

THE ART OF THE STORY

Writer Harry Bruce has built a career and become one of Halifax's most beloved writers by being honest, accurate and, above all, a gentleman

BY MARJORIE SIMMINS

PHOTOS BY MIKE DEMBECK

On Sundays in Halifax, many residents awaken with thoughts not of church or brunch, but of Harry Bruce's column in the *Chronicle Herald*. The column appears every other week and Bruce has been writing it for nearly a quarter century, without missing a deadline. Some readers have been loyal to the multi-awarding journalist's columns for even longer.

"Harry elevates non-fiction to an art form," says Stephen Kimber, writer, professor and former director of the University of King's College journalism school. Kimber has been reading Bruce's work since he was in high school in the mid-1960s, buying the *Toronto Star Weekly* each week just for Bruce's columns.

"I loved his stories," says Kimber. "For me it was the discovery that you could write real stories—about real events in your personal life, as well as the world around you." Kimber characterizes Bruce's writing as "self-deprecating, very human, about foibles and weaknesses—in a charming way." At that time Bruce lived in Toronto, where he was born and raised. In 1971, he moved to Halifax. His Maritime roots were deep, his Bruce and Tory ancestors having arrived in Guysborough Country from Scotland around 1790. He and his wife Penny still own the family home in Port Shoreham.

"I used to wonder why we keep coming back to Halifax over and over again," Bruce says, seated comfortably in his light-filled and airy West End home. "I don't really wonder anymore. It's a terrific city. This is as good as you can have it almost anywhere in the world."

He'd know. He and his family have lived all over Canada and

in England, New York and California. "It was going where the work was," says Bruce, "although sometimes I think there was a temptation just to see somewhere [new]."

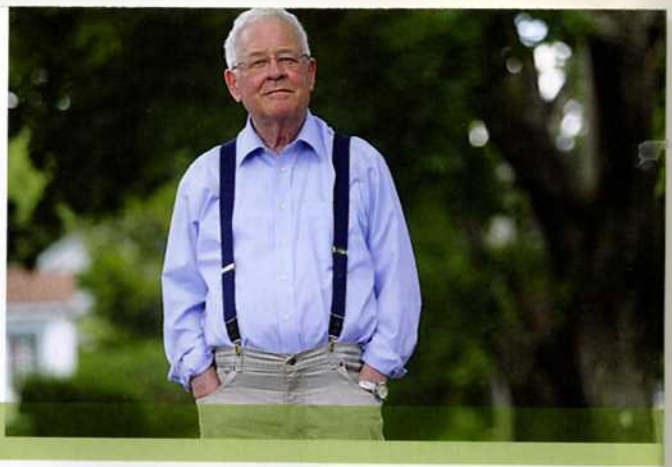
Bruce's journalism career began at age 20, when he joined the *Ottawa Journal* as a cub reporter. "It was a gruelling business," he recalls. "When you were a junior on those newspapers, in those days, they liked to print pictures of everybody who had died accidentally or violently. So if some child drowned, you were immediately sent to his house. You would knock on the door and ask for his picture. I couldn't stand it because people would be weeping and breaking down."

He recounts a day that the unpleasant errand took a nastier turn. "At one point, a policeman had arrived there first," he says. "When he saw me asking this question, he took a picture off the piano and threw it at me."

The early 1960s led Bruce to *Maclean's* magazine, then considered the hottest magazine in the country, with a crew of ambitious writers and editors. The names still resonate: Pierre Berton, June Callwood, Robert Fulford, Christina McCall, Barbara Moon, Ken Lefolii and Peter Gzowski, among others.

Magazine work had its own challenges, though.

"I really believed that magazine writing was much closer to being great literature than anything you ever saw in a newspaper," Bruce says. "I probably wasn't right about that, but in those days, I thought a magazine writer was a higher order of writer than a newspaper reporter. I was always nervous that I wouldn't make it."



Instead, Bruce's editors quickly noted his style—"springy and tight, wry and witty," wrote *Ottawa Citizen* reporter Bruce Ward in 1988. Bruce also became popular for his "personal journalism"—warm, intimate, first-person stories and anecdotes about the writer's own life.

