

Marking a fiftieth anniversary while reflecting on the roots of bigotry...

A strange childhood infection:



On the eve of this fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, it is strange to recall how much I hated him when he was president. My hostility had no basis in reason— it was a visceral reaction— rather like that against turnips which I equally despised as a child.

My hostility to Kennedy might have begun on an afternoon in the fall of 1960 when my mother, sitting at the kitchen table, pointed to colour photos in the ‘*Life*’ magazine she was flipping through.

“One of these two men is going to be the next president,” she said holding up the magazine. “Which one would you like to win?”

One man had a deep tan and crinkly eyes. The other on the opposite page has black hair and a stiff smile... As for the photo of the crinkly-eyed candidate, the detail that loomed largest was his rusty hair. Averse to redheads— I pointed to Nixon.

My mother smiled.



When Kennedy won and his name grew ever larger, his visage on TV annoyed me almost as much as his Boston accent.

I do not remember when I first learned that he was Irish American. Yet I gathered from the banter of TV personalities— from Ed Sullivan to Archbishop Fulton Sheen—that Irish Catholics were intensely proud of ‘their’ president...

In attempting to understand a 10-year-old’s irrational thought-processes, I realize that my aversion to the most famous public figure in its world, could not *only* have been due to reddish hair and a Yankee accent... I could not have hatched such a crazy animosity without some external influence.

As any child—I was a fertile medium for the microbes that circulated around my little petri dish... The political tensions stirring up that dish in the early 1960s were roughly determined by the following factors:

In the same year that Kennedy became US president, many English natives in the old Tory-Loyalist heartland of southern New Brunswick, felt threatened by the election of Louis Robichaud, the province's first Acadian premier. With the introduction of his 'Equal Opportunity' policies, the English (my tribal background) while still a numerical majority, feared that a new formula for the distribution of government pork was being concocted to favour the French...

When the province's industrialist overlord, K.C. Irving, fell into disagreement with Robichaud, blistering attacks from all the province's English newspapers (which Irving owned) appeared almost daily... The crusade was led by a virulent patch-eyed Britisher called Michael Wardell, the publisher of the Fredericton '*Daily Gleaner*'. The native English were primed to latch onto any printed rumours of vice and corruption in Robichaud's Liberal government. Indeed, there was a time when the vitriolic backlash against emergent Acadian power might have turned the sedate little provincial capital into a North American Belfast...

Just a few months before the Kennedy assassination, a Liberal government also came to power in Ottawa—largely through strong support from Quebec. On the dominion's peripheries, the seismic shift from the old order was even more rattling....

Through that period, I was a little ignoramus who looked only at the comic page of the daily newspaper. Still, I was not numb to surrounding tensions—and often attentive to mutterings overheard from adult conversations...

My father usually kept mute about politics. He was a border guard beholden to an oath of non-partisanship taken in employment with Her Majesty's civil service. But the 'tsks' that often accompanied his crackled pages of the Saint John '*Telegraph Journal*', make plain his displeasure with the country's state of affairs. When his tongue was loosened by drink, he would sometimes rail against the supposed perfidy of the Liberal governments both in Fredericton and in Ottawa.

Most deeply rooted was a conviction that that French Canada had opposed Canada's World War Two participation. The old soldier was especially bitter about the French boys who "took to the woods" rather than defend Mother England as he and his buddies had volunteered to do. He supposed that the heirs of the corrupt Liberal politicians and Catholic clergy who opposed the war were now pushing to strip Canada of all vestiges of its "British heritage"... He took the proposed abandonment of the Union Jack which he "fought under" to be especially disgraceful.

Meanwhile, my mother was not by nature given to reserve. She would sometimes mock Robichaud's French accent and refer to Liberal Prime Minister Lester Pearson's "mouth full of marbles." Although she had Catholic friends, she would sometimes grumble about the "clannishness" of Irish Catholics. Her jokey comments were never as scurrilous as a few heard on visits to the St. John River Valley Baptist "bible belt", from whence she hailed. It was in a

farm kitchen there (strung with fly stickers) that I once heard that having Kennedy in the White House—put Irish Catholics just a just a step away from world domination on behalf of “the long-nosed Pope in Rome”. It sounded terribly sinister...

