

TORONTO

A Literary Guide

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TORONTO ISLANDS

The tour begins at Ward Island and progresses west to the other islands.

Take the ferry from the docks at the foot of Yonge Street (hidden behind the Harbour Castle Hotel) to Ward Island.

Novelist Peter Robinson (b.1950), author of the Inspector Banks mysteries (e.g., *Final Account*, 1994; *Dead Right*, 1997), began his first attempts at writing in the mystery genre while living at **8 First Street** on Ward Island in the summer of 1979. Until then, his creative writing was confined to poetry, the writing of which he also continued while living here. Since then, his police procedural novels have garnered some of the highest praise conferred on a Canadian mystery author.

When poets Gwendolyn MacEwen (1941-87) and Milton Acorn (1923-86) were married in February 1962 they moved soon after to a small, four-room cottage at **10 Second Avenue** on Ward Island. One of the reasons they moved here is that both were trying to live on their incomes as poets—a paltry sum in total, of course, and at the time the Island mini-houses represented some of the cheapest rents in town. Also, Acorn, a native of PEI, liked the idea of living on an island. His affection for the insular lifestyle could not overcome, however, the inescapable fact that his marriage to MacEwen had been a huge mistake. Cohabitation revealed that neither was suitable for the other, and by July 1962 MacEwen had left the Island, had left Acorn, indeed had left Toronto temporarily to discover Israel.

Immediately after he finished Grade 12 at Jarvis Collegiate, poet Victor Coleman (b.1944) took a job as an office clerk at the headquarters of the Thomson newspaper chain on Bay Street and moved to **24 Bayview Avenue** on Ward Island. It was his home for the next 18 months, but even after

he returned to the mainland, he hoped to live again on the Island. His wish was fulfilled in October 1970 when he was able to take possession of **25 Third Street**, his home until June 1973, and again from November 1976 to September 1980. Coleman entered fully into the life of the Island community, and found his time here good for his poetry. During his first stint at **25 Third** he wrote two books, *Stranger* and *Speech Sucks*, and during the second tenure he finished *Captions for the Deaf*.

Poet and children's author Penn Kemp (b.1944) made a home at **11 Third Street** from 1971-74, during which time she wrote her first book, *Bearing Down* (1972), and edited the women's issue of the literary magazine *IS*. She then moved to **14 Fourth Street** and remained here until 1979. This is a most literary cottage for two reasons. First, Kemp wrote a number of books here: *Trance Form* (1976), *Clearing* (1977), *The Epic of Toad and Heron* (1977), *Angel Makers* (1978), *Toad Tales* (1980), *Some Talk Magic* (1986), and *Travelling Light* (1986). Second, after she left, the cottage passed into the hands of two other writers. In 1984, novelist Peter Such (b.1939) bought the cottage and made it his home from that date until 1988 when he moved back to the Annex. During the decade 1969-79 he published three novels that hinted at large possibilities, but since then he has published no books of creative writing. He teaches at York University.

Between the Kemp and Such years, poet Robert Sward (b.1933) developed a taste for island life when he lived in the same cottage from 1979-80. He then transferred to **3 Wyandot** on Algonquin Island and that was his home to February 1984. So taken with the islands was Sward that he wrote their history in the book *The Toronto Islands, An Illustrated History* (1983), and was inspired to



Milton Acorn and Gwendolyn MacEwen at a party at Raymond Souster's c. 1960, just prior to their marriage

finish two books of poetry: *Twelve Poems* (1982) and *Poems New and Selected* (1983). In a recent autobiographical essay, Sward recounts how, visiting from B.C., he came to discover the Island: "One day, Coach House Press editor Victor Coleman invited me to a party. Victor lived in a community of about seven hundred people on the Toronto Islands, a mile-and-a-half ride from downtown Toronto . . . The residents, a unique mix of writers, painters, musicians, workers in Canada's business and entertainment industries all commuted to the city together on a ferry boat. A number of American expatriates live on the Islands, along with people from England, France, Germany, and Switzerland. The Coach House party went on late into the night. It was two days before I got back to Toronto and, by that time, I had made up my mind to move to the Big City, and to live in the island community."

