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Verge of Renaissance



A man with stories to tell. George Clarke is home to stay. Photo: Heather Hueston

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By HEATHER HUESTON

George Elliott Clarke has made the Maritime version of the Grand Tour. He went up to Ontario, lived there a while and then came back home. He's now taking his Master's in English at Dalhousie. His collection of poetry, *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues*, published in 1983, is drawn from material Clarke found in 1978 as he travelled through Nova Scotian black communities setting up youth groups for the short lived Black Youth Organization. The BYO lasted for one year and three conferences

Why does someone with such a strong attachment to Atlantic Canada leave home? Clarke says because he couldn't stand Nova Scotia anymore. He went to University of Waterloo for his Honours English B.A. and found the university technologically strong. There were enough lit. students around, however to form a mixed science/english group for a Creative Writing Collective. Clarke also became editor of the campus paper, moving it from its "vapid" contents to a more crusading philosophy. Clarke is happy to say that trend has continued at the paper.

It was in Ontario that Clarke thought about Nova Scotia and discovered he was "irrevocably" a black Nova Scotian. "My whole history and culture is happening (in Nova Scotia)", he says. The historical poems, *Soul Songs* were written while in Waterloo.

So it was inevitable that he would return to Halifax. Recently, there has been a surge in awareness of black culture.

Even BYO has revived as the Cultural Awareness Youth Group with branches in high schools all over the province. Clarke learned last year while working for Black United Front in rural communities what a rich mine of talent was there. "There's a need to translate some of that to a larger society" says Clarke, and he predicts that we're on the verge of a Renaissance.

Clarke has written two songs

for the a cappella group *Four the Moment*. The music they'd been doing was often American and with his nationalist perspective, Clarke wanted songs that reflected "our Nova Scotian experience". He's written lyrics for the *Ballad of Catherine Wright*, the black woman whose white murderer was convicted of manslaughter after stabbing her eleven times in 1985. "The media made a lot of the supposed fact she was a prostitute, as if that mitigated the crime," says Clarke.

Social concerns have been a part of Clarke's life but he prefers positive forces to negative — "anger is too destructive". He laughs as he continues, "Here's a piece of propaganda: I think the black community should be more politically active". That's something he intends to be part of.

His published poetry deals with history and spirituality of black culture here. Rather than speaking in his own individual voice, Clarke takes on the duty of expressing a collective consciousness. That leads to some tension between what he'd like to say and the fact that there aren't enough poets to tell all "our stories".

He describes his poetry as a fusion of folk songs and urban blues. To Clarke, blues is an "all-encompassing word", and like a jazz artist he likes to improvise ("the spirit of black culture is in improvisation", and go beyond set forms)

Clarke was raised in the church and the aural and spiritual experience of listening to the church choir is something that can still give him chills. For his epic/saga "The Book of Jubilee", Clarke chose a Biblical motif to describe the crucial event of the blacks arrival in Nova Scotia. "There's no other way I could have written that" he says.

Clarke is working on a second book and "if God gives me strength, I'd like to create an entire Bible of the black experience in Nova Scotia." He laughs again "Ambition!"

He plans to stay here. "Despite any problems, I like it here."