

## THE SALMON FISHER TO THE SALMON

The ridged lip set upstream, you flail  
 Inland again; your exile in the sea  
 Unconditionally cancelled by the pull  
 Of your home water's gravity.

And I stand in the centre, casting.  
 The river, cramming under me, reflects  
 Slung gaff and net, and a white wrist flicking,  
 Setting you up the well-dressed specks.  
*flies well dressed with tent and flesh*  
 Walton thought garden-worms, perfumed  
 By oil crushed from dark ivy berries  
 The lure that took you best. But here you're doomed  
 By senseless hunger in your eyes.

Ripples arrowing beyond me,  
 The current strumming rhythms up my leg:  
 Involved in water's choreography  
 I go like you by gleam and drag

And will strike when you strike, to kill.  
 We're both annihilated with the fly.  
 You can't resist a gullet full of steel:  
 I will turn home fish-smelling, scaly.

Seamus Heaney.



# How to Remember?

Ciaran Carson

*The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast, 1962–1972*

Heather Clark

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Memory plays tricks. Any time a shard of memory comes to light, whether dug up or stumbled upon, it is altered by the act of remembering. The facts of any case are open to negotiation. Our memory is a story constantly revised each time we enter it for confirmation of what we think we are or were in thought and word and deed. The little that we do remember is a retrospective construct, a self-ingratiating fable, perhaps.

Of course there may be material back-up: documents, letters, drafts, typescripts, certificates, poems fully or partially achieved, receipts, photographs. Ephemera. Carbon copies. Flimsies. These too are open to interpretation. One can doubt their authenticity, or raise questions as to their selectivity. A researcher is not to know how much material a poet has consigned to the public domain of a university archive, and how much he might have retained, or burned, or lost. The poet himself might not even know. One fills in or makes up the gaps in the record. Or one might not perceive a gap in the record. The writing of history depends on such circumstances, and we must make of them what we can: as the football pundits say, you can only play the team that's put in front of you. So it is with Heather Clark's painstaking study, which, in focusing on the work of Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, James Simmons and Paul Muldoon in the decade 1962–72, makes considerable use of the correspondence of those poets, their recorded recollections, and their archival holdings in Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, an

institution that seems to have cornered much of the market for the papers of contemporary Irish poets. Without access to these materials, Clark's book would be a very different one; it might well not have been written at all. And it is quite possible that no such access would exist were it not for Coca-Cola, a point to which I will return in due course. History is full of unexpected contingencies.

Clark's narrative begins with an arrival and ends with a departure. In 1962 Philip Hobsbaum came to lecture in Queen's University Belfast and for four years conducted a series of weekly writing workshops. The workshops then continued under the aegis of Seamus Heaney; and when he left Belfast for County Wicklow in 1972, the workshops ceased, though a loose clique of sorts continued to operate in various drinking establishments in the university area, where writers like Longley, Muldoon, Frank Ormsby, John Morrow, Robert Johnstone, Douglas Marshall and myself would gather to indulge in gossip and the wicked but friendly banter known in Belfast as 'slagging'. In any event, the poets

Seamus Heaney, 'The Salmon Fisher to the Salmon', Groupsheet, Longley Papers, Manuscript Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Seamus Heaney, May 1970. Photograph: (John) Edward McKenzie Lucie-Smith, bromide print, National Portrait Gallery, London.

associated with the comparatively decorous Hobsbaum and Heaney workshops became known as the Belfast Group. Would these poets be the poets they turned out to be had there been no such thing as the Group? Was it a Group, or a group? A coterie? A mutual admiration society? Did its product constitute an Ulster Renaissance? Was there ever a Naissance? Do such definitions matter? Clark lays her cards more or less squarely on the table:

