

THE BERNARD EPPS PAPERS

Selected and introduced by

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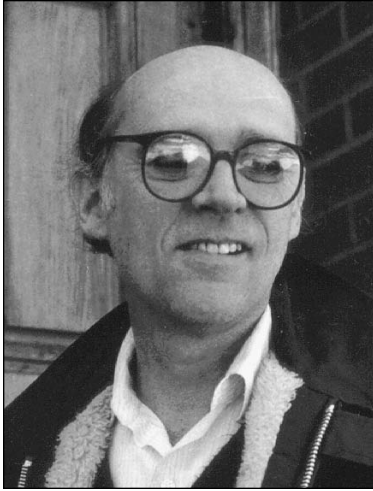
Transcribed by

Claude Charpentier

The recent acquisition of the files of Townships writer Bernard Epps is a significant addition to the archival holdings of the Eastern Townships Research Centre at Bishop's University. The ETRC will now have the papers of an important local English-language writer, much of whose work has been devoted to an exploration of local history and legend. In seeking out and obtaining the Epps papers, the ETRC has indicated its wish to make the archives a resource for literary as well as historical and sociological research on the Townships region.

Epps was born in 1936 in Whitstable, Kent, England. In 1950, he immigrated to the United States with his parents and then settled in the Eastern Townships in the mid-1960s. Gradually, he turned to writing full-time and abandoned his contract work as an electronic draftsman. His works include fiction inspired by his knowledge of the Townships and historic studies of the region: *Pilgarlic the Death* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1967; rpt. Dunvegan, ON: Quadrant, 1980), *The Outlaw of Megantic* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973; rpt. 1988), *Tales of the Townships* (Lennoxville, QC: Sun Books, 1980), *More Tales of the Townships* (Lennoxville, QC: Sun Books, 1985), and most recently, *The Eastern Townships Adventure, Volume I* (Ayer's Cliff, QC: Pigwidgeon, 1992). Epps has also published poems and articles in numerous newspapers and periodicals. In the 1970s, he was editor of the *Townships Sun*. During the 1980s, he supplied a weekly column to the *Sherbrooke Record*; currently he does the same for the *Stanstead Journal*.

The entry on Bernard Epps in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* says of him, "Epps is an accomplished storyteller who handles language and narrative with skill. His interest in myth, legend, parable and documentary as well as his acute awareness of history and place reveal his affinity with much of the best contemporary Canadian fiction."



Bernard Epps

Photo by Ariel Benazon

(Source: Personal collection of Michael Benazon.)

For many years, the Eastern Townships has been the principal English literary community off the island of Montreal, due no doubt to the presence of Université de Sherbrooke, Bishop's University, and Champlain College, which provided jobs for several of the writers. Unlike his academic colleagues, however, Bernard Epps was attracted to the Townships because his father's farm at Gould Station became available to him. He and his wife Susan were able to move there in 1966 using the farm as a partial source of income and the house as a combined library, studio, and residence. With a series of previously published stories to his credit, and with a contract from Macmillan to publish *Pilgarlic the Death*, Epps was confident he could make his way here as a writer. The Townships, which had provided the setting for *Pilgarlic*, seemed to present endless possibilities for the kind of historical fiction and anecdotal history that stimulated Epps' imagination. And indeed Epps has been most successful with those of his works that deal with the Townships. *The Outlaw of Megantic* has sold about 50,000 copies across Canada.

To date, the Epps collection includes most of the original manuscripts of his book-length works, both published and unpublished; copies of his stories, articles, columns, letters to the editor, and prose poems that appeared in a wide variety of journals, magazines, and newspapers in Canada and the United States; copies of press notices, biographical notes, and reviews of Epps' work published in Canadian newspapers; numerous unpublished letters, diaries, notebooks, and logs dating from the 1950s to the 1990s; notes, plans, and documents used in preparation for his novels, histories, and articles; responses from publishers and members of the general public; unpublished speeches and conference papers; drawings, cartoons, maps, and illustrations by Epps; and photographs of him at public functions.

