

Love and Death in the Loyalist Graveyard



When I failed Math in my Grade Eleven provincial matriculation in June 1969, the only way I could proceed to Grade Twelve was to rewrite the exam after taking a six-week refresher course. Reluctantly, I submitted to attending summer school in the port city of Saint John, New Brunswick. I was fortunate for the invitation to stay with my older sister and brother-in-law, who lived in a walk-up apartment near the city center. Being from a provincial village, it was my first taste of staying in a city.

One evening in the first week, I took a break from the homework and headed out for a walk. I took with me a paperback copy of *'A Concise Treasury of Great Poems'*, edited by Louis Untermeyer. As a pupil of self-study, I carried a pen for underlining and making marginal comment. I held the book under my jacket, as if for protection.

I walked up King Street East, towards the 'uptown' center. It was a typical summer evening on the Bay of Fundy—partly foggy and cool. The fog and the faintly armpit smell from the pulp mill at the mouth of the Saint John River would take some getting used to.

Beyond the apartment house blocks I passed the County Court House, a weathered brick building which had a lock-up in the upper storey. From behind barred windows, doleful faces looked down. I hastened my step as if from the vapours of plague.

On the next block was King's Square, the central park, my brother-in-law had pointed out on the drive in a few days before. I stopped up on the curb and surveyed across. Near the bandstand in the center, a few guys about my age were standing around. There was only one girl, who looked no older than thirteen, smoking and spitting. The boys had longish hair and were dressed in blue jeans and jean jackets, rather like I was. I hesitated. Among my village cohort, Saint John had a reputation as a place where a 'freak' could be a greaser in disguise.

On the sloping hill below there was another park, neglected and overgrown but with a few benches on the sides. Interspersed among the trees and longish grass were very old gravestones leaning at odd angles. Some were worn almost smooth and a few of the greyish stones had their tops broken off.

In that moment, I was unaware that I was standing before the Old Loyalist Graveyard, one of the oldest cemeteries in the Dominion of Canada. I certainly knew the importance of the Loyalists. Since grade school, figures in white wigs and tricorn hats were revered as the founders of our province. Still, it would never have occurred that the bones of the Loyalist forebears would lie scarcely marked amid a shabby city park scattered with broken glass and potato chip bags.

There was also a tradition around the Old Loyalist graveyard I did not hear about until a few months thereafter:

In my English class in the new high school I was soon to attend, I was to learn that visiting poets to Saint John were customarily requested to write a poem about the Loyalist Graveyard. The tradition began with a contribution of Bliss Carman, a nineteenth century poet born in the province. Carman enjoyed modest success in the larger world and was much lauded in his home province— especially by English teachers.

In any case, near that hallowed ground of official poetic inspiration, I sat on a weathered bench carefully to one side of a sticky patch. Shivering a little in the chill of twilight, I unbuttoned my jacket and withdrew my book.



Flipping through at random, I stopped at an unread poem with the title: “*Elegy on the Eve of His Execution*,” by Chidioc Tichborne. The name stuck me as strangely similar to mine. Further intrigued by the foreword that Tichborne had been executed in England for treason in 1586 at the age of twenty-four, I began to read his poem aloud, in a whisper:

*My prime of youth is but a frost of cares,
My feast of joy is but a dish of pain,
My crop of corn is but a field of tares,
And all my good is but vain hope of gain;
The day is past, and yet I saw no sun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.*

In the refrain: ‘*And now I live, and now my life is done...*’ I looked into the trees, blinking. My thoughts began racing: There I was, nearly four hundred years after those lines were written— a living mind like a needle following in the groove of an LP record, tracking the very thoughts and fears of another mind long extinguished! I looked back at the page:

*I sought my death and found it in my womb,
I looked for life and saw it was a shade,
I trod the earth and knew it was my tomb...*

'I trod the earth and knew it was my tomb!'

I looked over at the grass as the needle jumped in a tumble of thoughts:

'This very ground beneath my feet is my tomb as much as Chidiock Tichborne's! This mind, too, will soon enough sink into oblivion. There will be no trace of anything I ever thought or felt—no record that I even existed—nothing, unless—'

"Bet that's a skin book you got there!"

Startled, I looked up. An old man in ragged checked jacket, whiskery-cheeked, was leaning down. Frozen to the bench, I spread fingers over the page.

"So how many times has he got into 'er yet?" He jabbed a dirty-nailed forefinger towards the book. In his other hand, he held a brown paper bag.

"Can't say."

"Jeezuz!" He looked back and forth, unscrewing a bottle cap inside the bag. He took a swig and grimaced. "Don't pretend you don't know. How many times?"

"I'm not sure," I said still frozen.

"Horseshit, you don't know!" He leaned forward, showing a pinkish scab at the top of his bald head. "Maybe five or six?"

"Dunno."

"Six times—kee-rist," he waggled his tongue. "That's enough to make a fella wanna start beatin' 'er right here."

I gave a grit-teethed smile.

"Six times. Yup, that's a hot one..." He took a swaying step back looking back over his shoulder towards the city jail. Turning back, he grinned, showing brownish teeth. "Hey, you wouldn't have a coin or two, wouldja? For a cuppa coffee?"

"Sorry, I'm broke."

Well shit," He pushed the paper bag under his hanging shirttail into his back pocket. "Some skin book you got there, son. 'Course what a fella needs is the real thing—a *real* piece a' tail. Jay-zuz!"

He wiped a sleeve across his nose, muttered something indecipherable and then lurched away. Holding up one arm to ward off traffic, he crossed the road and disappeared into King's Square.

With the spell of Tichborne's *'Elegy'* broken, I slipped my book back under my jacket and retreated through the twilight— back to the dreary math homework...



A few months thereafter (more at ease in the Loyalist City), I read in the local *'Evening Times Globe'*, that the American beat poet, Alan Ginsberg, had just visited Saint John. As a staunch opponent of the War in Vietnam, Ginsberg had apparently considered that a city founded by opponents of the American Revolution might be an interesting place to spend some time.

Not surprisingly, Saint John did not live up to the American poet's expectations. Upon arrival at the airport, a Canada Customs officer had frisked him for pot. Then during his first walkabout, his hippie attire had apparently attracted the wrong kind of attention. Probably concluding that the progeny of the tory Loyalists were no less philistine than those of the upstart American revolutionaries, Alan Ginsberg abruptly retreated south.

Still, even in his brief stay Ginsberg followed the city tradition and composed a short verse about the Loyalist graveyard. As reported, he simply offered:

*'Many drunks have fallen and broken their heads
on the tombs of our Loyalist forefathers...'*

In reading his contribution to the tradition, I wondered just what Alan Ginsberg had missed in his brief brush with the spirit of grey Saint John. After all, there were greater torments than want of a drink that could cause a poor old guy to stumble in the Loyalist graveyard.

After only three months in the city, even I had begun to grasp that...

-1978, Hadejia, Nigeria (transcribed and edited 2015)