While acknowledging that both history and literature will always shift and subvert any perimeters we place around them, I want to challenge the notion that the terms ‘Belfast Group’ and ‘Ulster Renaissance’ are a kind of reductive shorthand made up by critics and journalists to fabricate a common goal or voice. On the contrary, this notion is the myth that needs revising. Studying these poets’ (and their poems’) relationships with one another complicates rather than limits our understanding of their individual achievements, and raises provocative questions about the social nature of literary production. As Longley put it, ‘Moving forward with coevals and potential rivals has a key role and it’s very seldom that someone flowers on their own.’ Longley hints at precisely the claim that I make in this study: that during the sixties and early seventies, these poets honed their craft both in accordance with and opposition to each other — a poetic practice which Bloom, referring to the relationship between dead and living writers, calls ‘creative correction’ or ‘willful revisionism’. It was in part such revisionism that drove the Ulster Renaissance, inspiring a long-running poetic dialogue which has produced some of the finest poetry of the twentieth century, and making Belfast, says Edna Longley, ‘Irish poetry’s strangest port of call’. To learn from this dialogue, we must explore the intimate, interpersonal relationships that propelled these poets’

work, along with the events which helped Belfast — once characterized by Louis MacNeice as a city of ‘hard cold fire’ — to become, in Ciaran Carson’s words, the ‘mouth of the poem’.

I should say at this point that though I was involved in the last few sessions of the Group, I am quite rightly more or less excluded from Clark’s study, along with John Montague, Medbh McGuckian and Tom Paulin, since like them I was not ‘as closely involved in the local renaissance as those who met under Hobsbaum’s roof’. But I should point out that my gloss on ‘Belfast’ as ‘the mouth of the poem’ (in my essay ‘Farset’ in *Belfast Confetti*) was intended to be taken playfully, as a spurious and ironic etymology for the Irish *Béal Feirste*, from which ‘Belfast’ derives. *Béal* can indeed mean ‘a mouth’, or ‘an opening’, or ‘an approach’; *fearsad*, of which *feirste* is the genitive, can mean, according to Dinneen’s wonderful *Irish–English Dictionary*, many things, including: a shaft; a spindle; the ulna of the arm; the fibula of the leg; a club; an axle; a bar or bank of sand as at low water, a deep narrow channel on a strand at low tide; a pit or a pool of water; a verse; a poem. In other words, I wanted to loosen up the possible definitions of ‘Belfast’. I wanted to make it multivalent and polysemic. I wanted it to resist easy interpretation. I wanted it to imply whatever its beholder saw in it. Noting that Dwelly’s *Gaelic–English Dictionary* gives ‘wallet’ as another possible meaning for *fearsad*, I could say that ‘Belfast’ means ‘the opening of the wallet’. Which brings us back to the archive, since none of the Irish poets in it, to my knowledge, gave their papers to Emory for free. And, as a way of trying to make sense of the recollections of the poets cited by Clark, their contributions to the archive, and their subsequent place in her literary history, I want to indulge myself in some memories of my own, flimsy and unreliable as they are.

Lyric Theatre, Belfast, c. 1976. Back row, left to right: Paul Muldoon, John Hewitt, Patrick Galvin, Frank Ormsby, Ciaran Carson. Front row: Seamus Deane, John Boyd, Michael Longley. Photograph: private collection, Belfast.



When, in 1993 (I only know the year because I've just looked it up on the online archive catalogue), I was approached by one of the Kennys of the eponymous bookshop in Galway to sell my 'papers' to Emory University, I was surprised and gratified that anyone should be prepared to pay good money for the contents of a few cardboard boxes gathering dust under my bed. And the money was very welcome just then, so I had little hesitation in entering into what seemed to me a good deal, first with Kennys and subsequently with Steve Enniss of Emory. It is an arrangement that continues to this day, as I consign periodic batches of written, scrawled or printed material to the Special Collections Department of the Robert W. Woodruff Library, named for the president of the Coca-Cola company who in 1979 endowed Emory University with a gift of \$105 million. The Coke connection only came to my notice some years after the initial sale of my papers, when before reading my poems there I attended a reception in the impressive penthouse gallery of the Woodruff Library tower

block and found it given over to a display of Coca-Cola memorabilia — vintage bottles, trays, urns, mirrors, calendars, posters and other advertising materials, bills, receipts, correspondences. I learned then that Coca-Cola was invented in Atlanta by the pharmacist and morphine addict John Pemberton, who in 1886 brewed the first batch of Coca-Cola in a three-legged brass kettle in his back yard. The economy of Atlanta, and thus of its educational establishments, has been Coke-dependent for over a century.