In short, the collection is a record of the triumphs, frustrations, and inevitable disappointments of a man who devoted his life to his art. It will no doubt be completed in the course of the next few years

as Epps gradually transfers the more personal and more recent of his writings to the ETRC archives.

To provide the potential researcher with some idea of the range and variety of Epps' work, we are presenting six excerpts from this collection, mainly from his unpublished work. Document A is the beginning of a novel titled *Dropping Out: A Love Story*, written in 1969. It is a slightly fictionalized account of Epps' arrival at Gould Station to begin permanent residence on his father's farm. It demonstrates Epps' ability to create character through convincing dialogue.

Document B, from his 1969 Notebook, provides a rough draft of "Jennifer's Bestiary," the kind of poem Epps wrote every year on the occasion of his daughter's birthday.

Document C, notes attached to an unpublished novel, represents the many daily journals Epps maintained throughout his adult life. Dating from 1972-73, it reveals something of his damn-the-torpedoes approach to his profession and his nervous tension as he wrestled with the *Ballad of Johnny True* and waited for responses to the publication of *The Outlaw of Megantic*.

Document D is from *Droppings n' Drippings n' Such*, a notebook Epps kept between 1978 and 1987. It expresses his interest in and observation of animal life, rendered, in this third excerpt, with a dash of his ironic humour.

Document E, from 1978, is typical of a number of comic strips Epps created for *The Townships Sun*. It should be remembered that Epps spent a year at the New York Cartoonists' and Illustrator's School in 1954 and yet another year there in 1956 after it had been renamed the School of Visual Arts.

Document F is an extract from Epps' 1995 log book. In it, he reflects on the success of his most popular book, *The Outlaw of Megantic*, published twenty-two years earlier. In this excerpt, Epps contrasts his treatment of the Donald Morrison tale with other versions of the story by Oscar Dhu and Henry Kidd. He also makes brief allusion to the television film version that appeared in the late 1970s.

The Epps papers will provide a complete portrait of a man who did a great deal to make Townships residents conscious of the culture, history, and significance of their region and its place in the history of Quebec and Canada. In his two major works, *Pilgarlic the Death* and *The Outlaw of Megantic*, Epps was able to pass on his insights and discoveries to entertain and edify Canadians from coast to coast.

The Excerpts

Editorial Note: *The following principles were observed in transcribing these excerpts from the Epps papers for publication. The transcription faithfully reproduces Epps' manuscript text letter for letter and point for point, with these exceptions: the few abbreviations the reader may find difficult to understand have been expanded inside square brackets; the very few spelling errors have been silently corrected; and a few clear punctuation slips have been silently emended. Manuscript underlining appears as italics, and words struck out by Epps appear in ~~strikeout~~.*

Document A

From Epps' 1969 unpublished novel: Dropping Out: A Love Story

We arrived at Stormaway Crossing backwards. The little Budd train was so unused to stopping there that it clattered right past in the darkness, ground to a halt a mile further on and then reversed up the grade and around the curve back to the place where road crossed rail.

"Stormaway!" yelled the conductor. He seemed surprised to discover the stop was on his line.

Ethel smiled sweetly at him.

"Thank you," she said. "It's not often we get such service."

"I should think not," said he. He helped us down with our baggage and then stood a moment in the lighted doorway above us peering rather timidly at the enfolding dark. There was no light anywhere to hint at human habitation—only vast sky, silent hills and the endless owl-haunted woods.

"Are you sure this is where you want to get off?"

"Absolutely," said I.

The trainman shrugged, sniffed, pinged his little bell and the train—like a short silver caterpillar with two heads—started up. We watched it gather speed and take its lights and noise and stink once more around the curve and down the grade.

Silence clanged down around us. Ethel looked around at the lonely night with the same nervousness the conductor had shown.

"Are you sure this is where we want to get off?"

"Absolutely," said I again. "Here we are."

"Where?"

"Home."

"But there's nothing here."

"Yes, there is. There's everything here. There's hills and trees

and sky. Look up there. See that star? That's Sirius, the Dog Star. See the little one next to it? That isn't."

"Isn't what?"

"Sirius."

"Oh."

"When I was young and single and wandering around the country by bus or on foot, I used to steer by Sirius."

