DHAKA SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2018

BHADRA 24, 1425 BS



## PROFESSOR IMTIAZ HABIB: A Scholar Par Excellence

Professor Imtiaz H. Habib was easily recognizable in a crowd even if his back was turned towards you. He was a tall, well dressed man with wavy hair, who walked slowly but purposefully, with his head slightly titled or upright, towards something. And that destination was always towards the path of excellence. However, he did not want this pursuit to be circumscribed to him alone; he wanted to stoke this flame in his students, to love literature, particularly Shakespeare even if they did not like the bard at first. He had made this clear to us, the students of the English Department at Dhaka University in the 1980s, when he was a teacher there. With his hands firmly



planted on the desk and his frame brought to the eye level of his students, he unmistakably announced, that we, would have to reach a certain standard as he would not meet us where we were! The indelible message was "Rise." His look asked, "Understood?"

His Old Dominion University students in Virginia, USA, say the same. One observed, "I was his research assistant for a semester. I hung unto every word he uttered in class and during the research days. He changed my outlook on Shakespeare and he showed me that excellence requires great effort on my part." Another stated, "Habib both intimidated and inspired me. I have rarely learned so much and worked so hard in a course. I was always fascinated by the way he

could quickly flip through his yellowed and faded notes for a second or two and then teach so beautifully. I will never forget his passion and knowledge."

The students who became teachers note his impact on them. "The teachers that he helped prepare are continuing the good work he did towards creating a world where by exploring and celebrating each other's different perspectives, we are more connected to one another." He laid this foundation in his post-colonial literature classes and in his lectures on Shakespeare. This was one of Dr. Habib's remarkable accomplishments.

Others recall that he liked intelligent conversations. "I got to know Imtiaz, of all places, at the parking garage. We had the same model of car and always parked side by side on the same floor -did it a few times by accident, and, then, on purpose. There, outside of the Tower (BAL), we talked freely and informally. As I got to know him, he mentored me too, pushing me to 'come back to literature' to pursue scholarly work and publishing. Because of him, I did. I will always be grateful for how he not only encouraged, but insisted." When he spoke he showed vitality, youthful energy and pleasure. And he smiled.

Sir not only talked about literature but also about his departed friends as one of his students recalls: "I will never forget his personal account of friends lost during the succession of Bangladesh." Similarly, neither will his friends and colleagues forget him. Says Professor Shawkat Hossain, our "guru": "I'm paralysed and am unable to do anything. I have known him for 60 years." According to ODU, "The expressions of gratitude, love, and respect towards Dr. Habib honor him gracefully. We are a family here. May we carry on his 'ripple effect' through the ages." Imtiaz Habib sir, unquestionably left a mark worthy of emulation. Winning hearts was another one of his admirable feats.

How did sir study literature? He studied it like an anthropologist, a sociologist, a psychologist, a political scientist and a historian. He dug deep

forsaking sleep (hence the grisly bear in him). He went where no one had gone before. He proved beyond a reasonable doubt what escaped the eyes of British and American scholars. This was pioneering work. And he did it. As posted on the website of ODU, Habib's Shakespeare and Race (University Press of America, 1999), is a book that "examines the political, social and cultural impact of Shakespeare's approach to the racial issues contained within his plays, is one of a handful of scholars who were interviewed for the four-part series by noted documentarian Michael Wood." "Habib, the author of "Shakespeare and Race" (University Press of America, 1999), a book that examines the political, social and cultural impact of Shakespeare's approach to the racial issues contained within his plays, is one of a handful of scholars who were

"Until now people have assumed that the Elizabethans did not know people of color," said the Shakespeare and English Renaissance scholar. "We now have documented proof of the residences of black people, which must be reckoned into the colors of Shakespeare's world, in a very literal sense. Shakespeare knew people of color. He walked through their

interviewed for the four-part series by

noted documentarian Michael Wood.

neighborhoods every day." "I can't say Shakespeare reached a point of closure and an emancipated, enlightened view of people of color," Dr. Habib said. "He didn't. But he did put persons of color into European culture, there to remain. And that enriches the cultural discourse." Habib's research has led to a significantly new understanding of the role of cultural politics in Shakespeare's time, with close examination of the ways race and colonialism affected. For this landmark studies, Imtiaz Habib received recognition from the Shakespeare Association of America.

In Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677: Imprints of the Invisible, Imtiaz Habib collects for the first time, "the scattered references to black

people -- whether from Africa, India or America-in sixteenth - and seventeenthcentury England, and arranges them into a systematic, chronological descriptive index." As the description of the book goes, surely he offers an "extended historical and theoretical interpretation of the records in six chapters, which serve as an introductory guide to the index even as they articulate a specific argument about the meaning of the records. Both the archival information and interpretive scholarship provide a strong framework from which future historical debates on race in early modern England can proceed.