Emory began as a small liberal arts college in the small town of Oxford, some forty miles east of Atlanta. In 1914 Asa Candler, the founder of the Coca-Cola company and the brother of a former president of the college, gifted Emory \$1 million dollars and 72 acres of land in Atlanta. It became a university that maintains its Coca-Cola links to this day. To give one example, its Coca-Cola Artists in Residence Program currently provides 'an opportunity to meet mutual educational goals through the



Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, 1977. Photograph: Heaney Papers, Manuscript Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

unique creativity of the arts, to improve the outlook for arts education in Atlanta, and to improve the quality of life in the community'. I wonder if they give out free Coke at the events held under the auspices of that programme. *I'd like to buy the world a Coke*. At any rate, besides the Ciaran Carson Archive in the Special Collections of the Robert W. Woodruff Library, there is a Coca-Cola Archive. I was tempted, when I first heard of this serendipitously alliterative coincidence, to write, and sell to Coca-Cola for what I thought might be considerable profit, an 'Ode to Coke' — or maybe it would be called 'My First Coke' — a poem which, in Proustian fashion, would extol the virtues of the said beverage, and would be

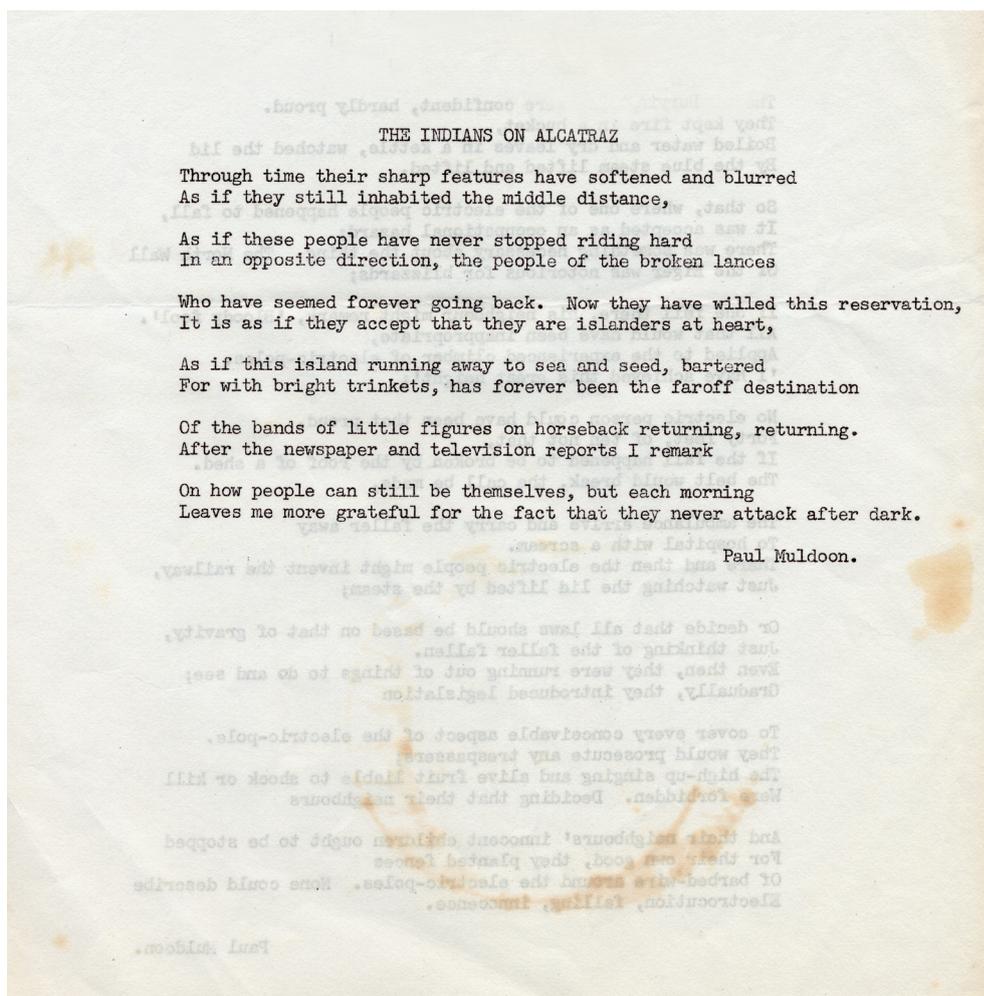
filled with words like 'gush', 'buzz', 'fizz', 'smack', 'glug', 'lip' and 'rush'. I never got round to it, but I still entertain the notion, while acknowledging that the Irish poets in Emory's Special Collections have been to some extent bought by Coca-Cola gold. Posterity comes at a price, though I should say that some of us who gave our papers to Emory — Longley, Muldoon and myself — once entertained the idea of doing some mischief to posterity by inventing a literary feud between ourselves, complete with vituperative or apologetic letters that would then be consigned to the archive. But we were too lazy, if not too moral, to engage in such a conspiracy.