"But you'd go round and round in a circle."

"I know."

We stood looking up at the stars and getting used to the darkness. There were billions and billions of stars. The night was alive with them. They seemed to squeak and clamour in the sky and, close to, I fancied we could hear the trees breathe. Far off, a black shadow pasted against the stars, Stormaway Mountain slept and snored.

"Come on," said I. "Let's go home."

We shouldered our rucksacks and sleeping bags and started up the hill.

"How far is it?"

"Not far. Look there."

The house loomed out of the dark ahead like a great stone dwarf.

"There," said I. "Home."

"What shall we call it?"

"Does it need a name?"

"It's our first real home. Let's call it something romantic."

"All right, then. Lindisfarne."

"Lindisfarne."

"The Holy Island."

"That's nice," she said and tasted all four syllables again. "Lin-dis-far-ne."

We stepped up on the sagging verandah and dropped our baggage beside the door.

"You know what?" she said.

"What?"

"We forgot to bring anything to eat."

"We forgot something else, too," said I, thinking of the woods and hills that stretched for miles on every side.

"What's that?"

"The key."

Document B

From Epps' 1969 Notebook, pages 9 and 10

Jennifer's Bestiary

Delancey was a Dragon
Breathing fire and flames
Scaring pretty maidens
And spoiling all their games.

There came along Sir Basil
And put him in a cage
And Delancey could do nothing,
But fume & rant and rage.

One of the pretty maidens
Then let ~~the Drag~~ Delancey out
Now the Dragon loves the maiden
And follows her about.

She makes him wear a collar
When she takes him out to tea
And he's always very very good
As good as good can be.

Hippos aren't pretty
And Hippos aren't sweet.
They've funny pop-eyes
And ~~funny~~ clumsy great feet.

A Monkey is an animal
With fingers on his feet
He climbs the trees
With remarkable ease
Looking for things to eat.

Have no fear of crocodiles
Unless they smiles

Document C

From notes attached to Epps' unpublished novel, *The Ballad of Johnny True* (1972–1973)

June 30th 1972.

Finished the Megantic Outlaw a month ago, rebuilt verandah, painted farm sign & made a few loose notes for this book. Today I shall open it & see what it is all about. Must get writing once more. It will be a wild black comedy. That's all I know.

Dec 3rd 1972

Disregarded entirely the pages concerning Dirty McLeod, moon-wife, and a store and wrote from the notes instead 7 new pages concentrating on Hero instead of Woman. (I don't want to write Rib of Eve again.) These pages are entitled John True & the Goblins. Johnny True, Hero, Grandma & Grandpa, John True in His Cups, and The Corruption of Johnny True. They are wild and imaginative but I think that's a good note. A really wild, improbable comedy—a fantasy—a larger-than-life myth.

Anyway, I'm well pleased with my day's work and it is a beginning. I think I'll continue to write in this fashion for a few more days—let the writing go where it will—and make no attempt to design or organize for a while.

Anyway, I am sitting once more very pleasantly in my study with a feeling of weary satisfaction. I have contemplated for some months a commercial project similar to Megantic Outlaw—on smuggling across the US border. It is more than possible this novel will be too wild for the publishers as the last two were—Scarecrow & Rib of Eve—but at the moment I don't care. We have only enough money to last a month. More is promised from publishers but I don't know when it will get here. Doesn't matter. I'm doing what I want to do again and to hell with critics of all sorts.

Dec 19 Five good pages with delight. I should like to make it a hundred or so short passages, eliminating bridges, each one a sort of joyful poem, or verse in a drunken song. Comic, wild, improbable. Tale of a Hero. Must select words with great care.

Jan 4 1973 Went to Kingston Ont on Dec 26th to research the Canadians in Hong Kong prison camp for a TV play and to have a little break. Returned on the 30th writing easily in my head while

dozing on the bus. It's much harder to get down on paper. However, I have two plays going—one about a man who buys an antique fire engine, one in Hong Kong prison camp—and a third projected radio play about survival in the arctic. I've been feeling pretty stupid though and nothing ~~has happened~~ very exciting has happened to them. I'll plug away.

