that shifting boundary between land and sea, might

make a good subject for a book. I believed it would—in the hands of this craftsman any subject might make a good book. What transpired was something better than good. *The Living Beach, Life, Death and Politics where the Land Meets the Sea* was a wide-ranging chronicle that added its name to the top 100 Atlantic books list, but also previewed Cameron’s voice as a major environmental thinker and advocate in the 2000s when he was appointed the first Farley Mowat Chair in the Environment at Cape Breton University. In it he articulates the Gaia principle that the Earth is a living thing.

You talk as though the damn thing [the beach] were alive.

I think of it that way

In typical Cameron fashion, that paragon of freelance practice, this book had many lives. First it was an article in *Canadian Geographic*, a two –hour documentary series for CBC Radio’s *Ideas*, a television documentary broadcast by Vision and ATV, a commercial video, and a half-hour CBC Nova Scotia show for *Land and Sea*.

What couldn’t this man turn his hand to, I wondered? The first time I was at his home in D’Escousse, the prow of his schooner *Silversark* projected into his living and writing space, just another Cameron project under construction. It seemed the work, the good work, would never end—and then, with little warning, it did on June 1, 2020.

I am now reading his posthumous book, *Blood in the Water, A True Story of Revenge in the Maritimes*. Here are all of the qualities that I have admired for so long. It may well be “his masterpiece,” as some other writer admirers have said.

It is a tragic story told with gritty humour. Don’s voice had a mirthful and musical burr to it (how we will miss it) and he had an unerring ear for dialogue and dialect, which made him as gifted a raconteur as he was a storyteller on the page. All of those voices are mingled here in this portrait of the village and villagers he loved.

Silver Donald Cameron’s voice will live on. I am reminded of this passage from *The Living Beach*:
“The wave is at its most magnificent an instant before its death, and I watch it with a joy that is tinged with sorrow. For me, these are the most beautiful of all breakers—the combers within which T.S. Eliot imagined the mermaids singing.”

- Harry Thurston is a poet and journalist, and the author of some two dozen books.

