**Souster, Raymond (1921-2012)**



Photo Credit: Sheldon Grimson

Raymond Holmes Souster (pseudonym Raymond Holmes) has been described as a poet of place who invests into his writing Toronto, the city of his lifelong residence. Having worked for some 45 years at the downtown Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Souster's immersion in a particular place certainly informed his poetic output. But Souster the poet also ponders the human condition. On the one hand, he writes from a basis of experience with the destruction of war and the changes imposed by rise of the modern era. On the other, his work seeks out and highlights that which is still precious despite the weight of the world he feels. Moreover, he clearly values poetry as a salve to the cacophonous imposition of modernity, and continually encourages poetic development: in addition to his substantial body of work, he has supported Canadian poetry by editing several anthologies, and as a creator of *Direction* (editor 1943-1946); a founder of *Contact* (editor 1952-1954); an editor of *Combustion* (1957-1960); and a founding member of the League of Canadian Poets (president 1967-1971).

**Timeline of Life**

**1921 1939 1941-45 1985 2012**

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Birth Graduates from high**-**school; served in R.C.A.F. retirement Death

begins working as a bank teller for in the Maritimes and England from CIBC

Imperial Bank of Canada

**Timeline of Works Published During Lifetime**

**1946 1947 1950 1951 1952 1953 1954**

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*When We Are Go to Sleep, World The Winter of Time City Hall Street Cerberus Shake Hands A Dream That Is Dying*

*Young with the Hangman*

**1954 1955 1958 1962 1962 1964 1965 1967**

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*Walking Death For What Crepe-Hanger's A Local Pride Place of Meeting The Colour Ten Elephants As Is*

*Time Slays Carnival of the Times on Yonge Street*

**1968 1969 1971 1973 1974 1975 1976 1977 1979**

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*Lost and Found So Far, The Years On Target Change-Up Rain-Check To Hell Extra Innings Hanging In*

*So Good with Poetry*

**1980 1983 1984 1984 1985 1985 1986 1987**

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*From Hell Going the Distance Jubilee of Death: Queen City Flight of the Into This It Takes All Kinds The Eyes*

*to Breakfast The Raid on Dieppe Roller-Coaster Dark Earth of Love*

**1988 1991 1993 1993 1995 1996 2000 2002**

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*Asking for More Running Out Old Bank Notes Riding the Long No Sad Songs Close to Home Of Time Take Me Out*

*the Clock Black Horse Wanted Here & Toronto to the Ballgame*

**2003 2006 2006 2006**

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*Twenty-three Down to Earth Wondrous Wobbly Uptown*

*New Poems World Downtown*

Born on January 15, 1921, in Toronto, Ontario, to Austin Souster and (the former) Norma Baker, Raymond Souster grew up in the Humberside area of West Toronto (attending Runnymede Public School in the Jane Street neighbourhood where he resided for many years afterwards) and showed promise in bantam and juvenile baseball leagues as an excellent pitcher. His father was a bank clerk with the Canadian Bank of Commerce, and when Souster graduated from high school, he took a comparable job with the Imperial Bank of Canada—continuing to work in that environment (later with the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce) until his retirement in 1985.

In 1940, Souster first began publishing the poetry he had been working on since he was a teenager when Earle Birney included "Nocturnal" in *The Canadian Forum*. By only the next year, Souster began in earnest when his first professional editor, Winfield Townley Scott, accepted "Twentieth Century" for the Providence *Sunday Journal*. But Souster also began to put his hand to editing and publishing in World War II when he served in the Royal Canadian Air Force in the Maritimes and in England. While stationed at the Air Force Base outside of Sydney, Nova Scotia, Souster mimeographed the literary journal *Direction* (1943) on RCAF paper along with writers Bill Goldberg (Irving Layton’s nephew) and David Mullen. After the war, he married and returned to his bank job, but also became a publisher’s distributor for extra income, which allowed him to network with other magazines and editors and ingrained in him the important role of publicity. Moreover, with the publication of 21 poems in Ronald Hambleton's anthology, *Unit of Five* (1944), Souster was already deeply committed to poetry as a vocation.

Impressed by John Sutherland, Louis Dudek, and Irving Layton's modernist journal *First Statement* (1942)—Canada’s first truly avant-garde literary magazine—Souster became one-third of the second-generation modernist triumvirate in Canada. Alongside Dudek and Layton, he created *Contact*, a revolutionary magazine and small-press initiative that became a foundation for Canadian poetry in the 1950s and 1960s. With *Contact*, Souster also created a publication format (out of financial necessity) that ushered in a new era for small-press publications such as *Tish* and more than twenty American magazines (content typed on mimeograph sheets of legal paper, 9 x 14; and sheets folded in half with two staples down the middle and the recipient's address on the outside).

