

Dispatches from a Farewell Tour (July 1998)

Introduction:

On the summer break from a temporary teaching stint in Dubai, along with my then 13-year-old daughter, I made a two week visit to New Brunswick... My daughter, MT, stayed between my mother's place in my boyhood village and her nana's nearby lakeside cottage. I spent much of the time visiting old friends or old haunts.

The following are excerpts from extensive notes taken during that final visit.

June 30, 1998 (Fredericton, NB)

Back among the stately elms:



Was renting a car frivolous? I could have borrowed my mother's Camry for the excursion to Fredericton. She offered it. Yet I know she would have been nervous if I were late getting back. Also, if I had her nana's car—MT would have been deprived a day at the Makadavic Lake cottage.

Yet after just a day thumb-twiddling on the fusty porch, there was the matter of sanity. It seemed that two weeks in the village without my own wheels could drive me beyond stir-craziness...

So, in early afternoon I got dropped off at the Budget rental agency in Fredericton by my mother and MT. They picked up groceries before heading back to the cottage.

It turned out that the cost of renting a Chevy Lumina for a week was less than the cost of changing our air tickets for an earlier departure—a serious consideration yesterday. I paid with US \$100 bills—my Dubai-whoring lucre which I was itching to unload...

I then drove down Regent St. to the old downtown. I was glad for the opportunity to indulge a little nostalgia before the invited get together at old buddy C.C.'s place.

The first stop had to be the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. I had never doubted that its collection rivalled that of a public gallery of a much larger city. The gallery was, of course, a gift to the province from its most famous native son: Sir Max Aiken. He had been a generous benefactor to the city despite having been—rather like Churchill in whose wartime cabinet he served—a staunch imperialist. Sir Max once opined that granting independence to certain territories in Britannia’s empire would be like: “the gift of a razor to a child...”



Even with that quote in mind, I was eager to once again behold the wall-sized painting opposite the foyer. I first saw *Santiago El Grande*, when accompanying my parents to the gallery for its public opening in 1959. In the midst of a pressing crowd, I glimpsed a bald grinning gnome—Beaverbrook himself...

Nearly forty years later, Dalí’s vision of the patron saint of Spain mounted on a rearing white steed with bare legs splayed out, was as gobsmacking as ever. Yet I gave Santiago only a minute’s tribute. I also whizzed through the gallery of old English familiars (J.M.W. Turner, Constable, Gainsborough, Joshua Reynolds *et al.*). With only an hour budgeted, I made straight for the special exhibition advertised in the foyer: the works of New Brunswick native, Miller Brittain...

An interest in Brittain’s work was piqued nearly three decades ago from a small acquaintance with his daughter, J.B.... She was the ethereal blonde, in miniskirt and leotards, with whom I exchanged a few shy smiles in passing in the high school corridor. Otherwise, she seemed to occupy a higher plane of being than one to which I dared aspire. That impression came even before I heard that she was the daughter of a famous artist, who had recently passed away...

Today J.B. is apparently custodian of most of her father’s works. The glossy brochure on this exhibition (picked up in the foyer) were written by her. In her notes, she described how her father was inspired by the engravings of William Blake. Even in struggling with his demons he was committed to capturing his version of “fearful symmetry...”

Particularly revealing was the detail of her father breaking out into raucous laughter in the midst of a rural church service...



His daughter's description was a perfect introduction to '*God and the Devil*'. Many of the works in the exhibition were done in Brittain's troubled final years when, like Blake, he worked to render his own biblically inspired visions. Fascinating in such regard are his haunted-eyed Christs.

Other works showed drooping flowers and elongated human forms, reminiscent of carved Makonde *Djinns* or the hellish visions of Hieronymus Bosch. I was left with no doubt that Miller Brittain (a Goya of Saint John?) is much underrated...

In exiting the gallery, there came hauntingly to mind a snatch of reportage in a drunken phone call a few years ago from high school comrade, J.D. When I asked after high school classmates, the name of the ethereal blonde with the shy smile came up. He laughed. "She used to be so beautiful, right?" JD then related a sordid encounter in a bar. Even in dismissing the drunk talk of an old friend bottoming out—his insinuation of debauchery was hard to bear...

