

GERALD E. PANTING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MARITIME HISTORY IN CANADA

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In comparative terms, maritime history is reasonably healthy today in Canada. Our scholars have made important contributions to both national and international maritime literature; the country is home to two of the most important journals in the field; and the Canadian Nautical Research Society is one of the most dynamic national commissions in the International Commission for Maritime History (ICMH). By any measure, these are accomplishments of which to be proud. While many people deserve some credit for these achievements, only one individual can claim to have been indispensable to all of them. I refer of course to Gerry Panting.

For most readers a lengthy chronicle of Gerry's career would be redundant. Indeed, such a narrative would also both trivialize his contribution and miss the essence of the man whom we honour with this special issue of *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord*. For while Gerry Panting commands respect as a scholar, teacher, administrator and builder, no list of his accomplishments—and they are many—can do justice to the qualities that have made him so singularly important to a generation of maritime historians. This is because it is the type of person he is that has made him arguably the most important figure in maritime history in this country over the past two decades. In this brief appreciation I would like to focus upon several of his most salient traits. In doing this, however, I hope that readers will recognize that I write from a very personal perspective. I have no choice, since for the past seventeen years Gerry has been both colleague and friend.

The creation virtually from scratch of structures to promote the study of maritime history in this country has required a tremendous amount of work, and no one has demonstrated this capacity better than Gerry Panting. Indeed, it has been a defining characteristic of his entire career. I can remember the late Keith Matthews, the founding President of CNRS and a man who could charitably be described as a workaholic, shaking his head in amazement at the effort Gerry put into literally everything with which he was involved. Perhaps nothing exemplified this trait better than the way Gerry responded after Keith's untimely demise. As the senior man in Canadian maritime history, he was asked not only to continue to do his own job but to shoulder the burdens Keith had borne as well. Literally in the space of two months he became chairman of the Maritime History Group at Memorial (which included running the largest maritime archive in the world), President of CNRS and a member of the executive council of ICMH. Where most of us would have collapsed under the load, Gerry drove himself to perform all the tasks with his customary efficiency. Where he found the time or energy I will never know.

Before I had ever met Gerry, the late David Alexander described with great admiration another of Gerry's characteristics that I have come to appreciate over the years. "Gerry is like a bear," David said. "Once he perceives a problem he clings to it until he has found a solution." How right David was. I have never known Gerry to give up on a problem without finding an answer. A good example occurred in late 1988 when he and I were asked by CNRS to take over the production of *ARGONAUTA*. Since we both appreciated the importance of the newsletter to the

membership, we agreed to do so. Nonetheless, I could not see how we could succeed and worried incessantly about mustering the resources. While I fretted, Gerry worked at the problem, finally reaching an agreement with Memorial's Dean of Arts to convert Margaret Gulliver's part-time position into a full-time post. Without Margaret, of course, we would not have been able to produce the newsletter; equally important, without Gerry it is distinctly unlikely that such a happy solution would have been found. He simply stuck at the problem until it was solved.

A third attribute that separates Gerry from the rest of us is his wisdom. Even after all these years of watching him, I continue to be impressed at the frequency with which colleagues seek his counsel about a wide range of matters. A good illustration occurred during his second term on the executive of ICMH. As many readers will be aware, ICMH organizes a quinquennial congress that attracts maritime historians from around the world. In 1985 ICMH had met in Stuttgart for a Congress which most recognized was poorly conceived. In fact, upon departing some participants grumbled that perhaps it was time to disband the organization. As ICMH looked forward to its next Congress in Madrid, it quickly became apparent that unless some serious organizational changes were made the results would likely parallel Stuttgart. After discussing the problems for a while, the executive turned to Gerry Panting. It was a fortuitous choice, since as CNRS members will know, Gerry has few peers when it comes to organization. Grasping the problem decisively, he both organized the programme *and* drafted a compendious position paper showing the Commission how it could reorganize itself to forestall future crises! After a successful Congress in Madrid, the outgoing President of the Commission, Professor Klaus Friedland of the University of Kiel, observed to me that "the Canadian Commission is extremely lucky to have a leader as wise as Gerry Panting." It is hard to disagree.

But perhaps the most impressive thing about Gerry—and the characteristic that in my view has made him absolutely essential to maritime history in this country—is his constant willingness to shoulder burdens regardless of the sacrifice required. Gerry has always been available for maritime history and its practitioners. Let me go back to 1984 one more time. What is most amazing about all the burdens that Gerry shouldered is not that he accepted these appointments, or even that he performed exceptionally well in all the posts. No, what is remarkable is that at the time Gerry was involved in a half dozen other organizations, all in responsible positions; was simultaneously continuing with the teaching, research and administration required by his position as a Professor of History; and was continuing to devote every spare moment to his family. I cannot conceive of anyone else being able to juggle all these responsibilities as successfully as Gerry did.

It is this last attribute which leads me to give Gerry the ultimate credit for much of the success of maritime history in this country. Since the mid-1970s, he has always been there for maritime historians, their organizations and their publications. He is the individual whom we all sought out when we needed advice, and he never turned us away.

Maritime history has indeed been fortunate that Gerry Panting has chosen our field in which to make a contribution. And perhaps our greatest fortune is that although he will officially retire from Memorial in August, he will continue to sit on the CNRS executive. Moreover, in May he accepted appointment as Honourary Editor of *The Northern Mariner*, thus assuring that we will continue to have access to his experience and wisdom. Maritime history owes him a tremendous debt of gratitude. While this special issue of *TNM/LMN*, to which four of his friends and colleagues have contributed essays, tries to make an initial repayment, we recognize that it falls far short of meeting the collective debt that we owe him. Knowing Gerry, I have a hunch that the best way to thank him for his years of service is probably to continue to seek his advice, just as we have been doing for all these years. Certainly Olaf and I can not envision doing otherwise, for we accepted long ago that Gerry's counsel was indispensable. For maritime history in Canada, Gerry Panting has been—and will continue to be for a long time yet—truly a national treasure.