

Raymond Souster

January 15, 1921 – October 19, 2012

Raymond Holmes Souster, OC, was the true bard of Toronto, the city where, aside from service in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II, he spent his entire ninety-one years, never far from his beloved Humber River. No other poet has written so deeply about the Queen City.

Souster began publishing poetry at the age of twenty-one. Since turning ninety-one he has brought out two full-size books of new work: *Easy Does It* and *Never Counting the Cost*. Never a slacker, he wrote his final poem on October 5, 2012, a mere two weeks before the end. His death brought to a close a remarkable seventy year publishing career.

He was the last active member of the Great Generation of Canadian poets that included, among others, P.K. Page, Margaret Avison, Louis Dudek, Al Purdy, Eli Mandel, Milton Acorn, James Reaney, and Anne Szumigalski. Souster won the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1964 (for *The Colour of the Times*), was presented with Canada's Centennial Medal in 1967, won the City of Toronto Book Award in 1979 (for *Hanging In*), and was made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1995. He was a founder of the League of Canadian Poets and served as LCP President from 1967 to 1971.

During the 1950s, he edited first *Contact* and later *Combustion*, the foremost Canadian poetry magazines of their day. With Louis Dudek and Irving Layton he also ran Contact Press for fifteen years (1952 – 1967), which published initial books by many of Canada's most important contemporary poets. For several years Souster hosted dozens of poetry readings in Toronto, bringing to Canada such major writers as Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, and other members of the so-called Black Mountain School.

Between 1945 and 2012 he published two novels (one a bestseller) and at least fifty-nine collections of original poetry. He also edited or co-edited ten volumes of Canadian poetry and, with the late Richard Woollatt, four Canadian literary textbooks for use in Ontario schools. Through his textbooks as well as volumes like *100 Poems of Nineteenth-Century Canada*, *Comfort of the Fields*, *Vapour and Blue*, *Powassan's Drum*, and *Windflower*, Souster established himself as a leading expert on the poetry of Archibald Lampman, William Wilfred Campbell, Duncan Campbell Scott, and Bliss Carman. These books also introduced the Confederation Poets to readers in the last half of the 20th century.

He poetry tended to fall into five main subject areas: love poems to his wife of many decades, Rosalia; nature poems, often set in the Humber area of Toronto, especially in the Humber River valley; poems dealing with political and current events, usually from a leftist perspective; the bravery of soldiers and the horrors of war; and his Christian faith, he was a member of the United Church. In the years following World War II no one did more to introduce Modernism to Canadian readers. His poetry is among the very finest ever written in this "snow-eyed country" he so loved. It forms a lasting legacy.

Both Donna Dunlop, his personal secretary and executrix, and I know that Ray had no use for obituaries. In his view, the personal details of a poet's life are unimportant. It is only the *gift* that counts, not the giver. But I cannot let it go at that.

I was blessed to have been Raymond Souster's friend for the last three decades of his life. We first met when he was working at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce and I for Maclean Hunter (we were both number crunchers), and we sometimes got together for lunch. Later there were annual poetry afternoons in his backyard on Baby Point. In terms of human courage, honesty, compassion, and devotion to family and church, Souster led a life that was pure inspiration to all who were fortunate to know him. He spent more

time editing, publishing, and promoting the work of other writers than he gave to his own poetry. In short, he was the most decent, generous, modest man I have ever known. And, as the final member of the Great Generation, the passing of this fine poet closes an extraordinary era of Canadian literature.

Souster is survived by his wife Rosalia.

by James Deahl