At the same time, I wondered what self-sacrifice it must take to be the bearer of the legacy of a famous parent. Understandably, one would crave breaks of anonymity... I was even more touched by a remembered ethereality...



From the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, I walked past the legislature and then down leafy Church St. towards the apartment building at the corner of George Street. The old Victorian manse, long ago split into apartments, was freshly painted green. I lingered for a moment at the back peering up into a gable window on the third floor. That was once the bedroom wherein two English majors experimented at intimacy in the cozy winter of 1973... Were any ghostly traces left behind? Looking up, I could almost conjure the sound of Joni Mitchell's '*Blue*' on a record player, emanating from the propped open window...

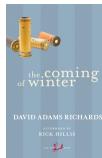


With a couple of hours before the visit to C.C.'s, I drove up to the university and parked behind the student union building. I ventured inside to see the upstairs lounge. The décor was unfamiliar but there were still armchairs positioned before the bay windows. For a moment I sat in one, remembering hours gazing out at the frozen river trying to ignore the shrieks of overdue term papers...

In the familiar vista of church steeples poking above a canopy of trees, I remembered a derisive phrase Saint Johners sometimes used in describing Fredericton. Without a single smokestack, the capital city was like "a head without a body."

I then walked out past the Harriet Irving library, named for the wife of the province's late industrialist titan. He apparently attended the opening ceremony of the library without extending the endowment that was presumed forthcoming. In some manner K.C. Irving unwittingly enhanced the reputation of his rival for 'most enterprising native New Brunswicker of all time'. Indeed, beside Max Aitken—K.C. Irving looks small...

Resisting the impulse for a nostalgic peek at the basement carrels where I once scrivened, I continued on the footpath to the university bookstore.



Therein I browsed the 'Canlit' section... Not unexpected was an entire shelf dedicated to the novels of D.A. Richards. From '*The Coming of Winter*' (1974) to '*Hope in the Desperate Hour*' (1996) multiple copies were available in both hard-cover and paperback...

Back in the early '70s, Richards could have been any of the college students showing a fake ID at the Windsor tavern. Who among the quaffers at surrounding tables would have guessed they were in the presence of the budding Chekov of the Miramichi?

At least one English major among those tables needed to take a crack at filling a ready niche. Clear of purpose and self-assured—Richards jumped in. He never rested on the acclaim of his first novel. He kept his hands off his dick and kept plowing the native soil. Canlit needed a regional New Brunswick novelist and Richards was right with his timing... Why should that in any manner qualify his achievement?

Leafing through his Governor General's Award winning '*Nights Below Station Street*' (1988), I chuckled a tribute to the old clique of Fredericton literati wherein Richards was first anointed... How many, I wondered, in mortal coil remain?

Back in the early 1970s, the 'cottage' of poet Alden Nowlan near the university was the nucleus of the local literary scene. As writer in residence, he hosted parties for the young

writers who had had chapbooks published by the local '*Fiddlehead*' press. Those parties were chiefly attended by the professor poets and their proteges—but the ambiance was enriched by artists and local theatre people. Prodigious drinking accompanied poetry readings. All this was reported by a student poet of my acquaintance at the time...

Viewed from without, the local arts community appeared immodestly self-assured. A word that was sometimes used to describe the clique (also derisively from without) was "incestuous"...

The former Americans among the academic literati seemed to regard themselves as neo-Loyalists, having fled the scorching political climate of 1960s' America for a cooler clime. They seemed to view the University of New Brunswick as had its Loyalist founders: as a little Harvard on the St. John River... Understandably they had to believe that they *could have* competed in the bigger leagues had they so chosen...

I had taken classes with a few members of this would-be Bloomsbury circle but had never received any invitation to a social gathering. Very likely that was the basis for my cynical observations...

Still, from the distance of a quarter century—it is hard not to be struck by the contrasting achievements of the *habitués* of that insular little world—and that of a genuine artist who had worked alone 100 kms. down the river...



"F.! My goodness. What are you doin' here?"

