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| Souster, Raymond (1921-2012) |
| Raymond Holmes |
| Raymond Holmes Souster has been described as a poet of place who invests Toronto, the city of his lifelong residence, deeply into his writing. Having worked for some forty-five years at the downtown Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Souster's immersion in a particular place certainly informed his poetic output; however, Souster the poet also ponders the human condition. On the one hand, he writes from a basis of experience: the destruction of war and the changes imposed by the 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 1943-46); a founder of *Contact* (editor 1952-54); an editor of *Combustion* (1957-60); and a founding member of the League of Canadian Poets (president 1967-71). |
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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 1943-46); a founder of *Contact* (editor 1952-54); an editor of *Combustion* (1957-60); and a founding member of the League of Canadian Poets (president 1967-71).  Fig: Raymond Souster  Photo Credit: Sheldon Grimson  Born on 15 January 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, Earle Birney included his poem ‘Nocturnal’ in *The Canadian Forum*, moving Souster to first begin publishing the poetry he had been working on since he was a teenager. The next year, Souster began writing in earnest when his first professional editor, Winfield Townley Scott, accepted ‘Twentieth Century’ for the Providence *Sunday Journal*. Souster also began to put his hand to editing and publishing during 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 importance of publicity. Moreover, with the publication of twenty-one 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, in which content was typed on mimeograph sheets of legal paper, 9 x 14, and the 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, as well as American poets like Frank O'Hara and Charles Olson. His editorial work also allowed him to develop a dedication for anthologising 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 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). Chronology of All Works:Edited texts *Poets 56: Ten Younger English-Canadians* (1956)  *New Wave Canada: The New Explosion in Canadian Poetry* (1966)  *New Poems of the Seventies* (with Douglas Lochhead, 1970)  *Made in Canada* (with Douglas Lochhead, 1970)  *Generation Now* (with Richard Woollatt, 1970)  Sights and Sounds (with Richard Woollatt, 1973)  *100 Poems of Nineteenth Century Canada* (with Douglas Lochhead, 1974)  *These Loved, these Hated Lands* (with Richard Woollatt, 1975)  *Vapour and Blue: Souster Selects Campbell: The Poetry of William Wilfred Campbell* (1978)  *Poems of a Snow-eyed Country* (with Richard Woollatt, 1980)  *Powassan’s Drum: Selected Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott* (with Douglas Lochhead, 1985)  *Windflower: Selected Poems of Bliss Carman* (with Douglas Lochhead, 1985) Long Fiction *The Winter of Time* (as Raymond Holmes, 1950)  *On Target* (as Holmes, 1973)  *From Hell to Breakfast* (with Douglas Alcorn, 1980) Poetry *When We Are Young* (1946)  *Go to Sleep, World* (1947)  *City Hall Street* (1951)  *Cerberus* (with Louis Dudek and Irving Layton, 1952)  *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* (7 volumes) (1980-1994)  *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)  *Into This Dark Earth* (with James Deahl, 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* (10 vols. covering 1940-2000) (1980-2004) |
| Further reading:  (Davey)  (Whiteman) |