We know what Sir's academic life was like. His family life was no less delightful. When approached, his daughter Reema Habib sent a moving portrayal of her father: "My father and my mother were like a pair of lovebirds, always together. They had just celebrated their 42nd wedding anniversary, after which he whisked her off to Paris for a surprise anniversary trip. They had a wonderful time, and came back with stories that they never could fully share because they kept laughing in the middle of telling them. I think he was always impressed by her, and she by him-- I remember my father telling me how amazing my mother was because she could speak 7 languages, etc. She would do the same, always telling me about my father's successes. Each parent told me about the other. It was my father who set my mother as my role model. That says a lot about their love.

"Every year, for their anniversary, my father would pretend to forget the date. He let my mother think he had forgotten, when in reality he had gotten up early to buy elaborate bouquets for her, which he arranged downstairs on the dining table. As my mother came downstairs in the morning, my father followed closely because he loved to see her reaction. One year, this pattern continued until they reached the table, where my shocked parents discovered that the family cat had eaten up all of the flowers instead. My father was the surprised one that year.

"My father was also a wonderful grandfather. He was unfailingly patient with his grandchildren. When I had reached my limits with a screaming newborn, I could always count on my father to come and soothe the baby all night long. We were fortunate to stay with my parents for a short while, during which time my father and my young daughter became best friends. They would always argue in the evening over who got to choose the program to watch on TV. My daughter always wanted cartoons, while my father wanted the news. In the end, they compromised and my father watched cartoons.

"My brother Ameet's daughter, my niece, was one of the great lights of his life. It was always my father who hurried us to go to all of her school functions, because he couldn't bear the thought of missing even a second of her performances. She was his right-hand assistant in every project he did in the house, and in return, my dignified father would allow her to put ribbons in his hair or silly hats on his head. Anything was allowed for his grandchildren.

"My father was the one who I could always count on. He was rock-solid. When I was in a car accident, he drove overnight through 4 states to reach me. When my brother went away to law school, my father drove hundreds of miles to see him just for the weekends. He used to joke that he wanted to become a truck driver when he retired. My brother and I credit what success we have to him."

Professor Imtaiz Hasan Habib had convincingly transcended demarcation and had risen to becoming a universal scholar. He had achieved the enviable balance in his life as he was also an involved, funny, encouraging family man according to his niece. We don't know if anyone can replace this complete and legendary gentleman. The esteem for him was evident in the well attended funeral graced by the respectful presence of his faculty. May sir rest in eternal peace.

Nabila Murshed is a psychotherapist in private practice in the USA.



Titans at the Early CanLit Boom

Literary Titans Revisited: The Earle Toppings Interviews with CanLit Poets and Writers of the Sixties.

EDITED BY ANNE URBANCIC, DUNDURN, 2017

## REVIEWED BY SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

When we are at the verge of the third decade of the twenty-first century, and watching about more than ten thousand books getting published every year in Canada, it seems somewhat unbelievable that during the fifties of the last century the picture of Canadian book publishing world was very poor. Later on, the situation changed and the changes were mostly felt in the literary arena. The modernism that Canadian literary stalwarts initiated during the nineteen forties experienced a boom during the late sixties and early seventies. It is an everyday question who played the vital role in shaping Canadian Literature as 'CanLit' and thus giving it an identity in the world's literary map? There are so many aspects we have to research in the forthcoming days. Such a one has been unearthed by Anne Urbancic, the Victoria College professor in her compilation of the sixteen interviews and readings taken by Earle Toppings

for a radio broadcast.

The interviews and readings include Margaret Laurence, Morley Callaghan, Hugh Garner, Hugh MacLennan, Mordecai Richler, Sinclair Ross, Dorothy Livesay, Gwendolyn MacEwan, Al Purdy, Earle Burney, F.R. Scott, Irving Layton, Miriam Waddington, Raymond Souster, Eli Mandel and James Reaney. Every literati of Canada knows well about these bigwigs of CanLit. Autobiographies and memoirs by them, and biographies on them are also

widely available. But Urbancic's new

initiative will add many new values to all the books, no doubt, on CanLit history.

Who was Earle Toppings to interview these literary powerhouses of the 1960s and early 1970s of Canada? A 30-page interview with Toppings has been added as an 'afterwards' part of the book and thus the three hundred and sixty paged book has truly been a great resource for any study on Canadian Literature of the last fifty years. A short biographical sketch on the interviewed authors will help the new readers on the past of CanLit. References on the bios will also help many to explore a bit further.