Thanks to the intervention of a girlfriend of the time, novelist and playwright David Young was able to obtain a fall-to-spring-only sublet at **1 Willow Avenue** from 1971-75. David tells me, "I cleared out in the summer to travel in Europe. This was a sweet little hidey-hole, a Peter Rabbit cottage hidden behind a high hedge. The place was uninsulated and fiercely cold in winter. I was writing in earnest now. Here I met Victor Coleman and thus began my long association with Coach House Press. The island house was a hub for frenzied, nonstop socializing with Coach House authors such as Matt Cohen, Ed Dorn, Allen Ginsberg, General Idea, Billy Hutton, bp Nichol, David McFadden, Michael Ondaatje, *et al.* Here I wrote my first screenplay, *125 Rooms of Comfort*. Also here my first publication: *Rifle News*, a faux tabloid newspaper which I wrote, designed and printed at the Coach House Press. And I began work on *Agent Provocateur* (1976)."

Novelist Phil Murphy (b.1925) was a fifth-generation Torontonion, the only child of the noted visual artist R.W. Murphy, a member of the Royal Canadian Academy. The first six months of Phil's life were spent on a hammock in his parents' yacht, soon after which they bought The Moorings, a house at **118 Lake Shore Avenue** on Ward Island. The home appears on the cover of Murphy's story collection, *Summer Island* (1984). For the next years, this was to be his main residence, the family returning to various rented houses only for the three or four worst months of winter, and his youthful memories of the island provide the background for his only published volume.

Novelist and short-story writer Hugh Hood (b.1928) lived at the Manitou Hotel, **320 Lake Shore Avenue**, Centre Island, from 1939-43. In a letter he remarked, "I should note that while I lived at the island, I iceboated on Toronto Bay, walked across the Bay many times during the winters, and rode across in a car once, terrified, when a drunk offered me a ride after the [ferry] Ned Hanlan had made its last crossing for the day. Almost no Torontonians can make that statement."

Norma West Linder (b.1928) was born in Toronto but spent most of her childhood and youth on Manitoulin Island. Because her husband was a dance-band musician, the couple were forced to live out of suitcases for much of their married life, including the post-war decade when Toronto was their home as much as any place. In 1947 she lived at **7 Mohawk Street** on Centre Island: "Centre Island was my favourite spot. I loved taking the ferry back and forth to work. At that time, I made the notes for a book of poems called *The Rooming House*. I learned something important with the publication of that collection. Never trust anybody to proof for you! Toronto will always mean a great deal to me—creatively and emotionally. I used it as the setting for my first novel, *The Lemon Tree*. It was released simultaneously in England and Canada in 1973. With that, I was thoroughly hooked on writing."

By the time Herman Voaden (1903-91) spent a year, 1939-40, living at **15 St. Andrew's Avenue** on Centre Island, he was well-known in the Canadian arts community for his accomplishments as a playwright. For almost 20 years by this point he had been espousing a singular vision of what theatre should be, a symphonic blend of all the arts certainly more ambitious than anything else being proposed in the country. That it was also successful the few times it was presented was beyond doubt. His scale of production was difficult to produce in a nation which was largely indifferent to the absence of stages on which Canadian voices could be heard. And the economic woes of the Depression certainly made the task almost impossible. Yet he persevered in doing what he could to see his own plays—and those of others—professionally performed, and he remains an undersung hero of Canadian drama.

Toronto-born Vancy Kasper (b.1930) is a poet, novelist and was also for most of the 1950s a features writer at the *Star*. During the decade 1955-65 she lived in since-raised rooming houses [addresses unknown] on either Ward Island or Centre Island from March 1 to December 1 of each year. She would have happily lived year-round on the Island, but in the off-months the ferry did not leave early enough for her to get to the *Star* office by the required 7 am starting time.

Raymond Knister's brilliant promise was cut short when he drowned in 1932, at the age of 33. Adept at poetry, he was more highly regarded in his time, and now, as a fiction writer of wonderful adroitness. Macmillan recognized his talent early and in 1927 commissioned him to make a selection of Canadian short stories for the first anthology dedicated to the form to be published in this country. Knister's introduction to the collection is still regarded as a milestone assessment of the Canadian approach to short-story writing. Much of the reading and editing for that book was done while he lived at The Poplars, a cottage

