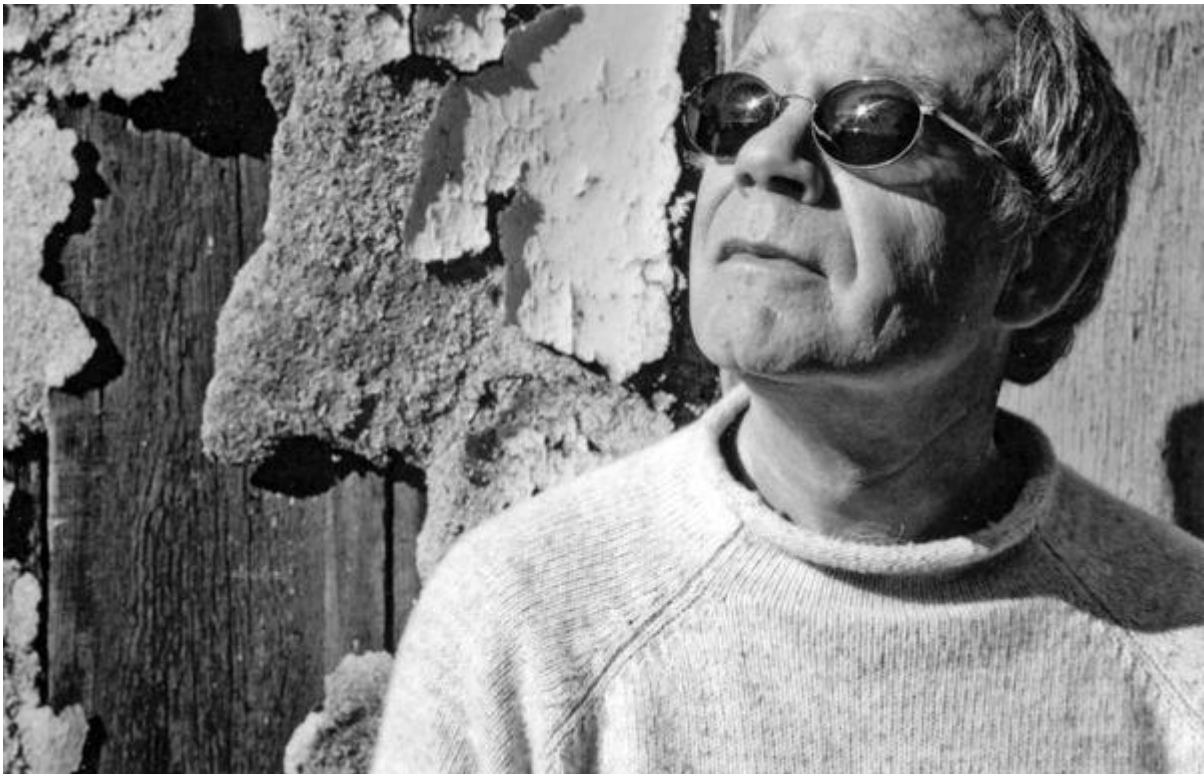


OBITUARY

# Literary critic and writer Stan Dragland was ‘a lover of books, a lover of song’

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Stan Dragland, photographed circa 2008, was named a member of the Order of Canada in 2020.

Author, editor, literary critic, musician and publisher Stan Dragland, who co-founded the prestigious literary journal *Brick*, died of sudden cardiac arrest on Aug. 2 in Trinity, N.L. He was 79. Under his stewardship and later under that of Michael Ondaatje, the journal garnered an international reputation. Over the years it has published work by notable writers such as Louise Erdrich, John Irving, Zadie Smith and Karen Solie.

Mr. Ondaatje, who led the magazine from 1985 to 2013 described Mr. Dragland as “a wonderful writer, a lover of books, a lover of song. ... He was and still is my dearest and kindest friend.”

Born in a Calgary hospital on Dec. 2, 1942, Stanley Louis Dragland was raised in several Alberta communities. He completed a PhD at Queen's University. He taught at a number of schools and postsecondary institutions in Canada and the United Kingdom before settling in as a professor of English at the University of Western Ontario, in London.

“He was a different kind of professor with a personal connection to the courses he taught,” said Manina Jones, current head of the Department of English and Writing Studies at Western, who was one of Mr. Dragland's Canadian literature master's students. “He was speaking from inside a community and communicated the emotional, psychological and personal ways people encounter writing. He was also very funny.”

Ms. Jones credits Mr. Dragland with inspiring her own decision to pursue an academic career. “He showed there was enough elasticity in the academic community to embrace ethical considerations and a heartfelt engagement with literature. He found his fit, even though he was not a traditional academic. I like to think he changed academe for the better.”

In 1975, Stan Dragland and Don McKay co-founded Brick Books, a publishing house dedicated to poetry. Two years later, along with Jean McKay, he co-founded Brick, A Literary Journal, which remains a vital institution and continues to present work by emerging and established writers from Canada and abroad. Along with his teaching pursuits those activities put him in touch with writers throughout Canada, many of whom would benefit from his counsel and editing.

