

Godforsaken:

“*Godforsaken*” was a word that to my childhood ear, sounded grave and ominous.

My mother often muttered it on bitterly cold days. I particularly remember a time she mumbled the word when unpinning clothes from the clothesline in a blustery wind...

Several years later, when caught without a winter jacket in a spring blizzard, ‘*godforsaken*’ came to my lips. I recorded that detail in a weather and work journal I kept that year— my last in New Brunswick...

The word came to mind again quite recently when looking though a photocopied booklet of my late mother’s paternal family tree. That was one of the few of her keepsakes I brought back from New Brunswick after attending her memorial service...



My late mother’s paternal cousin, who did the genealogical research, admitted to murky records before the early 1800s. A possibility was hinted of an illegitimate birth of a patriarch in the family’s genesis. Yet it was still conjectured that the forebear who bestowed the family name five (or possibly six) generations ago was a Pennsylvanian named Nehemiah W.

During the American revolutionary war, Nehemiah W. had been a Corporal in a Loyalist regiment. According to the genealogical research, he served in Florida. Upon losing the war, he joined thousands of other disenchanted colonists in the migration northward to British territory. Seeking a loyalty-awarded land grant, he arrived in New Brunswick in 1783 accompanied by his wife and their first two children.

Upper-crust United Empire Loyalists with political influence were given the choicer land grants in the newly created province. Their farms were along the southern St. John River and its tributaries. That was in prime territory seized a few decades earlier from the Acadians, who had in turn, stolen it from the Maliseet. The soil was fertile but the climate still harsher than in any of the thirteen colonies the Loyalists left behind. Although cotton or tobacco was obviously unsuitable to the northern clime, some Loyalists from the deep south brought along slaves from their old plantations...

Former Loyalist soldiers of lower rank were granted less arable land in territory further north. In those forested areas (later to be raped for timber and pulp) the climate was barely suitable for

root crops. Corporal Nehemiah's allotment was on the border of York and Carleton counties on the margin of the central St. John River Valley...

Clearing a tillable patch of such thick and swampy woods could not have been more disheartening. One can imagine a 19th century pioneer swatting mosquitoes with his tricorn hat or tightening his cape against sleet. Winter, for a Pennsylvanian would never have started so early nor tormented for so long. Many soldiers of the king's regiments had just gone back to their homes in the thirteen colonies. By pledging loyalty to the new order and keeping mouths shut about politics thereafter, they could have kept their farms in the new republic... Perhaps as Nehemiah kicked at the iron-hard ground after the first fall freeze up, he yearned for the softer dirt of Pennsylvania...

The only official record of Nehemiah W. I could find in the New Brunswick Provincial Archives was his petition to the New Brunswick House of Assembly in 1837. The former Loyalist soldier is described as: '*very poor and indigent being dependent on one of his sons who is also very poor...*'

He received a pension of £10—a small consolation for someone who may have been taunted to the end of his days by misgivings... I have no portrait of him against which I can compare an imagined sourness. I imagine that Nehemiah often muttered the word 'godforsaken'...



Others of my likely forbears first set foot in New Brunswick a few decades later. They were among the English, Scottish, Welch and Irish commoners who arrived in steerage at the ports of what are today the Maritime provinces...

By the 1830s, New Brunswick was already a prime source of timber for the ships of the British Navy. Yet apart from enriching a few lumber barons, the province was hardly a destination for fortune seekers. Some arrivals, as 'chain migrants', joined former villagers or even family members preceding them in eking out a living in the province. There was the lumbering, fishing and the commerce of the towns. There was still cheap land for hard-scratch family farms. But for real opportunity—the compass pointed west. The more ambitious arrivals almost immediately boarded the trains...

Of course, those who shipped in by steerage were poor—and usually needed to earn a little money before continuing into the hinterlands. Almost any paid work would likely have postponed plans. In the meantime, some young men's hopes of travelling on were probably ensnared in unplanned marriages. So began in New Brunswick some families whose progeny would eventually spread throughout the globe...

Just as I wonder about those Loyalists who may have secretly regretted joining the northern exodus, I also wonder about later immigrants who stepped off the ships with cold feet. Were they primarily the ones who stayed on in New Brunswick?

Perhaps it was the faint hope of a passage back across the Atlantic which kept some close to the eastern edge of the New World. Yet those would soon realize that there could be no greater humiliation than going back to their old-world as failures. Most would have resigned themselves to making the best of their lot. Some would go on to modestly prosper...

Yet a few may have been haunted to the end of their days by missed opportunity. For those unlucky few, I imagine that no curse would have given such bitter satisfaction as one that included the word: '*godforsaken*'...



Of course, such speculation could never be taken as an opinion based on credible research. There are no doubt existing studies of attitudes of early immigrants to New Brunswick based on relevant documents unknown to me. However respectful of the methods of real historians, I stubbornly persist in following certain intuitive hunches...

