

TREVOR CAROLAN / Dorothy Livesay in North Vancouver

Ten years ago, as a District of North Vancouver Councillor, I proposed to my colleagues in the nearby City of North Vancouver the idea of creating a memorial plaque in honour of Dorothy Livesay. An important twentieth century Canadian poet and social activist, Livesay lived in the city on and off for more than twenty years with her husband, fellow socialist Duncan McNair. They lived in several homes within view of the inner harbour: at Cumberland Crescent, then at 848-6th Street about a block from Sutherland High School, and later on toney Grand Boulevard. Livesay wrote some of her best work here—making it an appropriate place to commemorate not only a fine poet, but also a champion of women's rights and family planning before either became fashionable. The idea of a memorial marker-stone failed to gain traction with the politicians of the day; it's an idea that's still out there for commissioning.

In her memoir *Journey with My Selves*, Livesay says that she originally arrived in BC wanting to find her way to the San Francisco literary scene. In fact, she came to Vancouver to work as an editor for a communist labour journal. From Vancouver she hoped to travel further south to join the Depression-era's well-established leftist arts community concentrated in the San Francisco Bay Area.

This was IWW territory and numerous publications there served the One Big Union labour ideal, which appealed to her political interests. The city also enjoyed a long liberal tradition in its journalism and politics.

Livesay had graduated from the University of Toronto in 1931 and spent a graduate year at the Sorbonne. From France she went to London and returned to Canada exhilarated by the poetry of Pound, T.S. Eliot, Hilda Doolittle, and the French Symbolists. In her early years in North Vancouver, she met Alan Crawley, who would launch *Contemporary Verse*, the first significant Canadian literary journal west of Toronto. Livesay became part of his editorial team and participated in publishing the work of Luis Dudek, Earle Birney, P.K. Page, Miriam Waddington, Jay MacPherson, Anne Marriott—who also moved to North Vancouver in 1959—and Daryl Hine, a 19 year-old poet from Burnaby who would eventually succeed Hayden Carruth as editor at *Poetry* magazine. Her “The Lizard: October 1939” refers to a Lynn Valley populated by small farm-holdings:

In the sheltered rocks of our homeland, the Pacific waters
Hills shrouded with evergreens and the valleys yellow
With corn and apples; within the walls of our houses
Splashed with a vivid wallpaper,
Radios blare the censored version of our living...

Alan Crawley introduced Livesay to radio broadcasting, and the documentary poem for radio “Call My People Home” that she wrote as a result is the work she credits with propelling her to acclaim during the 1940s and 1950s. She lived in North Vancouver through the wartime evacuation of Japanese-Canadians. Moved by accounts of the war and by the spirit of a young Japanese-Canadian student who lived in the Livesay/McNair home for a winter, Livesay wrote “Call My People Home” from her archive of internment stories. The poem was broadcast from Vancouver on the CBC performed by local actors in August 1949; it was published in *Contemporary Verse* in 1952. The poem’s plea for multicultural tolerance echoes Earle Birney’s “Pacific Door,” written at Dollarton and published in 1947. Where Birney taps into layers of west coast pioneering and immigrant history, Livesay’s approach is more immediate:

...That was before Pearl Harbour: before a December day
Spent on a restless sea...
Between the curfew rung
On Powell Street
And the rows of bunks in a public stable...

Dorothy Livesay spent several summers as Malcolm Lowry’s neighbour in a borrowed cabin on the small stretch of Dollarton beach known as “Three Bells,” located in front of the old bee-hive sawmill burner ruins in what is now called “Little Cates” Park. Earle Birney, who also had a cabin there, often joined them and it is interesting to speculate on the effect that this pair had on Lowry’s poetic output.

During her twenty year association with North Vancouver, from 1938-58, Livesay twice won the Governor-General’s Award for Poetry—for *Day and Night* (1944) and *Poems for People* (1947). Raising children through the late-Depression and War years, she organized childcare programs at North Shore Neighborhood House—a reflection of her lifelong social commitment.

Like many Vancouver-area writers, I knew something of Dorothy, or Dee as her friends called her. She was not averse to accepting the admiration of younger members of the literary tribe and willingly shared her wisdom with those inclined to listen. She passed away in Victoria in 1997, aged 87, and British Columbia’s foremost annual poetry prize is named in her honour. Yet unlike Malcolm Lowry or Group of Seven painter Fredrick Varley, no memorial stone, view-point, or public walk has yet been dedicated in her honour in North Vancouver.