Anyway, maybe we are only getting back our dues. Back in Belfast in the 1970s, or maybe it was the 1980s, some of us drank a great deal of Coke, not for itself — they had taken out the cocaine in 1905 — but as a mixer for the notorious DRAC, Dark Rum and Coke, ‘in a tall glass, with plenty of ice, please’. You needed the ice to cut the syrupy sweetness of both dark rum and Coke. In venues like the Welly or the Bot or the Eg (aka the Wellington Park Hotel, the Botanic Inn and the Eglantine Inn) we would gather in twos or threes or fours or fives to drink DRACs and Guinness and Bushmills and Powers and talk. Heaney and Mahon had left Belfast by then. So ‘we’ would have included Longley, Muldoon, Ormsby, Johnstone, Morrow, the critic Michael Allen, among others. We talked a great deal about a great many things, and poetry was not necessarily at the top of the agenda, which was fluid. There was lots of smoke in the air: ‘in those days’, as Michael Longley says, ‘they hadn’t put the cancer in cigarettes’. As a matter of fact, the first words Michael ever spoke to me were occasioned by a cigarette. We were at a Group meeting, standing side by side at the back of the small, packed back room of the English Department at 4 University Square. ‘Oh, a Parkie,’ he said, ‘I’d love a Parkie, haven’t had one for years.’ He seemed to me to be putting on a proletarian Belfast accent. I was smoking Park Drive untipped at the time, a powerful working-class cigarette. I proffered him the open packet — how often do you see that once familiar gesture nowadays? — and he took one, I gave him a light, and, as I remember it, for he does not remember it, he said, ‘The name’s Longley. Michael Longley.’ Of course I knew who he was, as I think he must have known I must have known. I was delighted to meet this luminary of the poetry scene. Was it 1970 that we first met? 1971? Who was the featured poet? I can’t remember, though I think it might have been Heaney. As I tell it, the encounter is banal, but not inconsequential. Over the years Michael and I shared many cigarettes, and

thus many conversations, the vast bulk of which we cannot now remember. There are so many things we can’t remember.

Wondering if my memory of those times might be improved by consulting the catalogue of my papers in the Robert J. Woodruff Library, I enter its virtual Irish Literary Portal and go to ‘The Ciaran Carson Papers’. I’ve looked at the catalogue in a cursory manner before, but only now do I realize its full extent, and the full extent of my memory loss, for when I click on ‘Subseries 2.2b: Uncollected Poems’, and scroll down the page, I realize that there is much here that I have no recollection whatsoever of having written. Many of the titles are a mystery to me: ‘At the Poetry Reading’; ‘At the Zoo’; ‘For Reasons of Security’; ‘Firing Range’; ‘To the German Language’; ‘Wrong Side of the Fence’; and, ironically, ‘How to Remember’. Now what that was about? There is a poem called ‘Paul’, which I guess has nothing to do with Paul Muldoon, for when I note that it precedes another called ‘Philomena’, I now do remember that at some time or other I embarked on what I thought might be a series of poems named for Christian martyrs. It came to nothing; or rather, it came to these two entries in the archive.

