

Poetry by Allan Anderson

Words Are

Words are
Words are the beginning
Words are the beginning and the end
Words are the beginning and the end of the beginning
Words are

Poetry

Poetry's like love.
Sometimes, order is order's decay,
And, confounding all we say,
Intricate mysteries prove
A unique disarray
A universe away.
What new planet now will move
Through startled skies above?

HOW DO YOU DEFINE SINGULAR?

ALLAN ANDERSON, 1915-1994

By Janine Harris-Wheatley

Allan Anderson, it must be said, was not one of those people whose life can be encapsulated in a few hastily scribbled words. Allan did not have interests, he had passions, mostly for people's stories. From 1949 to his retirement in 1975, he crisscrossed Canada, collecting and broadcasting oral histories for his popular CBC Radio series, *Let's Find Out* which ran for 21 years. As a freelance broadcaster he developed and pitched his own program ideas. *Metro Intercom* and *At Stake, Ontario* were two other series that made the grade, along with mini-series on trains and the Arctic.

When he retired he moved permanently to his farmhouse near Tottenham with his partner Betty Tomlinson, Allan turned to writing books not radio scripts. His first collection of oral histories, *Remembering the Farm: memories of farming, ranching, and rural life in Canada, past and present*, appeared in 1977. It became a Canadian bestseller, going to 8 editions in hardcover and paperback. *Greetings from Canada: an album of unique Canadian postcards from the Edwardian era, 1900-1916* was written with Betty. The pair toured Canada presenting a successful program based on the book. This was followed by more oral histories of sailors, submariners, and fisherman in *Salt Water, Fresh Water* in 1979 (3 editions) and *Roughnecks and Wildcatters* in 1981 (6 editions), the stories of Canadian oilfield workers. In 1983 he published *Remembering Leacock* (4 editions), a collection of 78 recollections about Stephen Leacock, the celebrated Canadian humourist and economist, and Allan's favourite professor when he studied at McGill University.

Writing, his own and others, was a passion. He was a regular reviewer of books for Robert Weaver on CBC Radio's *Anthology*. Every sentence he wrote was carefully crafted and meticulously punctuated. He generously shared this passion and talent for good writing through his creative writing classes in Tottenham. The first meeting was advertised in the local paper for September 1980 and classes continued until the late eighties. Members of the group

still cherish the three volumes of their poetry collected in *Creative Mosaics* (1985-1986). Allan's poetic entries were titled *Words Are, The Fog, Moment of Waking, Poetry, Writer, and Summer Afternoon*.

Views from the Hilltop, the column Allan began in 1977 for the Beeton Record Sentinel, appeared every week until his death. The final *Views* was Editor Bruce Haire's farewell tribute. Bruce noted that this column "became one of the most controversial pieces of writing to be found anywhere in community newspapers." As Catherine Haller said in The Alliston Herald's tribute, Allan was "A devout socialist who loved books only slightly more than he loved politics. Anderson never set out to make friends, he set out to win battles." A self-proclaimed gadfly, Allan used *Views* to chivy politicians at every level of government, holding them to a high standard of service to their constituency. But also he wrote to extoll the worthy accomplishments of those people he admired, to describe and protect the natural wonders he observed from his hilltop home on the 5th line, to champion artistic and cultural opportunities, and to explore history locally and across Canada.

When Bernice Merrick Ellis called the first organizational meeting of the Tecumseth and West Gwillimbury Historical Society in May 1978, Allan stepped forward as a founding Director. He served as President for one year but his real contribution was the many programs he presented. His first in October 1978, on the importance of people's stories in preserving local history, has set the agenda for the Society's forty years of advocacy, special events, and publications on behalf of promoting and preserving the heritage of the two historic Townships. Whenever there was a space on the yearly schedule he would gather a panel of locals to talk about automobiles or farming or some such or pull other stories from the past. His portrait hangs on the Wall of Honour at the Museum on the Boyne in recognition of his enduring contributions to the heritage of South Simcoe.

Allan's first local history book was *Tottenham : a history of Tottenham, Ontario and the area around it, from the pioneer days to the present time : the story of a friendly, fun-loving village*, commissioned by the Tottenham Women's Institute and published in 1980. Next he co-wrote with Shawn Thompson *From grandeur to ghosts : the Tottenham Inn remembered*, published in 1983. Then he convinced Tecumseth Township Council to fund a history of the Township and persuaded a group of TWGHS members to help with research. Along with Betty he wrote, compiled, and edited the 980 pages of *Tecumseth Township, the unforgettable past: a local history of Tecumseth Township, Simcoe County, province of Ontario, Canada*, published in 1984. The Andersons are also listed as consultants on *A History of Vespra Township : pioneers and settlements, communities, historic places, people and events* published in 1987. Allan had one last oral history to share, *The Tottenham Tornado: The Massive Relief Effort, First-Hand Accounts by Survivors, The Vivid Comprehensive Story of the Tornado ...With Over 100 Dramatic Pictures*, which was published in 1991, five years after the disaster.

In Allan's own words, in 1991 came "the right idea, at the right time, in the right place!" Times were changing and the Province had decreed that the four historic municipalities of Tecumseth, Alliston, Beeton, and Tottenham would be amalgamated into one on January 1, 1991. Allan thought this a splendid opportunity to increase support in this area for arts and culture. In usual Allan-style he captivated fourteen like-minded people to form an organizing committee, cajoled Town Council into allowing it to be designated an Advisory Committee on Culture to the new Town, and charmed or coerced a number of individuals and businesses into contributing cash and services. The next step was the *1991 Cultural Resource Directory* published by the Advisory Committee on Culture for the Amalgamated Town of Alliston, Beeton, Tecumseth, and

Tottenham. It contained 150 entries for individuals involved in arts and culture in the area and 33 organizations. That accomplishment sparked the need for more meetings and focus groups, Spring Flings and Gala events before the Committee evolved into the New Tecumseth and Area Arts Council in 1993, with his accomplished wife, Betty Tomlinson Anderson as its first President. Another in a long line of lasting contributions to his community that won Allan an Ontario Seniors Achievement Award in 1993.

Allan Anderson was born in Calgary in 1915, grew up in Montreal, served in Canada in World War Two, worked in Toronto, successfully turned his back on alcohol, and lived the last sober nineteen years of his life in Tecumseth Township until he died there, peacefully on a Spring afternoon in 1994. But those words barely begin to tell the story of this complex, challenging, singular man. "Singular", that is to say "unique ... remarkable ... eccentric in some respect", that is to say Allan Anderson.

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