A couple of days were spent digging out after a snowstorm so we could get Jeffi to the doctor. And yesterday the first galley proofs on *Outlaw* arrived. They're done now. More are on the way.

.....

Jan 25th 1973. Have been working on a History of Quebec, two television plays and a radio play. The History is to be my main concern—a fictional view of Quebec through 300 years and a commercial proposition—we hope. The TV plays I have little hope for because there is little freelance market but I'll do them for the experience and the faint hope of profit.

Jeffi is in Hospital for a tonsilectomy and to clean up infections that have been bothering her since Christmas.

The writing seems to produce nothing—I've produced nothing since last May—but I suppose it progresses. My desk, at least, is awash with manuscripts.

This novel seems to be coming out more as a dream or a tapping of the "Collective Unconscious", the sea of images beneath the surface of knowledge inherited from the race.

Perhaps that's what it should be.

Feb 7th Jeffi was in hospital eleven days and most of my energy went to getting to & from Sherbrooke in a battered car during atrocious weather. I've done a lot of research on History of Quebec but, right now, that too has bogged down. I don't know how to write it. Thought of combining it with this book but that seems to be getting away from the commercial purpose. Nothing is getting done again. The TV plays ~~are~~ lie unfinished on my desk and I have no interest in them. Nothing gets done.

Feb 13th Both T.V. plays are finished and ready to send off. I had a crack at the radio play but nothing emerges as yet. Page proofs are done on *Meg*, *Outlaw*, and we were paid \$900 for it. That should hold us until June. Last year I made less than \$1000 which includes my summers work on the farms—only \$500 from the writing. This

year things must improve or I'll be back in the city hunting a job.

Thinking of mixing Time sequence of this book—it's dull to begin with birth. Might run two or three threads through it simultaneously and I want to divide sections into MIRROR and TIME (and a third—unknown as yet — Wheel won't do for that is the Time image.). Perhaps can take a hero ~~and~~ from mythology or history or folktales and recast it in my own mold.

March 27th Began again at the beginning. My intention is to write KEBEC in the mornings and work on this in the evenings. Maybe that way, I can get something done. *Outlaw of Megantic* comes out about April 7th—it is a week behind schedule.

March 28th It goes well. If I can keep it up. I'm not quite sure I am striking the right note in the prose style but that can be changed later.

April 11th It goes well. Great fun. Bridge built between John as a little boy & Serpent/Pig/Bull/Goblins by having him hauled off by welfare authorities & making an Incredibly Journey back home. *Must be simply and beautifully written.*

April 22nd On the 20th, writing letters and concerned with this publication business, I had a look at Rib of Eve. A few words here and there looked tremendously interesting, and I settled down to read it in the afternoon—for the first time in some 18 months. It is great. I have touched in several places the unconscious or the "collective subconscious" and it still raises the hair on the back of the neck. The writing is good and often excellent.

The agent's reaction was "it reads something similar to a Bergman movie". I'll go along with that for he has also tapped the subconscious. The Publisher's reaction was "I just didn't have any idea what it was all about after I finished it" (Harvey Ginsberg). I'll go along with that, too, for a publisher's reading—(speed-reading no doubt) from a Metropolitan businessman—would be remarkably only if he *did* know what it was about. (I'd like to rewrite that last sentence). It's been turned down by 4 New York publishers to date.

But the experience of reading this book (although it is not a masterpiece) upset me for a day or two and would not let me get back to these two novels. They seem so flimsy in comparison. John True seems facile and clever but it has none of the inspired pieces that mark Rib of Eve. I realize that my intention was to stay clear of the muddy depths of the subconscious in order to achieve publication

and a little money but it still leaves me dissatisfied. *Outlaw* was different for it was always intended as an entertainment, a brief, relaxing interruption. *KEBEC*, although much more difficult, is still a commercial “entertainment”. *JOHN TRUE*, however, must be something more important, something deeper. I should continue this exploration of the “collective subconscious” even though I don’t want to write again about women or sex, moonpower etc.

And today I am reading Huxley’s *Doors of Perception* where he speaks of tapping the “void”, the vast reality, “the collective subconscious?”