But I am inadvertently reminded of Paul Muldoon, and some of the uncountable, and sometimes unaccountable, times we spent together drinking DRACs, back in whatever years they were. Back then, we drank and smoked as if there were no tomorrow. Paul was working in the BBC, I in the Arts Council, and we would often meet ‘after work’, which usually meant about 4 p.m., in the Bot or the Welly. After one such meeting, when the bars had closed, we ended up in Paul’s flat in Notting Hill off the Malone Road, where Paul thought there might be further drink; or maybe we bought a carry-out. I don’t know what time it was when we found we had run out of cigarettes. So we decided that the best place to purchase



Paul Muldoon, 'The Indians on Alcatraz', Groupsheet, Longley Papers, Manuscript Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

more cigarettes was the BBC Club, which maintained a late licence, so we could get a drink there as well; and we decided that the best way of getting there was to drive there in Paul's dilapidated Hillman Imp convertible.<sup>1</sup> We got into the car to find that Paul was incapable of driving, so I undertook the task instead, I who had failed my driving test about ten years before and hadn't done anything about it since. Somehow we got there. We entered the club, bought cigarettes and drink and stayed and talked some more until we were asked to leave. When we emerged, we'd forgotten where I'd parked the car, and the memory ends with us staggering through the streets of Belfast, searching for the means to get

home. I am reminded now that this Notting Hill is one of the Muldoon abodes — *Chez Moy*, a phrase I believe I coined — that figures in his poem 'History'. It is a poem, among other things, about the unreliability of memory and history. I thought it might be cited in Clark's book, but it is not.

Where and when exactly did we first have sex?  
Do you remember? Was it Fitzroy Avenue,  
Or Cromwell Road, or Notting Hill?  
Your place or mine? Marseilles or Aix?  
Or as long ago as that Thursday evening  
When you and I climbed through the bay window  
On the ground floor of Aquinas Hall  
And into the room where MacNeice wrote 'Snow',  
Or the room where they say he wrote 'Snow'.

1 After writing this, I met Paul Muldoon in London. According to him, the vehicle in question was a Triumph Herald.

Table of drink in Wellington Park Hotel, Belfast, April 1978. Left to right: John Morrow, Ciaran Carson, Frank Ormsby, Jimmy Simmons, Michael Longley. Photograph: BBCNI (Wilfred Green).



What exactly did we talk about, at his place or mine? It's all a blur now, but it seems we had good times, and we never fell out, unless it was falling out of pubs. I was deeply impressed by Paul ever since I first set eyes on him, then a pale, thin wisp of a boy from the Moy delivering his poems in a whisper at an undergraduate reading in a dim-lit room in Queen's University. I could catch barely half of the words, but what I heard seemed startlingly brilliant. Some weeks later I went up and introduced myself to him in the Snack Bar of the Students' Union, and we became increasingly close friends. I was daunted by him from the beginning, and when I look back now at the contents of the single worksheet I presented to the Group in about 1971 — I've just found it online at Emory — I see that half of the poems are near enough Muldoon pastiches. I learned the necessary anxiety of that influence, while remaining grateful for the ongoing presence and development of his poems throughout the years. I could not help but be influenced.

I mention all this as some kind of parallel to the kind of thing that might have gone on between Heaney, Longley, Simmons, Mahon,

and indeed Muldoon, in the period covered by Clark's survey. Though relationships between the former three particularly, according to Clark, were somewhat more volatile from time to time. Words were uttered unadvisedly over drink, words that were difficult to retract when they could not be remembered the morning after. By 1976, says Clark, the relationship between Heaney and Longley had grown tense:

Things came to a head one night during a drunken row at the Hammonds' home when Longley belligerently claimed that Mahon was a better poet than Heaney. The next morning, after calling David Hammond to find out exactly what he had said, he wrote an achingly sincere six-page letter of apology to Marie Heaney in which he castigated himself for his stormy, offensive behaviour. He was envious of Heaney's fame, he admitted, but knew he also enjoyed it 'by proxy'. He was annoyed people assumed his admiration of Mahon equalled a criticism of Heaney, though he also felt Heaney did not deserve more attention. He said his resentment had been building for years ...

The letter to Marie Heaney can be read in the Michael Longley Papers in Emory University. But Marie Heaney never read it: it was never sent. Is the archive a kind of public confessional? Are some poets more indiscreet than others at what they allow into the public domain? Certainly, some appear to have little compunction in showing themselves as driven by vanity and envy. In June 1968 James Simmons writes to Tony Harrison, ‘The Irish papers still won’t publish my poems. Derek Mahon is Poetry Book Society Choice for Autumn. Grrr. Heaney is Somerset Maugham Award.’ A few months earlier he had written to Harrison:

The Ulster Arts Council played a rather dirty trick on Jimmy — They rejected, when approached by him to back a tour of poetry and singing — no cash, etc. Yet 3 months later sent Heaney, Longley and a singer called David Hammond all around the province — I could spit — I supposed their material is safe with just enough SEX thrown in to make an audience feel mature and sophisticated.

