

A Precambrian Coprolite:



Back in the early 1980s, there were elderly Germans in the town of Luderitz, Southwest Africa (soon to become Namibia), who spoke a quaint German dialect of the era of Kaiser Wilhelm II... Many of them had been born in Africa and had never visited Germany. Yet they were nostalgic about the *Vaterland* of their imagining.

In gleaning those details from an old '*National Geographic*' (June 1982), I was struck by just how disconnected I am from decades of change in the province of my origins. The New Brunswick of my memory is probably no less fossilized than the imagining of Germany was to those old Germans on the edge of the Kalahari Desert...

Indeed, my memories of my native province are frozen in time. My impressions are based on experiences between the late 1950s and the time of my departure, a decade and a half thereafter... Like the Precambrian granite boulders in the woods surrounding my native village—admittedly, those memories are ancient artifacts...



Still, in contrast to the old Germans of Luderitz, I have made several return visits to my native province. I have also maintained some connections of tribe and clan. Yet the sentimentality so common in New Brunswickers who move away—has always been alien to me. In every visit back that have been jarring reminders of why I needed to get away...



Winter in the Canadian Maritimes is largely determined by the clash of opposing air masses. Wild storms— blizzards or even icy rain— occur when the fronts pushing east from the Great Lakes and north from the Gulf Stream collide with the prevailing air masses lunging down from the Arctic... In the winter of 1974, my final term at the provincial university, I kept close track of the daily weather.

In that last of twenty-three winters in New Brunswick, I took every lashing of the north wind as a personal insult. The torment intensified in late March when the brief reprieves of milder air were invariably dashed by successive snowstorms. I distinctly recall an April day when in the sting of sleet— I could almost hear taunting laughter...



While at war with the weather god(s) in that last winter in New Brunswick, I began to think about the influence of the climate upon the native mindset. Living one's entire life where there are only three months of summer seemed to mirror an acceptance of what is a supposedly *just* apportionment of pleasure and pain. The ratio seemed to be roughly one to four: every tweak of joy being purchased fourfold in the coin of misery...

At the same time, I wondered whether the prevailing grimness had an even deeper source than a harsh climate. I imagined that ancestors scratching for innumerable generations in patches of dirt somewhere across the North Atlantic had also sighed and muttered: "*She's pretty grim, boys!*"

In childhood, I was always uneasy in the presence of old women. In their scowls, I sensed something more than a mere dislike of nasty little boys. It seemed that they sensed in me some of the ungodliness soon to be manifest... Perhaps they even foresaw the burning pages of the New Testament that a teenager would scatter on the Main Street of his village...

Yet the dislike was mutual. However unfairly, I saw in the grim expressions of old women reflections of a lifetime of drudgery. In their sighs, I felt a dreariness I wished I could put into words...

One might suppose the affection for one's native soil comes as naturally as maternal love. For many, loyalty to one's roots is probably as deep-seated as the Abrahamic injunction to '*honour thy father and thy mother*'... Allergy to one's place of origin may not be

quite so rare as allergy to mother's milk— but even that aberration is not unknown. Such an 'unnatural' aversion could be a comorbidity with the deepest unease in one's own skin...

By my late teens, I was already given to such dark speculations...



The self-torment of my winter of 1974 induced an eczema rash that spread from hand to forearm. In scratching, I was reminded of the swaddled hands of the tormented spinster in Ingmar Bergman's *Winter Light*... Yet the deeper itch was to get away or risk being trapped forever...

Admittedly, there were a few nights when the snowy streets of the capital, Fredericton, appeared like a tableaux in a glitter globe. Especially during the (previous) year when I cohabited with my college girlfriend, I could not deny that the little city had a cosy charm. I might not have been quite so edgy to get away from the home province had the university been quite so close to the village where I spent my first eighteen years...

My aversion to the (herein nameless) place where I grew up had nothing to do with material want, trauma or abuse. None of the conventional poisoners of memory were in any appreciable degree, part of my early experience... It simply seemed that in my final years there— I struggled to breath...



Strangely, in such regard I think of an anecdote about the late Frank Sinatra. I was intrigued in once reading just how much he despised his hometown of Hoboken, New Jersey... He reportedly once cringed in being told that he was flying over the place. I wonder whether he also cringed in hearing the name 'Hoboken' spoken in the local accent... I certainly once felt the same in hearing the name of my native village droned through the native noses...

Yet it is a village is well cherished by many of its former residents. Many others who grew up there have memories harkening to Norman Rockwell paintings, Disneyland's Main Street or Thomas the Tank Engine...

Perhaps typical was the sentiment of an elderly aunt expressed in her eulogy written by an American cousin who grew up in the Pacific Northwest. That aunt had been a

naturalized American from the 1940s but apparently remained nostalgic for the New Brunswick village of her girlhood:

'Our many summer visits to the town which boasts one of the most picturesque railroad stations in North America, was like going home for us.'

It is no surprise that the turreted station, looming like a castle above the main street, figures so large in the village identity. Constructed of granite in the early 1900s, it reflects the outsized ambitions of the steam engine era when the village was a regional 'hub.'

Villagers were nostalgic for their railroading glory days (1940s-1950s) long after the railroad (and its jobs) pulled out... Even when their population dipped to half the number proclaimed on a welcome sign on the village outskirts, the number on the sign was unchanged. That sign and accompanying flower bed were as well tended as were the graves in the nearby village cemetery.



I am also not surprised how memories of the same landscapes or events can be so utterly different... Indeed, it is fascinating to compare such contrasting portraiture. For one example, one might imagine Thomas the Tank Engine chugging towards Shining Time Station juxtaposed with another: that of prisoners in grey rags peering through the wooden slats of shunting boxcars...



So, whether spurred by allergy— or by claustrophobia— in July 1974 I ended up in southwest British Columbia. It is a more northerly latitude, but the winters are a little kinder... In the barrier of mountains and 5,000 kilometers between me and natal territory, I took some comfort. Even the eczema began clearing up.

2010, May
