Yours Affectionately: Artists' Books Inspired by Correspondence

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In the summer of 2009, I exhibited *Yours Affectionately*, a series of 15 artists' books, at the Queen Elizabeth II Library, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's. This exhibition represented the culmination of two years of study for a practice-based Masters Degree from the Creative and Performing Arts Department of the Waterford Institute of Technology in Waterford, Ireland. This degree was made possible through the co-operation of the Waterford Institute and Sir Wilfred Grenfell College (Memorial University of Newfoundland), which enabled me to complete my studies in Newfoundland.

The textual component of each of my books came from a series of four letters written to my grandparents in the 1930s. The writer was a then-retired Methodist minister, Rev. W.H. Dotchon (1862–1951) of Brigus, Conception Bay. Dotchon was Yorkshire born and had come to Newfoundland in 1899 to enter the ministry. He retired to Brigus in 1926 and remained there until his death. My grandparents lived in the neighbouring town of Bay Roberts.

Several photos in the family album show Dotchon writing or with a book in his hand. This is not surprising, since he was an avid reader and a poet. In 1910 he travelled by train from Newfoundland to Victoria, BC, to attend a Methodist conference. His poetic travelogue of this trip was hand bound posthumously in 1978 by Rev. R.N. Roswell under the title *Flowing Grace (From Ocean to Ocean)* and is available at the A.C. Hunter Library and at the Centre for Newfoundland Studies in St John's. In 1937 Dotchon published

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Chronicles of the Christ, a work written in verse that he began in 1923.¹

Although retired, Dotchon was frequently called upon to preach when the resident minister was away from Brigus. A plaque in the Methodist church there acknowledges his contribution to the church and adds that he was “the seventh son of a seventh son and was widely believed to have been endowed with healing powers.” He was also known to be a prolific letter writer, and some of his letters (other than those in my possession) still exist in private collections. His letters were filled with descriptive details, his script exquisite and the content generally lengthy. It is not surprising that many were saved.

The letters in my collection spanned four consecutive years and provide details about everyday life in rural Newfoundland at that time. In the first letter Dotchon was married to my great-aunt Sarah. By the second letter she had died and he spoke at length about life without his wife. The third letter reveals a desperately lonely man searching for a companion. The fourth, a short Christmas letter, was filled with happiness and was signed “Harry and Lou.”

Figure 1: *Gossip* by Shirley Greer. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

It is not unusual for women to become the custodians of family memorabilia, or for women artists to employ these ephemera as a catalyst for their work, as happened in my case. These letters resonated with me on a number of levels. Beyond the family connection, the letters provide a glimpse into an era where friends came by of an evening to listen to a concert on the radio and someone was designated to pour the tea and pass the sweets. Dotchon wrote about berry

1 W.H. Dotchon, *Flowing Grace (From Ocean to Ocean)*, ed. R.N. Rowsell (Topsail, NL: R.N. Rowsell, 1978); William H. Dotchon, *Chronicles of the Christ* (London: Arthur H. Stockwell, 1937).

picking on the hills around Brigus, trouting in the ponds, having a rug hooked for the hall by a woman from the next village, and about the weather. The letters were all handwritten using a fountain pen on laid paper. Samples of his elegant handwriting are included as part of many of my books.

In the fall of 2008 I spent a week at Landfall Trust, an artists' retreat in Brigus. The Dotchon property is now a garden, but local residents told me about the house that once stood there. In one of his letters Dotchon had referred to "sitting one side of the fireplace – warm and cosy – and she at the other," and I learned that his house had a walk-in fireplace, or chimney nook, a not-uncommon feature of houses of that era in Brigus. While there I was invited to view an existing example of this type of fireplace – a cosy and charming nook with a bench on either side of the fireplace that would have been a wonderful place to sit and read on a chilly day.

While I was at Landfall Trust I began each day sitting at the window of the cottage overlooking the water and the town of Brigus, reading aloud each of the letters. I imagined my grandparents reading them aloud to each other to share the news simultaneously when the letters arrived. I pictured Dotchon sitting at the other side of the harbour penning the words. This was the inspiration for *Four Letters, Three Voices and the Sea*, an artist's book in DVD format featuring three voices simultaneously reading four letters, with the sound of the sea in the background. This experience, combined with the topography, architecture, and climate of Brigus resulted in an enhanced sense of intimacy with the contents of what I came to refer to as "the Dotchon letters."

Although I could now call the Dotchon letters mine, as I worked I was very conscious that they were not written to or for me. My task was to reveal aspects of the letters that would be relevant to a given structure but to conceal other parts, to share the contents but respect the privacy of both the writer and the recipients. In this way too these letters were ideal for my study, as my constructions were to provide the reader/viewer with an opportunity to construct meaning beyond what might be expected with a traditional book. As I wrote in my artist's statement that accompanied the exhibition, "By restricting access to the text in these books, I am raising awareness of materials, of colour, of presentation and of scale. Through a combination of binding techniques, digital photography, screen printing and letterpress, I am presenting the reader/viewer of my book with an opportunity to create their own meaning and interpretation." In

Chronicles the entire contents of all four letters have been cut into quarter-inch strips, randomly spliced together and wound onto an audio reel. *Gossip*, a modified flag book construction, presents strips of text in loops on an accordion-fold spine (Figure 1). Handling the book causes the loops to rub and scrape together, whispering and gossiping, but not really revealing anything. *Compendium* contains all of the words in a letter addressed to "Mistress Elsa," but they are arranged in alphabetical order.

Letters and diaries that reflect an almost-attainable past offer a rich area for artistic exploration, and I think that I may have only begun this journey.

SOMMAIRE

«Affectionately Yours» [Affectueusement vôtre] est une collection de livres d'artistes s'appuyant sur des lettres expédiées par le Révérend W.H. Dotchon de Brigus, Conception Bay, aux grands-parents de l'artiste durant les années 1930. Cette étude aborde les lettres dans leur contexte historique, clarifie des aspects du cheminement artistique de l'auteur et décrit une partie des livres comptant parmi la collection.