

**COME FROM AWAY [an extract]**

by Roberta Buchanan

*I Begin Teaching*

Teaching was just talking about literature, wasn't it? How difficult could it be? After all, I loved literature! I bought a second hand tape recorder, and attempted to practise a typical lecture - say, on *The Duchess of Malfi*, one of the four tragedies I would be teaching in English 200. Alas, after a few sentences and ers and ums I dried up and couldn't think of anything to say. I made several discoveries: I would have to write out all my lectures, and read them. And: it took me an hour to compose one page of lecture notes, not counting the preliminary reading. It took 6 typewritten pages (single spaced) for one lecture. That was 6 hours of writing.

My office mate, Dr Elisabeth Orsten, arrived back from Oxford. She smoked a pipe, much to the horror of the President, who thought it tarnished the image of the University. There were other young women faculty. Olga Broomfield, a Newfoundlander, who kindly lent me her notes on the Bibliography course, which she had taken as a student from Dr Story (famous as one of the compilers of the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*). An Albertan, Diane Schlanker, of Ukrainian ancestry - one of the few "Canadians" (i.e., mainlanders) in the English Department - lived a few doors down from me on Queen's Road, and we soon became friends.

I grew more and more anxious as the beginning of semester approached. The students would soon find out that I knew nothing, and I would be ignominiously fired! I couldn't sleep, my stomach was in a constant knot. I went to Dr Kennedy, just a few blocks down on Queen's Road, and asked him for some tranquillizers. He said he didn't prescribe tranquillizers. I was distraught - perhaps I cried. Anyway, he relented and wrote me a prescription.

Thus fortified, I went to my first class - Bibliography and Research. All I had to do was explain to the students what the course was about, and give them a reading list. These were all honours students, the *crème de la crème*. To my horror, my tongue felt thick, my speech was slurred, and I found it difficult to think! Tranquillizers were not the answer.

What a semester that was! I've never worked so hard or been under such pressure. It was worse than Finals. I had a nine o'clock class on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday (English 200, 50 students); an evening class, Tuesday and Thursday (Elizabethan drama); and my bibliography class Monday and Wednesday. I had cut one hour of the bibliography class so that the students could go to the library and look at the bibliographies assigned for that week, and report back on them to the class. That still meant 8 hours of lectures to prepare. After my 9 o'clock class I rushed home to write the lecture for my evening class. This class had several highly intelligent teachers in it, and I was always crippled with

nervous diarrhoea before it. (Luckily, as soon as I started my lecture it disappeared.) On Sundays, I had to research and write the bibliography lecture on the History of the Book. And how I wrestled with Aristotle's *Poetics* - a difficult text which I could hardly understand myself and was hell to explain to the second year students. No sooner was one lecture prepared and delivered than it was on to the next one. I was always in terror that some student would ask a question I couldn't answer, for a professor should know everything about her subject, I thought. I read as much as I could!

I knew what kind of professor I *didn't* want to be. I didn't want to be like Dr H, at Keele, who looked over the students' heads at the wall behind us as if we were too contemptible to contemplate. I didn't want to be sarcastic and put students down. I would treat them with respect, always. I would never, ever say, like Dr K., that Jane Austen was a great writer because she had a "masculine mind." And I was not going to treat Newfoundland with disdain, as some of my colleagues did, as the intellectual and social boondocks. After all, I was a colonial myself who had been born in South Africa. I encouraged my bibliography students to choose a Newfoundland writer as the subject for their annotated bibliography, if they wished to do so. That was the smartest move I ever made, for it was in this way that I came to know something about Newfoundland literature.

My nemesis was teaching poetry on Saturday mornings to the second year students. My method was I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism*: go through the poem line by line. Explication. We had a textbook which gave the poem, and then two critics' different interpretations of it. This confused most of the students, who thought there was only one interpretation - the teacher's - for every poem had a "hidden meaning," and it was teacher's job to tell them what it was so they could write it on the exam. Since I was very bad at remembering names, and more so when I was nervous, I had the whole class sit in alphabetical order, so that I could call on them in turn and knew exactly where they sat. They hated this, as it separated friend from friend. Saturday mornings were poetry torture. I called on each student in turn to give their interpretation of the line or stanza. I didn't realize that some students were so shy that they never spoke in class. I was traumatizing them by calling out their name and insisting that they answer. In the other classes - Aristotle's *Poetics*, followed by four tragedies - I gave lectures. But it seemed to me that poetry was different and needed to be discussed.

Things came to a head with Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality." Several Saturdays had been spent in trying to work through this long poem, line by line. On the third Saturday the students' patience snapped. I found written in large letters on the board: "NO MORE IMITATIONS OF IMMORTALITY."

Poor students! How they suffered at the hands of an inexperienced teacher who was obliged to learn by her mistakes. I tried to arouse their interest. I remember asking the question: Why should we be interested in a play - Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* - written four centuries ago? Does it have anything to say to us today? And trying to convince them that it did. It was a damned difficult play too. At that time, the courses lasted a whole academic year, two semesters. So we were together for a long time. The students were very forgiving. At the last class, much to my surprise, they clapped. Apparently that was the custom at the time: that the students would show their appreciation in the last class. A very nice custom, for a new teacher.