In his editorial career, Souster supported and networked many poets—publishing the early work of such poets as Alden Nowlan, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and Milton Acorn. He also brought many poets to the Toronto public eye through his 1957 to 1962 series at the Isaacs Gallery—including Leonard Cohen (in his first Toronto appearance), Al Purdy, F.R. Scott, and James Reaney, and American poets like Frank O'Hara and Charles Olson. His editorial work also allowed him to develop a dedication for anthologizing poetry with such collections for schools as *Generation Now* (1970).

In his own work, Souster has always been most interested in "ordinariness and human struggle." Poet and editor Gary Geddes has commented that "Souster's chief concern has been to keep singing in the face of despair" (*15 Canadian Poets X 3*, 2001,129). Though his poetic beginnings demonstrated the idealism of a working-class youth opposing the modern forces of cityscape, industry, and war, he has since confirmed his colloquial voice amidst city imagery and a middle-class nostalgia in *Collected Poems* (10 volumes). Souster was awarded the Governor General's Award (for *The Colour of the Times*, 1964); the President's Medal (University of Toronto, 1967); the Centennial Medal (1967); the Silver Jubilee Medal (1977); and the City of Toronto Book Award (1979), and was named an Officer of the Order of Canada (1995).

**Key Biographies of Raymond Souster:**

* Davey, Frank. *Louis Dudek and Raymond Souster* (1981)
* Whiteman, Bruce. *Raymond Souster and His Works* (1984)

**Chronology of All Works:**

Edited text(s)

* *Poets 56: Ten Younger English-Canadians* (1956)
* *New Wave Canada: The New Explosion in Canadian Poetry* (1966)
* (and Douglas Lochhead). *New Poems of the Seventies.* (1970)
* (and Douglas Lochhead). *Made in Canada*. (1970)
* (and Richard Woollatt). *Generation Now.* (1970)
* (and Richard Woollatt). *Sights and Sounds*. (1973)
* (and Douglas Lochhead). *100 Poems of Nineteenth Century Canada*. (1974)
* (and Richard Woollatt). *These Loved, these Hated Lands*. (1975)
* *Vapour and Blue: Souster Selects Campbell: The Poetry of William Wilfred Campbell* (1978)
* (and Richard Woollatt). *Poems of a Snow-eyed Country*. (1980)
* (and Douglas Lochhead). *Powassan’s Drum: Selected Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott*. (1985)
* (and Douglas Lochhead). *Windflower: Selected Poems of Bliss Carman*. (1985)

Long Fiction

* *The Winter of Time* (1950) (as Raymond Holmes)
* *On Target* (1973) (as Holmes)
* *From Hell to Breakfast* (1980) (with Douglas Alcorn)

Poetry

* *When We Are Young* (1946)
* *Go to Sleep, World* (1947)
* *City Hall Street* (1951)
* *Cerberus* (1952) (with Louis Dudek and Irving Layton)
* *Shake Hands with the Hangman* (1953)
* *A Dream That Is Dying* (1954)
* *Walking Death* (1954)
* *For What Time Slays* (1955)
* *Crepe-Hanger's Carnival: Selected Poems 1955-58* (1958)
* *A Local Pride* (1962)
* *Place of Meeting: Poems, 1958-60* (1962)
* *The Colour of the Times: The Collected Poems of Raymond Souster* (1964)
* *Ten Elephants on Yonge Street* (1965)
* *As Is* (1967)
* *Lost and Found: Uncollected Poems, 1945-1965* (1968)
* *So Far, So Good: Poems, 1938/1968* (1969)
* *The Years* (1971)
* *Change-Up: New Poems* (1974)
* *Rain-Check* (1975)
* *To Hell with Poetry* (1976)
* *Extra Innings: New Poems* (1977)
* *Hanging In: New Poems* (1979)
* *The Collected Poems of Raymond Souster* (1980-1994) (7 volumes)
* *Going the Distance: New Poems, 1979-1982* (1983)
* *Jubilee of Death: The Raid on Dieppe* (1984)
* *Queen City* (1984)
* *Flight of the Roller-Coaster: Poems for Younger Readers* (1985)
* (and James Deahl). *Into This Dark Earth* (1985)
* *It Takes All Kinds: New Poems* (1986)
* *The Eyes of Love* (1987)
* *Asking for More* (1988)
* *Running Out the Clock* (1991)
* *Old Bank Notes* (1993)
* *Riding the Long Black Horse* (1993)
* *No Sad Songs Wanted Here* (1995)
* *Close to Home* (1996)
* *Of Time & Toronto* (2000)
* *Take Me Out to the Ballgame* (2002)
* *Twenty-three New Poems* (2003)
* *Down to Earth* (2006)
* *Wondrous Wobbly World: Poems for the New Millennium* (2006)
* *Uptown Downtown* (2006)
* *Collected Poems of Raymond Souster* (1980-2004) (10 vols. covering 1940 - 2000)