So for a time, such poisonous spores circulating in the local environment seeded my own set of twisted beliefs: *‘The Irish hate the queen but adore Kennedy and their Pope. Along with the French— their fellow Catholics— they vote Liberal. They secretly mock our British heritage...’*

Mercifully, the prevalent resentment of having “French forced down our throats,” did not emerge from the toxic sproutings. There was nothing in my experience to latch upon— the few French families in the village were friendly. I was actually disappointed that French was not taught at my school. Meanwhile, I did not associate the perfidious Irish with any local Irish families since they did not speak in the Boston accent of the Kennedys...

Yet for a couple of years, the carbuncle even swelled into a loathing for the stock symbols of Ireland. I winced in the mere mention of shamrocks, shillelaghs and leprechauns. *‘Darby O’Gill and the Little People’*, was the only Saturday matinee I ever walked out on. *‘When Irish Eyes are smiling’* left me as me as queasy as after a mouthful of castor oil... Then there was the dread when I once discovered that I had accidentally worn green socks on St. Patrick’s Day. I would rather have been forced to wear pink ones...

Yet perhaps the strangest memory was one from soon after the Cuban Missile Crisis in October, ’62. Once afternoon walking from school, I imagined a mushroom cloud exploding over a map of the Emerald Isle...



The focal point of that bizarre hatred was still the visage of President Kennedy. Such was my obsession that I recall being tormented by a country song called *‘PT 109’*, by Jimmy Dean. It was about Kennedy’s war heroism as the skipper of a PT boat in the South Pacific. Every time I heard the refrain: *“The heathen gods of ole Japan—thought they had the best of a mighty good man!”* I seethed: *‘So why didn’t they get him?’*

Yet on the afternoon of November 22nd, 1963, the malignancy was lanced. Over the following few days along with millions of others, my heart was pierced by the grey TV images from Dallas and Washington... Haunted by the snatching away of the world’s most powerful person, never had I so keenly felt mortality. Amid the muffled drums of the slain president’s funeral procession, I felt shame and sorrow. I wondered whether by vile thoughts in the months before Kennedy’s death, I even bore some culpability...



I would like to think that my bout of anti-Irish bigotry was like a childhood disease that inoculates by infecting. After the pus drained away and the skin healed over— there was hardly a trace of a scar. As a teen, I was quick to call out any racial or ethnic slur.

Luckily, in my provincial setting, tribal animus was nothing like that of cracker America, white Rhodesia or Northern Ireland. Had I grown up in such places, I doubt I would have been among the courageous few who resist the cultural viruses imbibed in mother's milk... Yet having experienced a relatively short-lived infection, I am still haunted to think what might have happened had the poisonous spores not been rooted out early.

I also appreciate how much my late mother broadened her outlook over the years. For most of her life she would have been mortified to recall some of the banter she 'innocently' engaged in her early years. She is rightly remembered as one who was generous to all without prejudice.

As for my conscious resistance to bigotry— I do confess that from my early twenties I have harboured one deep seated prejudice— that being against the filthy rich... Off with their heads?

2013, November

Postscript:

A revelation today from the results of my '23 and Me' spit analysis: I have Irish DNA!

I have long known that many immigrants crossed the wild Atlantic from Cork, Ireland, to the port of Saint John, New Brunswick, but never guessed that I shared in that rich blood. Amusing to think how in childhood I was led to believe I was of Scottish heritage. Yet the analysis shows that a larger percentage of my DNA is traceable to London and Cork than to clusters in Glasgow and Edinburgh...

As a life-long appreciator of Irish music and poetry— not to mention being a lover of multifarious shades of irony— I could not be more delighted!

2020, July



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