

[NEWS](#) > [CLASSIFIEDS](#) > [JOBSPRESS](#) > [WHEELSPRESS](#) > [SERVICES](#) > [FEATURES](#)
[LOGIN](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#)
**SEARCH:**  Today's News  Last 7 Days  Web  
[Contests](#) | [Lotteries](#) | [Horoscopes](#) | [Comics](#) | [Tides](#) | [Bookmark Us](#)

A few clouds

9° Celsius

[Click for Forecast](#)

**NEWS**

- » Front page
- » Metro
- » Nova Scotia
- » Canada
- » World
- » Business
- » Sports
- » Entertainment

## Historian tells stories of African Canadians in verse

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

THE LIGHT OF PARIS is sultry and spectral — utterly Nova Scotian, Atlantic-bright and sullen. It is ideal for the reading of two poets, both surnamed Cooper: Afva and Allan.

2006 is the year of Afva Cooper. Born in Jamaica in the 1950s and now an instructor in history at the University of Toronto, Cooper published, earlier this year, a bestselling, critically acclaimed biography of Marie-Joséphine Angélique, a black woman who was accused of burning down a portion of Montreal in 1734, and was tortured and executed for the deed.



That book stands a good chance of becoming a movie — an unusual fate for an academic book, but Cooper writes of Angélique as a "soul sister," as a personage she understands and respects, thus presenting her as an exemplary character — a martyr for liberty.

Copper Woman and Other Poems (Natural Heritage, \$11.95) is Cooper's fourth collection — and it represents a solid advance from her third, Memories Have Tongue, which dates back to 1992.

In Copper Woman, Cooper puts to excellent use her training in history to revivify the stories of Angélique, Richard Pierpoint and pioneer African Canadians, presenting these narratives in poetry.

The simple, plain, direct storytelling style suits these lyrics well. Here is Angélique: "Smoke, smoke, too much smoke / only intend fi one house burn / fire, fire, too much fire / . . . and I running / my feet unshackled, unbound / . . . While behind me the fire rage / and my raging heart change back into its rightful position."

Negro Cemeteries discusses the continuing phenomenon of the discovery of black settler and slave burial sites in Upper and Lower Canada: " 'Negro' cemeteries are surfacing all over Ontario / ancestors rolling over / bones creaking / skeletons dusting themselves off / dry bones shaking in fields of corn."

Cooper's historical sensibility also informs her self-revelation, Biography: "I wonder if anyone will write a biography of me / would they say . . . / That the first boy I loved / had the face of a Chinese Buddha . . . / that I earned of a man named Walter Rodney / . . . and the government deported him / and Kingston (Jamaica) rioted. . . ."

Cooper models her voice on the vibrant tradition of Jamaican-Canadian Dub 'orality,' a fact that connects her to her well-known compatriot, Lillian Allen.

But Cooper's personal and historical concerns remind me of Nova Scotia's own Maxine Tynes.

Cooper is socially conscious, political, recording the travails of the African Diaspora, from Tanzania to Trench Town to Toronto: "Africa still wailin / for her children / scattered on white shores / wanderin in di triangle / tryin to find their way home."

**SUDOKU**
**CROSSWORD**
**OPINIONS**

- » Editorials
- » Columnists
- » Letters/Feedback


**FEATURES**

- » Living
- » Travel
- » At Home
- » Books
- » Religion
- » Science
- » The NovaScotian

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

- » Births
- » Cards of Thanks
- » In Memoriam
- » Milestones
- » Obituaries

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

“ Dreams are the

touchstones of our  
character. "

Henry David  
Thoreau

She reports, archly, "The diamond merchants of Amsterdam / New York / Toronto / Belgium / guzzle the blood of Africans." The "rocks" on women's fingers represent "Sierra Leone sorrow and slaughter / crafted by an Amsterdam jeweller."

Closer to home, Cooper mourns the four Canadian soldiers slain by U. S. "friendly fire" in Afghanistan, but also protests their /our presence in that nation as potential dealers of death to Afghans.

And in Toronto, black "Hot boys shoot down each other / in (a) world-class city / who no dead gone fi life / in the general penitentiary."

Given her social concerns, it is almost surprising to see Cooper's amorous poems. They are openly sexual, celebratory of love and reflective of her personal, Africanist religion (an occult theme that connects Cooper to Toronto's Andrea Thompson).

In Red Sea Woman, then, Cooper's lover bears the exotic cast of Egypt and Nubia: "Remember when we used to eat Seville oranges / sprinkled with salt from the Swahili coast / dive for pearls in the Red Sea, bloom roses from the red soil of the Rift Valley?"

Strikingly, the poet's back cover photo of herself — a beautiful black woman, with long black tresses, in a white shirt, standing in a field of orange tiger lilies, is a revision of the "copper" woman, with black hair, in a white robe, standing before a basket of flowers, painted by Diego Rivera, that graces the cover. Cooper — coppery — enacts a fertility goddess.

Allan Cooper's Lin Chu: The Black Swan (Owl's Head Press, \$25), a series of 20 ghazals, completes a sequence of poems begun in 2001. These Chinese-flavoured lyrics feature a woman's voice: "write your name in fire across my breasts." For copies, contact Cooper at allan-cooper@excite.com George

Elliott Clarke teaches literature at the University of Toronto. A Nova Scotia native, he wond the Governor General's Award for poetry in 2001.

---

[Back](#)

[Back to top](#)

ABOUT US | CONTACT US | PRIVACY POLICY | CHARITIES | ADVERTISING | SUBSCRIBE | FAQ | COMICS | HIGHWAY CAMS  
WORK @ THE CHRONICLE HERALD | WEATHER | TIDES | LOTTERIES | HOROSCOPE | CONTESTS | BOOKMARK US

© 2006 The Halifax Herald Limited