I do have a few documentable shreds for my speculations. One is a photocopy of a transcribed letter that was among the few papers left behind by my late father:

The original letter, unseen, was posted from Wishawtown, Scotland to Frederickton [sic], New Brunswick in July 1838. It was written by one Malcolm T. and addressed to his seventeen-year-old nephew who had settled in the province the previous year. The nephew, one Duncan T. (1820-1885), was probably my great-great paternal grandfather.

The letter is a curious blend of news from home and affable advice. Some of the reporting is droll: '*Haliburton the tailor got married to Sandy Watson's daughter... She is twice as big as himself.*' Yet more of the news is sombre: '*Your grandfather's brother is no more... He dropped down dead in our garden...*'

The grave detail is followed by homily in a Presbyterian tone: '*You see how soon we may be called out of this uncertain world... We should endeavour to make God our friend and then we will not be afraid to meet him when he calls us to a better world...*'

The uncle advises the young nephew in “getting on” in both the spiritual and in the practical realms. He urges Duncan to be a good servant to his master: *‘We are happy to hear that you got settled in a trade and hope you will feel comfortable with your employer....’* In further encouraging his young nephew, he informs of the good fortune of a Wishawtown friend of young Duncan’s who through patronage, became a guardsman at Stirling Castle: *‘It was through Mrs. Riddell’s interest that put him in the way of getting on...’*

In the repetition of “getting on” throughout the text, I was unavoidably reminded of the less than admirable traits for which lowland Scots have been stereotyped. For some lowlanders, “getting on” was offering their services to ‘the master’—whether that loyalty was to a traditional laird or to an English estate owner. Their ilk became the petty clerks, soldiers, or gamekeepers ready to report troublemakers. While not bereft of Presbyterian virtues (e.g. frugality)—this same sub-set of lowlanders tended to toady before authority. Too often they exhibited an obsequiousness similar to that bitingly described by an American of the mid-20th century also named Malcolm: that is, the celebrated Malcolm X... To use an expression he coined: those types of lowlanders were too often ready to serve as Scotland’s “house negroes”...

In closing the letter, Duncan’s uncle makes a curious but revealing reference: *“I hope the rebels trouble you no more there in Canada or in New Brunswick...”*

Several months earlier, William Lyon McKenzie, a fiery polemicist who opposed the corrupt ‘Family Compact’ colonial establishment, had incited an abortive rebellion in Upper Canada. That event would have been reported in the British newspapers...

Duncan’s uncle seemingly found offensive any bucking of the authority of the British crown—especially one incited by a fellow Scotsman... *‘Don’t rock the boat’* was the sacred Presbyterian principle which the uncle Malcolm implicitly implored his nephew to observe...



What of the ‘getting on’ of the young Duncan in New Brunswick? Starting as a bank clerk, he became a government clerk, and eventually a municipal councilman. He ran a family farm and sired a large brood. Apparently, his New Brunswick soil was more fertile than the depleted farmland in his native Lanarkshire.

‘*Godforsaken*’ may never have crossed his mind—not even in January...

These impressions I draw from his obituary—which was published in the Fredericton *‘Evening Capital’* in July 1885. That obituary in transcription was also among the handful of photocopied papers kept by my late father.

The obituary notes that Duncan T. had been an avid curler and patron of the local St. Andrews Society. He was an admirer of the works Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns. Although he kept a residence in the city, in his latter years he often stayed at his small farm on the Nashwaak river north of Fredericton. There, he kept an open door: *'Every poor Scotsman who went to him for assistance was sure not to be disappointed... His hospitality was proverbial and he was generous to a fault...'*

I would never have guessed that a lowland Scot like 'Duncan T.—rather like 'Rabbie' Burns—would really have put into practice, the bold declaration that: *'The rank is but the guinea's stamp/ a Man's a Man for a' that'*... That was pleasing to read...

Still, if the claim is not merely hyperbolic praise standard for an 1885 obituary writer, it is ironic. As recalled from childhood, a notable tendency of several of Duncan's descendants was to wince in the very names of fellow villagers they presumed beneath them. Deepening the irony is that some of the ancestors of those who bore those unsavoury names could well have been among the poor Scots who showed up at Duncan T.'s door...



I also have a copy of a painted portrait of Duncan T. It was found in an old album by my nephew, M.S., who distributed his digitized copy a few years ago. In the portrait, Duncan and his wife, Eleanor, are framed in double ovals. She is dour-faced and in Victorian black. He is long mutton-chopped and thin lipped—possibly only affecting a formal staunchness. His eyes do not appear meek nor is his chin notably weak—features sometimes noted in the lineage of his male descendants...