All the interviews were taken at different times between 1969 and 1970. They heralded the emergence of the new wave and during that time, Toppings took the interviews which have recently been discovered and now presented for the common readers in book format. Those interviews reveal the insights of the writers, their emotions and motions as well. After some five decades it might not be easy for us to easily identify which poems Irving Layton or Gwendolyn MacEwen enjoyed reading from his or her own creation. When Layton wrote about his father in Waiting for the Messiah, he named his poem 'My Father,' but here we found Layton naming the poem on his mother after her name. The interview of Earle Burney enlightens the story of his writing the first poem in an

Indian milieu. It sounds quite

interesting when in his reading Al Purdy says, "all my poems are autobiographical," and later on, connects his poems with the incidents of his personal life. When Miriam Waddington reads her poem which connects her past for being a Jew, it sheds a new light and thus opens a new horizon. All these rare snapshots are available in the long readings and interviews, a toiling outcome.

"I suppose, poetry begins ... has always begun ... with the fabulous, the legendary, the dreamlike ... and I've been fascinated with the way in which legend and dream and myth interact with reality ... and fascinated for many years with the image of the maze or the labyrinth or the puzzle - the labyrinth being, of course, the mystic shape of reality itself - I suppose - in which a monster lurks" (p. 269-270) is an awesome read in the book. Eli Mandel started his reading with this extraordinary emotional outburst. Maybe, this expression of Mandel's was incorporated in some book or other, or may not be. But this compilation has proved its worthiness through all of them to many and sundry.

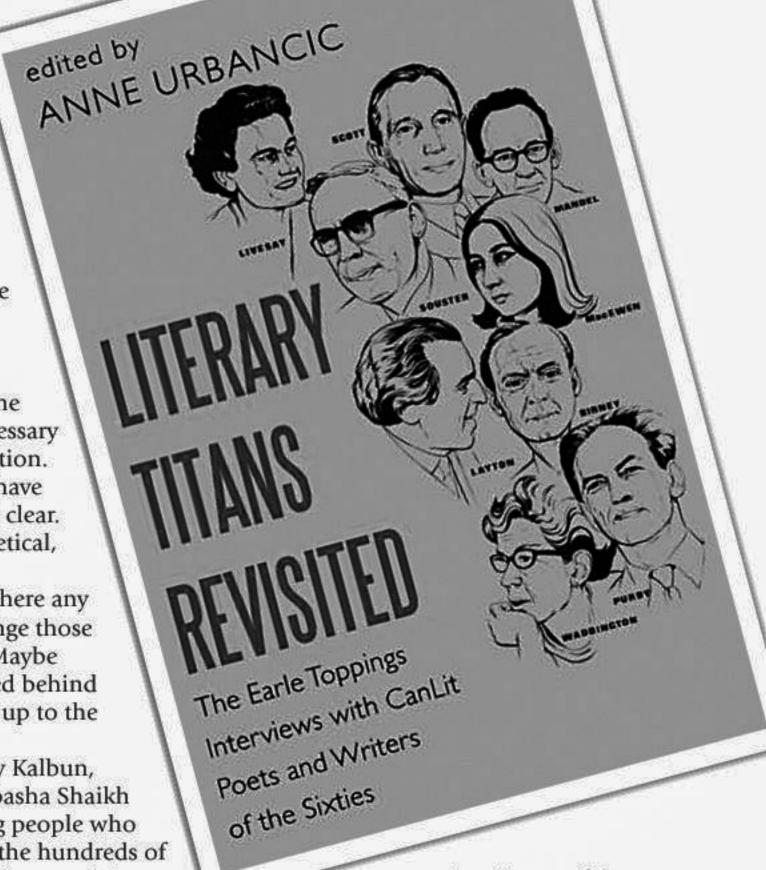
The book presents sixteen stalwarts of that time but the present reviewer spent hours to understand why there are nine busts on the cover. An explanation of it could have satiated the general readers. More than that, a photograph of Toppings could have been added as he was also a pivotal role in watching all the expansion of the

literature written in the vast land called Canada.

Some of the interviews were set question-answer format. In some of them, questions were omitted. They were somewhat like readings, though it becomes clear that the interviewer gave necessary guidance in anticipation. The way the writers have been arranged is not clear. They are not alphabetical, neither are they chronological. Was there any other reason to arrange those in the given order? Maybe some logic has played behind which doesn't come up to the commoners.

Geoff Baillie, Amy Kalbun, Griffin Kelly and Vipasha Shaikh are the hard-working people who helped to transcript the hundreds of pages. They deserve huge acclaim.

When Canada celebrated its centenary, Canadian literature went through an aspiring process. By the 1980s, the literary communities across the world began to realise what has happened to the till-date ignored literary arena of Canada. The affectionately used term CanLit is much matured now. Tens of books have already come out to focus on the many



various issues of that
era. Hundreds more could be
expected in near future which will give
a true picture of CanLit boom scenario.
Literary Titans Revisited can be cited as
an exemplary one, for the literary
enthusiasts and for general readers as
well.

Subrata Kumar Das is a Toronto-based Bangladeshi writer.