**Pratt, E.J. (1882-1964)**



Photo credit: Victoria University

Library (Toronto) E.J. Pratt Collection

Edwin John Dove Pratt was a Canadian poet and academic whose often spare language displays vivid imagery while still employing rhyme, metrics, and blank verse. As a chronicler of the maritime crux of living between sea and land, in his early work Pratt captured the liminality between anthropological and natural concerns in Newfoundland community and livelihood. At the same time, he was instrumental in upholding and expanding the epic and narrative elements of the long poem form—in his larger works moving towards grand themes such as nationhood. He taught in the Department of English at Victoria College (University of Toronto) until his retirement in 1953 when he became Professor Emeritus. Pratt was a Literary Adviser to the Editorial Board of *Acta Victoriana* as well as a founder and the first editor of *Canadian Poetry Magazine* (1936-1942), and received many honours from Canadian literary and educational institutions in his career.

**Timeline of Life** (an in-depth Timeline available here: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/timeline/timeline1880.html)

**1882 1912 1918 1921 1924 1940 1963 1964**

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Birth Death of fiancée, Marries Viola Birth of daughter, Brother William premature death Death of Death

Lydia Trimble Whitney Mildred Claire commits suicide of friend and Macmillan brother

editor Hugh Eayrs Calvert

**Timeline of Works Published During Lifetime**

**1917 1923 1926 1926 1927 1930 1930 1932**

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*Rachel: A Sea Newfoundland Verse The Witches' Brew Titans The Iron Door: The Roosevelt Verses of Many Moods*

*Story of An Ode and the Antinoe the Sea*

*Newfoundland*

*in Verse*

**1935 1937 1940 1941 1943 1945 1947**

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*The Titanic The Fable of the Brebeuf and His Dunkirk Still Life and They Are Returning Behind the Log*

*Goats and Other Poems Brethren Other Verse*

**1952 1962**

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*Towards the Here the*

*Last Spike Tides Flow*

Born in Western Bay, Newfoundland, as the third son of Methodist Reverend John Pratt (originally from Yorkshire) and Fanny Pitts Knight (of Newfoundland), in his early years Pratt saw much of outport Newfoundland—including Bonavista, Cupids, Blackhead, Brigus, Fortune, and the Grand Banks. He held various forms of employment before joining the Department of English in 1920 at the invitation of Pelham Edgar, working as a draper's apprentice and at a dry goods store in St. John’s (1896-98); a teacher in Moreton's Harbour (1901-04); a Methodist preacher-probationer in Clarke's Beach, Bell Island, and Portugal Cove on Conception Bay (1904-07); and an Assistant Minister at various Methodist churches in Streetsville, Ontario, and a Demonstrator-Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Toronto (1913–20). During the summer months (ca. 1916), he also worked in farming, the postal service, and bookselling in Western Canada. He received a B.A. in 1911 at Victoria College; an M.A. at the University of Toronto, and a B.D. at Victoria University in 1913; and a Ph.D. at the University of Toronto in 1917. He was promoted to Professor in 1930 and Senior Professor in 1938 (both at Victoria College)—also serving as a Visiting Professor during summer sessions at Dalhousie University, Queen’s University, and the University of British Columbia. His longstanding history with and contributions to Victoria College at the University of Toronto are evidenced by the library named there in his honour (Link: http://library.vicu.utoronto.ca/).

Pratt held a number of memberships throughout his career, including the Royal Society of Canada (elected a Fellow in 1930); the Editorial Board of *Saturday Night* (1952-58); the Canadian Authors' Association (Honorary President, 1955); the Empire Club of Canada (Honorary Member, 1963); and the Arts and Letters Club (first Honorary Member to be elected, 1963). His poetic endeavours earned him the Governor-General's medal three times, for *The Fable of the Goats and Other Poems* (1937), Brébeuf and His Brethren (1940), and *Towards the Last Spike* (1952); the Lorne Pierce Gold Medal, for distinguished services to Canadian literature (Royal Society, 1940); the Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George (1946); the Gold Medal, for distinguished service to Canadian literature (1952); the Canada Council award (1957); the Civic Award of Merit, City of Toronto (1959); and the Canada Council medal, for distinction in literature (1961). He has also been honoured by several educational institutions, including a D.Litt., University of Manitoba (1945); an LL.D., Queen's University (1948); a D.C.L., Bishop's University (1949); a D.Litt., McGill University (1949); a D.Litt., University of Toronto (1953); a D.Litt., Assumption University (1955); a D.Litt., University of New Brunswick (1957); a D.Litt., University of Western Ontario (1957); and a D. Litt., Memorial University (1961).

