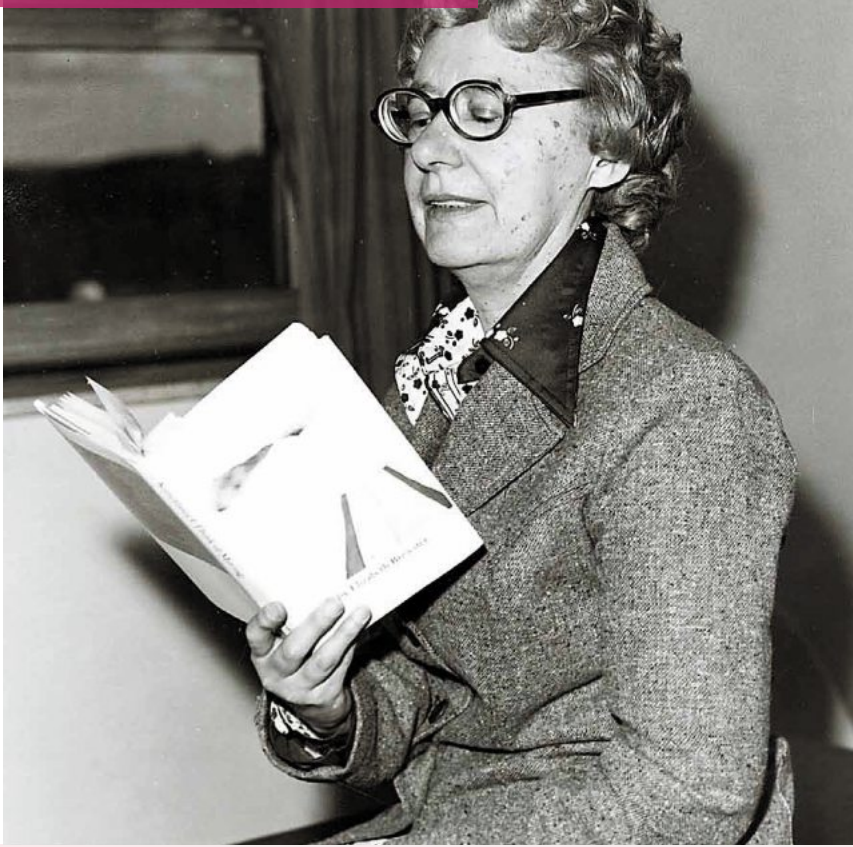


obituary



Elizabeth Brewster passed away on Dec. 26, 2012, in Saskatchewan. This photo, from Oct. 8, 1977, was taken when Brewster was reading from one of her published works at the University of New Brunswick Saint John. PHOTO: TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL ARCHIVE

Where she came from

Remembering Chipman-born poet Elizabeth Brewster (1922-2012).

Story by Thomas Hodd

Elizabeth Brewster was no stranger to the idea of making connections. She was a prolific Canadian author who believed in the transformative power of the written word; a dedicated teacher and mentor; a loyal friend to people across the country, who counted among her intimates such Canadian literary luminaries as Dorothy Livesay, Margaret Atwood and P.K. Page; and a transplanted Maritimer who never forgot her roots, who returned to her home province almost yearly to visit with old acquaintances.

Born on Aug. 22, 1922, Brewster grew up in Chipman, a lumber, coal and brick town that offered her few opportunities.

"She came from a very difficult background," says longtime friend and fellow New Brunswick writer, Robert Gibbs. "The family was desperately poor. They had to move around."

But Brewster had a kind of resilience that helped her to succeed. Although poverty kept her from completing high school until most of her friends had already graduated, it didn't deter her desire to pursue post-secondary studies. At a time when few women were obtaining university degrees, Brewster proved the naysayers wrong. She completed her BA at the University of New Brunswick in 1946, followed by an MA at Harvard University's women's college, Radcliffe College, in 1947. She then obtained a bachelor of library science from the University of Toronto in 1953, and a PhD from the University of Indiana in 1962. Of course, Brewster's scholarly achievements weren't surprising to those who knew her.

"Betty was a shy person, but incredibly strong, and so was able to make her way in the world," remembers Nancy Bauer, another close New Brunswick writing friend. "She was a lovely, sweet, talented woman."

Then there was her writing career, a vocation that began when Brewster was a child. In 1941, the shy young high school student entered a poetry contest in the *Telegraph-Journal* being judged by Canadian poet and artist P.K. Page. Brewster was one of the winners, and she and Page began a friendship that would last until Page's death in 2010.

At UNB, Brewster became friends with local Fredericton writers such as Don Gammon and Alfred G. Bailey. They, along with some other local poets, formed *The Fiddlehead* in 1945, now considered Canada's longest-running literary journal. It's a fitting tribute, then, that the Spring 2013 issue of *The Fiddlehead* is publishing a selection of Brewster's poems that appeared in the early issues.

Brewster's first poetry chapbook, *East Coast*, appeared in 1951. She went on to publish more than 20 collections of poetry, a handful of novels and short-story collections, as well as two autobiographical works. But what always struck admirers of Brewster's work was her writing style.

"She deliberately wrote plainly, and strove to make it that way," Bauer says.

It's a sentiment shared by Gibbs, who

sees similarities between her work and that of fellow New Brunswick poet Alden Nowlan.

"There's an integrity about her work — she didn't bow to fashion," Gibbs says. "Alden thought highly of her."

During the 1950s and 1960s, Brewster worked chiefly as a librarian at several universities across the country, including Queen's University, Mount Allison, the University of Alberta and for several years at the Legislative Library of New Brunswick in Fredericton. Then, in 1972, she became an English professor at the University of Saskatchewan, a post she held until her retirement in 1990. Brewster soon moved beyond her post to become an integral part of Saskatoon's writing community.

"She didn't fit in immediately, but was at the centre of it by the time she retired," recalls David Carpenter, who taught alongside Brewster for 20 years.

Carol Morrell, another friend and longtime colleague in the English department, remembers Brewster as being "very loyal to anyone who wanted to write." She also recalls that when Brewster was awarded the Saskatchewan Order of Merit, in 2008, the ceremony was held in a large ballroom in a downtown hotel.

"The place was full," Morrell says. "Her work is admired widely."

But influence is never a one-way street. Saskatchewan had a tremendous impact on Brewster. Retired English professor Paul Denham, who gave the eulogy at her funeral, points out, "Elizabeth was more prolific after she settled in Saskatoon; she was in a place to establish a network and was able to give more energy to her writing."

More than two-thirds of her publications appeared after she moved west.

As Brewster's reputation grew, so too did recognition for her work. In 1982, she received an honorary doctorate from the University of New Brunswick. In 1995, she received the Lifetime Award for Excellence in the Arts from the Saskatchewan Arts Board. The next year, her collection *Footnotes to the Book of Job* was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry. In 2001, she was inducted into the Order of Canada.

But as the new millennium began, Brewster's health began to fail. It didn't prevent her from carrying on, though; her passion for writing was too great.

"Even when she was almost blind, she dictated her letters and poems to friends. She would even ask others to go read her work at the poetry readings for her," Carpenter says.

Elizabeth Winifred Brewster died on Dec. 26, 2012, and is buried in Agudas Israel Jewish cemetery in Saskatoon. But she had purchased a plot and tombstone in Forest Hill Cemetery, in Fredericton, some years ago, intending to be buried there before her conversion to Judaism. Even in her passing, she will be forever connected to the places and people she loved so dearly. □

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