

# Heart of the Tantramar

Sackville's poet laureate Douglas Lochhead passed away in March, but isn't to be forgotten. Story by Thomas Hodd

Just off the beaten path, near the town of Sackville, is the High Marsh Road. Complete with a small, wooden covered bridge, it's a long, rural road that cuts across part of the Tantramar Marshes, the same marshes that Charles G.D. Roberts made famous more than a century ago in his poem *The Tantramar Revisited*.

It's a clear Sunday afternoon in late March. The sun is high; the wind is cold and biting. The covered bridge is a few feet away from where I stand. Everywhere you look there is sky and vast open space. Looking around you can easily understand why Roberts was inspired by this place.

But here's the thing.

Roberts wasn't the only poet who wrote about the Tantramar. I've made the pilgrimage for another poet, Douglas Lochhead, who passed away earlier this month at the age of 88.

Born in Guelph, Ont., in 1922, Lochhead published nearly 30 collections of poetry in a career that spanned more than 50 years. His last collection, *Looking Into Trees*, appeared just two years before his death. Lochhead was a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and a finalist for the Governor-General's Literary Award for Poetry for *High Marsh Road* in 1980. He was also a founding member of The League of Canadian Poets, a national non-profit organization dedicated to helping promote Canadian poetry at home and abroad, which today boasts more than 600 members.

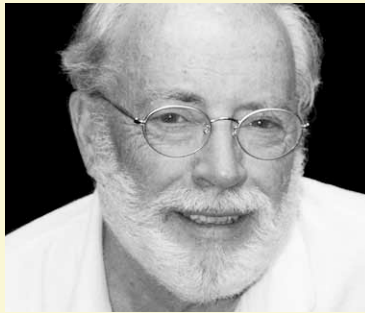
To those who knew Lochhead, his life work was a tremendous addition to the literature of the region.

Allan Cooper first met Lochhead in the late 1970s when Cooper was a budding young writer. The Moncton area poet and publisher remembers him fondly.

"In his own quiet way, he inspired others," Cooper says. "He added an imaginative layer to the Tantramar, and there's a depth to his poetry that in some ways makes him more important than perhaps Bliss Carman or Charles G.D. Roberts."

Being a writer was only part of Lochhead's lifelong passion for books. After finishing his military service in the Second World War, Lochhead studied English at the University of Toronto and library science at McGill University. He worked as a librarian at Cornell University in New York City, as university librarian at Dalhousie University, and later as director of libraries for York University in Toronto. Then in 1963, renowned Canadian author Robertson Davies asked Lochhead to serve as founding librarian for the newly established Massey College. Lochhead stayed at Massey College for more than a decade, serving as both librarian and as a senior fellow.

Lochhead was also a dedicated teacher. While in Toronto he taught in the library school as well in the English department at the University of Toronto. In 1975, Lochhead was offered the Davidson Chair of Canadian Studies at Mount Allison



Douglas Lochhead.

University. Although born in Ontario, Lochhead's mother was from New Brunswick and Lochhead had spent many summers in Fredericton and at Duck Cove, near Saint John. Moving to Sackville was a homecoming of sorts.

Lochhead quickly established a reputation at Mount Allison, endearing himself to students with his knowledge, wit and trademark laugh, and winning the respect of colleagues in the way he carried himself.

"He demonstrated that the word 'gentleman' still had some application in

the modern world," Terrence Craig, a long-time colleague at Mount Allison, says. "He went about his business with integrity and generosity that showed a new faculty member another route to follow."

Lochhead spent 15 years at Mount Allison, and made enormous contributions to the creative and intellectual life of the university. Lochhead wrote several volumes of poetry, mentored students, taught courses, edited books, published important literary criticism and directed the university's Canadian studies program for more than a decade. From 1987 until his retirement in 1990, Lochhead served as the university's first writer-in-residence.

After retiring in 1989, Lochhead became the university's first writer-in-residence. In 2001, he received the Alden Nowlan Award for Excellence in English-language Literary Arts, and a year later was named Sackville's first life-time poet laureate.

For close friends, like Nova Scotia poet Peter Sanger, being named poet laureate was a deserving honour for Lochhead.

"A day Douglas didn't write was a day lost," says Sanger. "For him, poetry was celebration and he wanted others to share that celebration."

In *High Marsh Road*, Lochhead wrote: "this new space, this new sky./I find myself with my eyes./there is no need to stand up in it."

I never met Douglas Lochhead, but after going to High Marsh Road on that cold Sunday afternoon I like to think I caught a glimpse of what he experienced in this landscape. It's a solitary place, but far from lonely. One feels immense out there, that the road is not simply leading you along a path but also showing you the way into the heart of the Tantramar Marshes, into something deeper about our sense of connection to place.

Before leaving Sackville, I went to a local used bookstore looking for some of Lochhead's books. The store was well-stocked and organized, with many older titles on the shelves. I quickly checked the poetry section – nothing. Then I checked the "local interest" section – still nothing. I joked to the young woman behind the cash that Lochhead must be popular around here.

"We get calls every once in a while from people looking for his books," she says. "Are there none? I guess people like to hold on to his stuff."

It was a wonderful testament to Lochhead's legacy. I can almost hear him chuckling with pride. [S](#)

Read this story online at [www.telegraphjournal.canadaeast.com/salon](http://www.telegraphjournal.canadaeast.com/salon) to watch a video of Lochhead reading from one of his collections of poems.

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