I have never seen a photograph of Duncan but guess that he looked very similar to his likeness in the painting. A photo of his wife, who outlived him, looks strikingly similar to her likeness in that earlier portrait. She appears at the centre of a studio photo (also digitized by my nephew) of female kin taken in the later nineteenth century. She bears the same heavy-lidded grimness. One can only charitably assume that Duncan had to have been attracted to her inner beauty...

The only male in that vintage photo of womenfolk in funereal Victorian dress is the son of Eleanor and Duncan named Malcolm. He stands at the rear of the family brood, a portly middle-aged man with a Stalin-like moustache. In his visage is a glimpse of Presbyterian gloominess that was absent in the portrait of his father...

Perhaps tellingly, Malcolm T. was named after the uncle in Wishawtown, Scotland who wrote the letter to his father in 1838. It is interesting that this man—my presumed great-grandfather—was the son who inherited the farm. He would stay on in New Brunswick while most of his thirteen siblings migrated west... In looking closely at the photo, I can easily imagine him—or his mother, Eleanor—muttering 'godforsaken'...



Picturing one's name reassigned from a branch—to a root—of a family tree is not as unsettling as imagining one's name on a tombstone. As the prospect of becoming an ancestor oneself moves closer to the present, interest in family roots often grows. Also often kindled with advancing years is the hope that future generations carry forward an interest in family history. More audacious is the hope that future sproutings in the family tree will preserve—along with our genes—aspects of our character...

Yet the family 'tree' is itself a relic of the past. A more appropriate metaphor is a web: a vast entangled web encompassing not only all of humanity but of all living things. Indeed, since the advent of DNA analysis—notions about inheritance have been upended...

For example, in thinking one bears any resemblance to a particular ancestor—say, a great-grandfather—one should temper the probability with the fact that any single great grandparent is only one of eight. Even assuming official records of paternity are accurate, one inherits from any one of our great-grandfathers only about 12.5% of familial DNA. A great-great grandfather contributes only about one-sixteenth of familial DNA... Unfortunately, I have not a shred of information about my fifteen other great-great grandparents, apart from Duncan T.—with each of whom I share only about 6.25% of familial DNA...

If one could trace a lineage back twelve generations—back to the era of Elizabethan England—any forbear living at that time would be only one among 4,095 great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandparents... That fact should lend scepticism to claims of direct descent from—along with resemblance to—a famous person like Shakespeare. In any case, the exponential spreading out of our DNA among past forbears extends backwards for about three thousand generations (60,000 years) to the common ancestor of us all: our African Eve...

It is obviously not logical to think that a love of poetry be inherited from a great-great grandfather who was devoted to Robert Burns. Still, like most people—I speculate about shared traits inherited from distant ancestors. I even wonder what I might have in common with Nehemiah W.—from whom I would have inherited no more than one-thirtieth of familial DNA—even if he is my biological great-great-great grandfather...

Few of any culture would doubt that one shares more than mere DNA with ancestors. One need not 'worship' them (as many cultures do) in desiring to feel something of their spirits moving in us. One might still use the analogy of DNA replication in describing how collective memory is carried forward by families, clans—even by nations...

Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins famously called the transmitted images, ideas, stories—"cultural memes". While minds constantly absorb, transmit and shed cultural memes—some operate like software—at the very root of sentience. Some of the cultural memes—habits of mind or dispositions—probably go back generations.

I wonder about such riverbed memes embedded in me from infancy. No matter how much of my life I spent away from New Brunswick—such dispositions—not a few hidden—almost certainly still operate...

In such regard, I wonder about a certain dourness brought across the Atlantic and deepened in a climate even harsher than that of northern Europe. I observe in an old photo of a great-grandfather what appears to be a clenching of the jaw. Such a tic has been noted in me...

Similarly, I imagine feeling what Nehemiah W. felt in kicking at frozen mud in his first winter in New Brunswick. Even if his ancestry is only a family story to fill an unknown paternity with a Loyalist pioneer (an honour for English New Brunswickers)—he still seems more real than most living relatives...



In again picturing my mother reeling in the clothesline on a bitter cold day (I would have been standing behind her holding open the porch door) I hear along with her ‘tsks’ and mumbles off-key snatches of old country song like: *‘Life is like a Mountain Railroad.’* She heard her own mother sing such old songs, along with Baptist hymns, in the farm kitchen of her girlhood... Lyrics like: *‘we must make this run successful/From the cradle to the grave’* were certainly in her store of memes...

The family farm where my late mother grew up in Carleton County, New Brunswick, was not far from the dirt-poor land-grant bestowed a century and a half earlier to her legendary Loyalist forebear, Nehemiah W....

As for that particular time she mumbled *‘godforsaken’*—she might have been referring to the weather, the world—or to more personal woes...

-2011, November