May 16th Have been busy the past 2 1/2 weeks farming. Need research on *Kebec* and am not very interested in *John True* although I see innumerable notes & revisions have been added to the typing since I last looked. *Outlaw* is published also and I’ve been eager to receive some sort of reaction but it’s been out nearly a month and there have been no comments, no ads and no reviews.

May 28th Did research @ Bishop’s University Library. There have been 5 ads for *Outlaw* at least—*Quill & Quire*, *Saturday Night*, *McLeans*, *Canadian Library Journal* and *Books in Canada*. But after 5 weeks we still have heard nothing of radio & TV promotion and had no reviews.

1973 *June 17th* Reviews in *Sherbrooke Record*/*St John’s Daily News*/*Moose Jaw*/*Ottawa/Vanguard* (NB). All good but *St John’s* which was stupid. Most simply paraphrase story line. Last Saturday the VW blew a valve. All week I’ve been hitchhiking here and there looking for parts. Next week perhaps it will be fixed and perhaps I’ll be in Montreal for job interview and perhaps even in Montreal for radio and TV publicity on *Outlaw*. In *Scotstown* I’m told it’s the best book ever read!

But trying to get going once more on the writing and nothing comes, nothing goes. It’s been a year since *Outlaw* was finished—time for another.

Document D

From Epps' log book:

Droppings, n' Drippings n' Such (1978–87: unpaginated).

These two entries are among the earliest and, though undated, must be from 1978.

Emptying the Dog

For the past couple of days the birds have been flocking. This morning there were twenty on the wire and further off as many on another. Near the house they were mostly tree swallows but a few rusty barn swallows among them and a sparrow or two—all fledglings—plain from their fluff and plumpness.

This evening the young swallows were all prancing about the sky trying their wings, practicing their turns, flutter, soar and sink, swoop and rise, and then return to the wire to rest and consider.

We had five barn swallows hatch in a nest above the kitchen door and have been watching and worrying about them for some weeks. At night sometimes the mother slept leaning against the side of the nest, the father some distance away. They left their nest last Sunday afternoon or Monday morning because they were overflowing it when I left for Lennoxville—clamouring loudly for service—and were gone when I returned. I would like to know where the tree swallows nest.

A woodpecker sometimes perches on the apex of the barn crying loudly and sometimes drumming his beak on the tin. I watched him mate with his female and suspect there is a nest in the dead tree nearby. He has a black bib but he's not in my bird book.

[Joe the Cat]

Joe the Cat brings home the bacon almost every morning. Last night when I went out to look at the sky at ten o'clock, I stepped on something on the doormat. I turned on the light and found a half grown rabbit stretched out in front of the door—positioned in such a way that there is no longer any doubt he brought it for the family. It wasn't just dropped down on the porch or put there for us to see but arranged just in front of the door and in relation to the door. And since it was half Joe's size, he couldn't have caught it, dragged it home and got it up on the porch without a great deal of difficulty.

Still, his efforts are not entirely altruistic. At five-thirty this morning the rabbit was gone and a kangaroo mouse lay in its place. Lump showed me where Joe had dragged the rabbit to a quiet place under the porch and there were a couple of legs and some fur left.

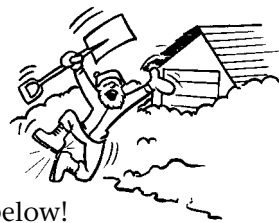
A very fat cat came in with us and went to sleep on the bed. An hour later he rolled over and fell off it.

Document E

The Townships Sun, February 1978, page 15

THE JOYS OF WINTER

Oh, what fun to be shovelling snow
When the temperature's down around 20 below!
And the sun shines bright
On that blinding white,
And the brisk north winds so cheerily blow!

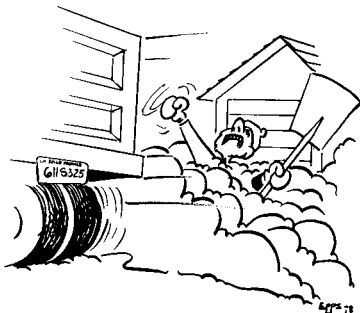


The snow's packed tight where the wind has blown
And you carve each block like a square dressed stone.
You freeze your toes,
The end of your nose,
And that jolly north wind bites down to the bone!