Not the least of Mr. Dragland's accomplishments as a literary critic was his enduring rumination about Duncan Campbell Scott, the once-celebrated and now notorious Canadian poet and federal Indian department bureaucrat of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Mr. Dragland's masterful book *Floating Voice: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Literature of Treaty 9* is a literate and very delicate balancing act of contemplating Scott's art while not turning a blind eye from his activities as an agent of assimilation and repression of Indigenous peoples.

In a film that this writer made about Scott, Mr. Dragland said he was “split down the middle” by the contest between his admiration for some of Scott’s writing and his revulsion over the policies Scott pursued. “It doesn’t make sense just to exonerate Scott, that he was simply a man of his time,” he said. “I think it makes sense to blame him for what was done.”

Mr. Dragland’s book stands the test of time as a rigorously researched, sensitive examination of an artist in the context of the ideology and mores of his time.

Mr. Dragland was also an accomplished fiction writer. His historical novel *The Drowned Lands* is about local people in a rugged area north of Kingston, where the Dragland family spent summers when living in Ontario. It’s about youth, accidents, village life, water flows and forests. The narrative is compelling and the understanding of place is profound.

“It’s a landscape that stuck with him and my family my whole life and beyond,” his son the filmmaker Simon Dragland said.

Ms. Jones sees that novel as a compelling example of Mr. Dragland’s worldview and art, “That was not a place he grew up in, but like the prairies where he did grow up, like southwestern Ontario where he taught, like Newfoundland which he inhabited, he became immersed in the texture of that place and its communities.”

St. John’s gallery owner and potter Gail Squires said Mr. Dragland’s fiction demonstrates that “the ordinary Joe is as important as Joey Smallwood.”

Late in his teaching career at Western University, Mr. Dragland and his then-wife Marnie Parsons decided to take a sabbatical in Newfoundland, a part of the country neither was familiar with. They decided they would return to live.

Mr. Dragland retired from Western in 2000 and was named a professor emeritus. At that point he left London for good,

St. John’s gallery owner Emma Butler began a long friendship with Mr. Dragland when he first visited her gallery with Mr. Ondaatje. A few years later, Ms. Butler

realized she would see Mr. Dragland at every formal or informal literary, music or visual art event in St. John's she attended.

"[He] was fascinated by the writers, musicians, painters and how the local artists connected. He thought we were talented," Ms. Butler said. "He never thought of us as quaint."

Adrian Fowler a retired literature professor from Memorial University in Corner Brook, N.L., stated that Mr. Dragland had a keen appreciation of "the lack of separation between various kinds of artistic expression in Newfoundland. He understood that such boundaries here are very porous."

Newfoundlander Michael Crummey, one of the younger writers who fell under Mr. Dragland's spell, simply stated, "Stan was one of the most intelligent people I have ever met and a kind, gentle soul. He understood the essential part of art in people's lives. His connection to younger writers was about that. He called reading, 'his darling pleasure.' He wanted more people to experience that."

Mr. Dragland and Mr. Crummey were part of a group that met regularly to play music. Mr. Dragland was an accomplished singer and songwriter. A recording of his composition Fried Egg Sandwich at 1 a.m. reveals a deft lyrical sense and unique voice on a wry country-ish tune about loss and relationships.

"He was a real gift to Newfoundland," Mr. Crummey said. "He made us visible to ourselves. He understood that in a place that had been so isolated, if people wanted entertainment, they did it themselves. He would have been embarrassed by some obits that called him a Newfoundland writer. But he was a Newfoundlander by choice. He found his spiritual home here."

His wife, the publisher and writer Beth Follett, who moved from Ontario to join him, said she and her husband shared a love of the breathtaking Newfoundland landscape, and said the constant proximity to nature heightened their awareness of the climate crisis.

“Stan wanted to understand the history of Newfoundland, its great struggle to be independent. Newfoundland is a culture that suffered at the hands of outsiders, over and over and over and yet there’s a long history of recovery and a joyousness about the people here,” Ms. Follett said.

Mr. Fowler greatly admires Mr. Dragland’s collection *Strangers and Others: Newfoundland Essays*, “Sometimes an outsider can bring clarity to a complex subject. He treated the place with a great deal of respect.”

About his fascination and keen study of Newfoundland culture, artists and landscape, Ms. Squires observed, “He was great man for detail. He saw depth even in ordinary stuff. Nothing was trivial. Nothing was small to him. Something he picked up on a beach was a connection to the universe.”

Many of his friends call Mr. Dragland a bricoleur, someone who puts random things together. Ms. Follett thinks the ultimate expression of that is the shed at their summer home at Port Rexton, N.L., that Mr. Dragland painstakingly decorated with found objects – everything from old hockey sticks, family memorabilia, to shells, buttons, Ms. Follett’s old Moroccan slippers, driftwood, stones, flotsam and interesting detritus from the shoreline.

Ms. Follett recounted a recent discussion in which she and other family members agreed that Mr. Dragland had an uncanny ability to “focus on some small something in front of him. He would complete it. Then another. Then another. Then another ... and before you know it there is a legacy.”

Mr. Dragland was named a member of the Order of Canada in 2020. He leaves his wife, Ms. Follett; former wives Truus Dragland and Marnie Parsons; children, Simon and Toby (with Truus Dragland) and Rachel (with Marnie Parsons).