This was after Simmons, his wife and a friend, sponsored by the Arts Council, had performed bawdy songs and poetry before an audience of ‘shocked senior citizens’ in Bangor, most of whom left the hall before the night was over. Nor did Simmons’s predilection to kiss and tell go down well with the Longleys on occasions:

Simmons had also become involved in a more personal feud with Michael Longley. In July 1970, the Longleys spent a weekend in Portrush with the Simmonses, where they enjoyed some sailing and a day out in Ballycastle. However, after a long Saturday night spent drinking, an alcohol-fuelled row erupted between the two poets. Longley had apparently implied that Simmons’s poetry was clumsy, and his morals — particularly his *laissez-faire* attitude to marital fidelity — shoddy. Simmons

argued there was nothing wrong with publishing a confessional poem about an affair, but Longley, Edna, and Simmons’s wife Laura disagreed. Furious, he stormed off to bed.

Edna and Michael left Portrush the next morning, wondering if they would ever be invited back. Longley was deeply troubled by the argument, and wrote Simmons a humble letter of apology ...

Unlike the letter to Marie Heaney, this one was sent: it is in the James Simmons Papers in Emory. More strained relations were to follow, particularly the big Field Day Row, involving, on one side, Heaney, Seamus Deane, Brian Friel, Hammond and Paulin, with the Longleys on the other. It’s a subject that could take up several books by itself, and I don’t propose to rehearse the pros and cons of that debate in this review. In any event, whatever grievances existed between Heaney and the Longleys have now largely been put aside. Perhaps some memories of those grievances have been expunged, or revised, and the participants can see the past in a kindlier light than they did at the time.

Heather Clark’s conclusions are much the same, though she is more convinced than I am of the value of expressions like ‘Renaissance’ or ‘Group’. Belfast is a small place. It is indisputable that from 1962 to 1972 a number of poets lived in Belfast. They gathered in pubs, back rooms and flats. They talked and drank together. Sometimes they read each other’s work, and took it in. They looked over their shoulders at each other, and were influenced by each other. They gossiped about each other. Sometimes they fell out. Sometimes they forgot why they had fallen out. They wrote letters that were never sent, and poems that were never published. Only they know what they destroyed, or perhaps they have forgotten what they destroyed. Sometimes they wrote about the same thing, since the same things were present all around them: islands, for

one thing, were much written about. We all live on an island. I'm reminded of Leopold Bloom's definition in *Ulysses* of a nation as 'the same people living in the same place'. One need not offer the tag of 'Renaissance' to describe an accident of history and place. In any event, whatever was happening did not end in 1972. The conversations and the poetry kept going.

In November 2006, as director of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's University, I was privileged to organize, with Frank Ormsby, a Gala Poetry Evening in the Whitla Hall to celebrate the publication of *The Blackbird's Nest*, an anthology, edited by Frank, of the work of poets associated with Queen's. It had been my aim, when accepting the Heaney Centre post, to re-create some of the atmosphere I felt at those Group readings and pub conversations in small back rooms in the early seventies. I also wanted to extend that room into the world at large on occasions. Longley, McGuckian, Alan Gillis, Jean Bleakney,

Chris Agee, Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, Sinead Morrissey, Leontia Flynn, Ormsby and myself read that night to a packed hall of some eleven hundred people — surely among the biggest audiences ever for poetry in these islands. It was visible and audible evidence that poetry in Belfast, some thirty-odd years after the demise of the original Belfast Group, is alive and well. Seamus Heaney had intended also to read, but was unable to be present due to illness. The evening was ended by Longley, who paid tribute to his 'old friend', wished him a speedy recovery, and, besides reading his own contribution to the anthology, read Seamus's. He read the work beautifully, with evident love. The evening was recorded by Paul Maddern, a young poet studying at the Heaney Centre, as part of a thesis that will explore the dynamics of poetry readings. Perhaps some day a copy of that recording might find its way to the Special Collections Archive in Emory. And it need not be bought by Coca-Cola money; it can be a gift outright. ■