on the Western Sandbar at **23 West Island Drive** [demolished] to which he had moved immediately after his marriage on June 18, 1927. When not absorbed with his work on the Macmillan project, he finished his first novel, *White Narcissus* (1929), at this address. Morley Callaghan wrote an appreciation of the book for the New Canadian Library edition. In a July 1, 1927 letter to a friend, Knister described his island home: "We have a nice cottage here, on the beach with neighbours only on one side, and a sort of wild little park on the other, and while I sit here I can see Lake Ontario on one hand, and an islet on the other. On which latter they are prosecuting regatta races at this moment, in celebration of the glorious first [July 1]. Except on such occasions, it is quite secluded here, though you can see the city, and hear the City Hall clock strike. It is nearly opposite the Exhibition grounds, and the domed and fancy roofs of those buildings are finely lit up in the mornings. Myrtle and I went over to the Rodeo the other afternoon, and wished we could swim home instead of going all the way round in sweltering street cars. No cars of any sort over here, and only one horse, the garbage man's. Eaton's and Simpson's deliver with two-wheeled carts pulled by men. So, behold me at established length and happier already than I have succeeded in being for any length of time before, feeling rich in everything but money, and even rather assiduously working. In June I re-wrote with much addition about 120 pages of *White Narcissus*, one story, and two articles. Not so bad for a honeymoon?" The Knisters remained here until January 1928, when they moved to a flat in Parkdale.

Novelist Hugh Garner lived in three furnished flats on Centre Island [addresses unknown] from 1950-53, probably near the Manitou Hotel where he was a frequent visitor to the beer parlour. In his autobiography, he describes how he wrote fiction in those days: "During the summer of 1951 I drank myself broke, and my \$75 monthly rent day was less

than a week away. I had to write a saleable story fast, and at eight o'clock one evening after the children had been put to bed, I dreamed up a story about a little old lady, an old-age pensioner who was determined to take a summertime trip on a train . . . By three the next morning the story was written, and after a few hours sleep I typed a corrected copy of it." The story was purchased the next day by *Chatelaine's* editor Byrne Hope Sanders for publication in their October issue. Garner was able to pick-up his payment for the story a mere 24 hours later. He lived this way, from hand to mouth, for much of the 1950s. One of his ongoing financial saviours was Jack Kent Cooke, later famous as a tycoon and owner of leading sports franchises in the USA, but in the fifties a rising entrepreneur of magazines and radio. During one bad patch, Garner went to see Cooke and convinced the millionaire to hire him as Public Relations Director. The job provided Garner with a steady income, but left him little time for any original writing while the Island was his home. It was only after he had moved to the mainland that he wrote an article for *Saturday Night*, a piece that includes his own odd assessment of his former fellow citizens across the bay: "Although living conditions and lifestyles are Bohemian in the extreme, very few writers or painters make their homes there for long; they can't stand the social pace and there are too many diversions popping up between themselves and their Muse. Many of the inhabitants belong to a half-world that includes chronic alcoholics, wife and husband deserters, beach-combers, deadbeats and spinsters-on-the-make. The majority of these live on Centre Island, the biggest of the chain, and one given over to a peculiar type of Edwardian architecture that is a hodge-podge of widows' walks, wings, cupolas and closed-in porches added to the houses as if thrown at them by a demented tent-maker. The normal fringe of the population is in a minority on Centre Island, as it is on Hanlan's Point,

while Algonquin Island is settled by a peculiar stuffy type of water-borne suburbanite who tries to pretend that the less-inhibited Centre Islanders do not exist."

One other notable author lived on the Island but I have not been able to determine where. Len Deighton cannot recall the address of where he lived, and none of the oldtimers or archives on the Island have a record of his whereabouts. Deighton (b.1929) discussed his Toronto days and plans for a novel to be set in the city with the *Star* when he was passing through town on a promotional tour in 1978: "Don't be surprised if you see a shoot-out scene on a Toronto Island ferry . . . And how about a winter chase sequence, with the spy on the run from Toronto to Ottawa to Quebec and on up to the snowy wastelands of the Canadian Arctic?" Those are some of the images running through Deighton's mind for a projected thriller that will use Toronto Island as its main locale.

"I like using actual spy cases in an authentic setting as a springboard for my fiction," he said in an interview. "Canada has all the ingredients for the sort of suspense story I like to write and I can't understand why its setting hasn't been used more often."

"You've got a lakeside proximity to the American border, an exotic dual language situation, a unique relationship with Russia, an historical background of Gouzenko-style espionage, and all that fantastic scenery running up to the North Pole . . . At this stage, all I know is it [the proposed novel] will contain the word spy. It ought to convey the idea of winter. And somewhere in the title there should be the 49th Parallel—a powerful image that epitomizes Canada to me.' But why Toronto Island? 'Because that's where I lived for four months back in the summer of 1956. I loved the ferries and the mixed community there. And it's a terrible, terrible shame they intend throwing out the Islanders and making it an arid sort of vacation park.'"