Each time you pause to stretch your back,
You briefly remember Aonghais Mac—
Who shovelled like this
In a state of bliss,
Then dropped down dead of a heart attack!



When the work's all done, you happily grin—
(You can feel the icicles on your chin!)
The walls rise sheer;
The driveway's clear—
Then the plow comes by and fills it in!



Document F

From Epps' log book for summer 1995 (unpaginated).

Donald Morrison

July 17 1995

My version of The Outlaw was published in 1973 almost 20 years ago and I have a clear enough view of it to write a few words. ~~It is still~~ Although classed as fiction because of the techniques used to bring the tale to life it is still the most accurate rendering. *Wanted Donald Morrison* has Donald's father coming from St Francis on a woodland trail which sometimes ran out so that he had to cut his way through the woods. This is nonsense because from 1833 or 34 there were regular stagecoach runs between St Francis and Sherbrooke and immigrants could rent a cart for their baggage or a horse and carriage. Instead of culling his way through a primeval wilderness, Murdo would have "taken the bus." One of the first acts of the B[ritish] A[merica] [Land] Co[mpany] was to widen and straighten the road to Sherbrooke and build the Aylmer Bridge across the St F there.

The only FACTUAL error I have found in the book in 20 years is in the relationship between Hugh and James Leonard of Gould. I believe I called them brothers when they were father and son (or vice versa).

But many people have told me "I have the *original* version" as if that was the real one. By that they do not mean the First, Second but the Third—Henry Kidd's version—by far the most inaccurate and least reliable. Kidd ~~not only got confused~~ relied on anecdotes and memories which as we know, tend to change with time. And got confused with those. Then to top it all *deliberately* changed the names and dates of what he pretends is a reproduction of the court case narrative from the *Weekly Star*.

When I began researching the story, I expected to find the legend had been inflated that it wasn't nearly as good a yarn as Kidd and Dhu had made it out to be.

To my surprise I discovered it was even better and said so in the INTRO. The interview w[ith] Peter Span is an example—nothing is made of that but I thought it was crucial because Donald told his story in his own words [because almost every policeman and soldier

in Quebec is searching for this man, Span goes, meets him and gets his story first hand].¹ And there was nothing about paying off mortgage and not asking for receipts as Kidd would have it. On the contrary, they seemed quite sophisticated in the matter of mortgages and promissory notes. Donald's complaint against Macaulay was that a 90 day promissory note had been arranged to which Macaulay added the stipulation when due to be payable on balance. That is he pays *himself* the money. But charges Murdo the interest and saddles him with the debt.

I also see now that a 3 day celebration is coming up in Lac Megantic that it is *my* book that made Donald famous. Kidd's was privately printed and sold a couple hundred copies locally. Mine was nationally distributed and sold 50,000 copies, used in schools, Newfoundland to B.C. Look in the Canadian Encyclopedia under Donald Morrison, and you'll find my book mentioned not Kidd's Dhus or any other.

One thing I did not make much of was Donald as Cowboy—mainly because I don't believe it. The enduring legend we think of around the word "cowboy" was true perhaps during the 1880[s], as of 1890s. The man with a 6-gun on his hip. Riding the range all day and whooping it up in town at night. Was created by Ned Buntline and his followers.

The reality was probably much more prosaic—hard work, sweat, and dirt. When Donald came back to a small town from the west. People had that image of Cowboy foremost in mind and I believe it would have been powerful enough to stick to any young man even if he just helped with the harvest fed a threshing machine as happened later.

Others made much more of 'Cowboy' Morrison. One even introduced him to Belle Star and got him romantically involved.

Augusta McIver was her real name according to contemporary newspaper accounts. Oscar Dhu first called her Marion McKinnon, because she was still alive. I believe their relationship was much as I'd painted it—certainly not the raw sexual affair that Kelly showed in his notorious TV film.

Same with Macaulay who made his money contracting for the railway/ And was involved in the Hereford Riots.

¹ The passage inside square brackets was inserted by Epps above the line.