"I was never assigned anything as personal journalism," says Bruce. "I began to sort of work it in here and there. Then people would say, 'That's what we want.'"

In the past 50 years, Bruce has written articles and columns for every major Canadian newspaper and magazine. His achievements include 16 books, four Atlantic Journalism Awards, two National Magazine Awards, an Outstanding Achievement Award from the National Magazine Foundation, and numerous provincial awards.

He's spent most of his working life as a freelance or contract writer. His books include a history of the Atlantic ferries and coastal boats as well as biographies of supermarket magnate Frank Sobey, entrepreneur R.A. Jodre and author Lucy Maud Montgomery. But of all Bruce's writings, it is the essays that fans remember most affectionately.

"My favourite book by Harry is *Each Moment as it Flies*," says Don Obe, a professor emeritus of magazine journalism at Ryerson University. The collection of essays was published in 1984 by Methuen. He also fondly remembers Bruce's collected *Toronto Star* columns, published by Macmillan in 1968 as *The Short, Happy Walks of Max MacPherson*.

Obe attributes Bruce's "special sensibility" to the fact that he has never been a critic. "It's a pure story-telling voice, not in any way didactic," he explains. "Bruce's secret is that he is a lovely writer to listen to. If he were a musician, he'd have perfect pitch. That's one of the things that gives his writing such appeal, intimacy."

Bruce's book publisher, Doug Gibson, agrees. "He writes musically," he says. "If you read it aloud, and most of us do read aloud in our heads, it is a very pleasing experience. He varies the notes, the pacing. The prose sings."

Gibson, who has his own imprint at McClelland & Stewart, refers to Bruce's latest, *Page Fright*, as "the work of a lifetime." The paperback edition came out last month.

Bruce himself has a modest view of his accomplishments. "As you get older, you begin to realize that there are certain people you may never be quite as good as," he says. "But you can admire those people and not feel badly about yourself, as long as you feel you're doing as well as you can."

He's also content with the life he chose—or perhaps, the life that chose him. "I feel really lucky to be able to have made my

living in this way," he says. "When you look back on it, it seems inevitable, but other people have changed their careers. I really just drifted into it because there was nothing else I could do well." He calls writing "hard," but not "work" in the ordinary sense of the word. "If you enjoy what you're doing or even if you are deeply absorbed in it and you don't notice the time passing," he says. "It's not work in the sense that most people think of it."

Since Bruce's earliest writing days, his wife Penny Bruce has helped facilitate the process. "Her judgment is excellent," says Bruce. "It's important to have somebody whose judgment you trust that close by. It's terrific, in fact."

Penny has also worked on painstaking, finicky tasks most people would run from. "She did the entire index for *Page Fright*, which is tough work, and then a thing like proofreading a 20-page bibliography," he says. "The quality and detail of my books is very much dependent on her."

Kimber affirms Bruce's praise. "Penny is Harry's centre," he says. Kimber has worked professionally with Bruce and has known the couple for many years. He laughs warmly: "She used to type up all his writing."


On September 10, Harry and Penny Bruce marked 55 years of marriage. They have three adult children: Max, Alec and Annabel. They also have three grandchildren and one great-grandchild.


After nearly six decades together, a perfect day for Harry and Penny is still simply being together. "We walk together most mornings when the weather is good," says Bruce. "I used to do nearly all my writing in the morning, but now I've reached an age where I think it's important to get a little exercise." He pauses, smiles. "It's so much fun walking with Penny that most of my writing now I do in the afternoon."


Bruce is currently considering a sequel of sorts to *Page Fright*, researching literary feuds and friendships and how writers influence each other.

For a writer of his fecundity, writers' block is hard to imagine. "For a non-fiction writer, particularly one who grew up for five years on newspapers and then had to meet deadlines on magazines, I just don't believe in writer's block," he says. "I get quite uncomfortable if I'm not writing a little bit almost every day. I just have a feeling—whether it's good or not, what I am here for is to write." ■

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