Pratt's work is much informed by both experience and the pursuit of concrete details: Pratt's poetic deliberations on the sea, for instance, are both a function of his life experiences and enriched by his research endeavours. In 1898 he witnessed the frozen bodies of sealers being borne back into St. John’s by the *SS* *Greenland* (see "The Ice-Floes" and "Toll of the Bells"); on January 12, 1901, he witnessed the first successful transoceanic transmission of a wireless message, received by Guglielmo Marconi on Signal Hill in St. John's; and, in his youth, he once accompanied his father and the local doctor "to break the news" to a woman about the drowning of her husband (see "Erosion"). Through such experiences, Pratt came to believe that poetry "came best out of the imagination working upon the material of actual experience" (Pratt, "On Publishing," *E.J. Pratt on His Life and Poetry*, 33). To this end, he engaged in extensive experiential poetic research of naval themes and specifics. For instance, in 1925 he met the Arctic explorer Captain "Bob" Bartlett on the *SS* *Rosalind* in 1925 (may have inspired "Tatterhead"), visited whaling stations (informing "The Cachalot"), and went fishing for salmon—visiting outport villages with Dr. Chester Harris, an old friend from Grand Banks, on his rounds (likely inspiring "The Doctor in the Boat," "The Way of Cape Race," "Sea-Gulls," and "A Lee Shore"). His research for *The Roosevelt and the Antinoe* was provoked by newspaper reports (1926) about the American liner *President Roosevelt*'s three day search and rescue of the British freighter *Antinoe* in the North Atlantic, resulting in his exploration of the *SS* *Roosevelt* for three days, interviewing the crew and perusing the ship's log (1929). In 1933, after reading articles commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the sinking of the *Titanic*, he began research for *The Titanic* by enlisting the help of Arthur Pratt in Liverpool; reading Laurence Beasely's Loss of the Titanic, the sole surviving officer Lieutenant William Lightoller's first-hand account, contemporary newspaper accounts and inquiries, and Frank Shaw's Famous Shipwrecks; attempting to contact surviving passengers (with negligible success); and procuring a White Star Line 1912 dinner menu from the *Titanic*'s sister ship the *Olympic*. Finally, in 1945, Lieutenant-Commander William Sclater introduced him completely to naval life: Pratt witnessed gunnery practice, toured destroyers, minesweepers and aircraft carriers, and examined naval equipment; he visited the Admiral's barge, the Moby Dick; and he observed gunnery trials as a guest on the *Micmac*. While he was on the *Moby Dick* it escorted the liner *Pasteur* and an aircraft carrier into dock; subsequently, he bore witness to the fire and explosions at the Navy's main Bedford Basin Magazine Depot, where the Admiral's barge lost most of its superstructure and he was able to visit installations unharmed by the blasts and examine available files and records. In fact, in his research for *Behind the Log*, he visited Naval Headquarters for information regarding conference procedures in order to expand the "human" dimension of the poem, and even sent a copy of the finished work to Naval Service for its official clearance and correction.

His experiences and research coloured his work but his dedication to developing "expansive" themes affected his formal concerns. For example, in 1931 he wrote "No. 6000" at the behest of Frank McDowell, Publicity Manager for the Canadian National Railways and editor of CNR Magazine, even braving the journey between Toronto and Montreal at the front of a new 6000-series locomotive (though he disembarked at Belleville because of extensive dust and smoke). However, Pratt's inquiry into the role of the railway in connecting the nation was later taken up in *Towards the Last Spike* (1952). Here, his dedication to the epic and narrative elements of the long poem did not supersede his willingness to undermine the traditional values of the form through parody—demonstrating both his contribution to later poets' examinations of the form (e.g. Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and bpNichol), and his maturity as a poet through a lifelong development of not only diction and technics, but a style of sufficient depth and complexity to properly voice the experience of his chosen subjects.

**Key Biographies of E.J. Pratt:**

* Sutherland, John. *The Poetry of E.J. Pratt: A New Interpretation* (1956)
* Wilson, Milton. *E.J. Pratt* (1969)
* Djwa, Sandra. *E.J. Pratt: The Evolutionary Vision* (1974)
* Pitt, David G. *E.J. Pratt: The Truant Years 1882-1927* (1984)
* Pitt, David G. *E.J. Pratt: The Master Years 1927-1964* (1987)
* McAuliffe, Angela T. *Between the Temple and the Cave: The Religious Dimensions of the Poetry of E.J. Pratt* (2000)
* *The Complete Poems and Letters of E.J. Pratt: A Hypertext Edition*.

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/

**Chronology of All Works:**

Poems

* *Rachel: A Sea Story of Newfoundland in Verse* (1917)
* *Newfoundland Verse* (1923)
* *The Witches' Brew* (1926)
* *Titans* (1926)
* *The Iron Door: An Ode* (1927)
* *The Roosevelt and the Antinoe* (1930)
* *Verses of the Sea* (1930)
* *Many Moods* (1932)
* *The Titanic* (1935)
* *The Fable of the Goats and Other Poems* (1937)
* *Brebeuf and His Brethren* (1940)
* *Dunkirk* (1941)
* *Still Life and Other Verse* (1943)
* *Collected Poems* (1st ed.) (1944)
* *Collected Poems* (American ed.) (1945)
* *They Are Returning* (1945)
* *Behind the Log* (1947)
* *Ten Selected Poems* (1947)
* *Towards the Last Spike* (1952)
* *Collected Poems* (2nd ed.; intro. by Northrop Frye) (1958)
* *Here the Tides Flow* (1962)
* *Selected Poems of E. J. Pratt*. Ed. Peter Buitenhuis. (1968)
* *E. J. Pratt: Complete Poems* (1989) (two volumes)
* *Selected Poems of E.J. Pratt*. Ed. Sandra Djwa, W.J. Keith, and Zailig Pollock. (1998)

**Links to E.J. Pratt readings on March 1956 in the Victoria College Library**

* Introduction to "The Truant"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/01.wav

* "The Truant"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/02.wav

* Excerpt from *Brébeuf and His Brethren*

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/03.wav

* Introduction to "The Prize Cat"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/04.wav

* "The Prize Cat"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/05.wav

* "The Highway"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/06.wav

* "On the Shore"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/07.wav

* "The Empty Room"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/08.wav

* "Seen on the Road"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/09.wav

* "Sea-Gulls"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/10.wav

* Introduction to "No. 6000"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/11.wav

* "No. 6000"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/12.wav

* The conclusion of *The Titanic*

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/13.wav

* "Erosion"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/14.wav

* Introduction to "Old Harry"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/15.wav

* "Old Harry"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/16.wav

* "The Shark"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/17.wav

* "The Drag-Irons"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/18.wav

* "From Stone to Steel"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/19.wav

* "Cherries"

Link: http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/20.wav