It was sheer coincidence in meeting at the exit turnstile, a boyhood friend entering... Although H.M.'s chubbiness was a little jarring—the broad smile of a village comrade of adolescence was warm as ever. I hadn't seen him in the flesh since a visit to the village more than two decades ago. It was then that the erstwhile rock and roller revealed that he had found Jesus and become a Pentecostal preacher.

We walked together out of the bookstore and stood chatting for nearly a half hour in the adjacent walkway... In a typical village connection, he said he'd heard from his mother-in-law—who was the aunt of my brother-in-law—that I was working in Dubai...

He asked about my job. I made no secret of the fact that my role was much more a minder of spirited young Emirati men than a teacher of any academic subject...

He said that he was assistant pastor in a tabernacle on the outskirts of the city. Yet through our conversation he seemed eager to show that he was not of the snake-handling holy roller ilk. He said he was in the vicinity to register for a summer course in theology at St. Thomas university.

"Gosh, F." he gushed, "I really want to do master's degree. I'd love to write a thesis!"

"Go for it," I gestured, "Get a doctorate in theology."

He grinned, pleased by my encouragement. Gradually, I was assured that even in the clutches of evangelical Christianity—H.M.'s big heart was warmly beating...

When he spoke of his theology readings (using non-Pentecostal words like 'hermeneutics'), I thought of his story of salvation heard in his mobile home in December 1976. Perhaps at the time he was practicing how he would tell the same story to his congregation. He dramatically described waking up in a jail cell after a drunk and disorderly arrest. In listening, I wondered whether his trajectory thereafter was determined more by his location than by the epiphany itself. Perhaps if his cell had not been in bible belt New Brunswick—Buddha might have got to him before Jesus.

Yet I respected his choice. He had made a dramatic turn—defying the easier path to keep stumbling along... Moreover, H.M. had always been drawn to helping others in emotional distress. Perhaps he was fulfilling that role without succumbing to the sordid aspects of his trade.

I told him that I would later be visiting our mutual old buddy, C.C., for a barbecue.

"Why don't you go?" I asked. "I'm sure C. would love to see you."

"I don't want to show up uninvited."

"Com'on, you know you don't need an invitation!" In his hesitation, I sensed a weighing of the risks of consorting with drinkers against the advantages of demonstrating that a preacher could be a regular guy...

"Well, I haven't seen C. all year," he smiled, "Maybe I'll drop in for a few minutes. Just to say hello. It's on Charlotte St., right?"

I confirmed the address. "See you there around 5:00 PM."

When we started towards our cars, I glanced over at him labouring up the hill. It was hard to believe that back in his rock and roll days—the now portly preacher could do a stellar imitation of Jim Morrison...



About an hour later, we met again on the third-floor deck of C.C.'s apartment on the top floor of an older house which he had bought and renovated.

C.C. explained that he was able to cover his mortgage by renting out the two apartments below his own... In teen years, he was always the guy who could find the misplaced keys— even when stoned...

Last night C.C. was an attentive host. He proffered beer from the ice chest (cola for the pastor) and urging second helpings. At the corner of the parked cars in the gravel yard below, his visiting teenaged son (who lives with his divorced wife), flipped burgers under a rumbling sky. Despite the gathering thunderclouds, the rain held off.

Around the deck table along with C.C., pastor H.M. and I— were C.C.’s younger roommate and the roommate’s pug-nosed girlfriend. As soon as the boyfriend mentioned that his girl was a first-year law student, she became the center of attention.

“Gee whiz!” exclaimed pastor H. “You study *law*? Wow, what kind of grades did you need for that?”

Pastor H. went on to ask her about client privilege laws— especially those pertaining to confidentiality between a person accused or a serious crime and his/her spiritual advisor...

“I really don’t see myself practicing criminal law,” she said, “or being a public defender.”

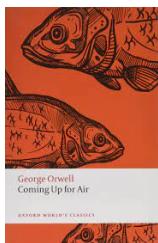
The boyfriend and C.C. asked a few more questions about criminal law. They demonstrated that tidbits learned from cop shows was about equal to her first-year law courses. The quibbling over detail (“We don’t have misdemeanours and felonies in Canada, ya know!”) was like old rams butting heads before an unimpressed ewe. Still, the pug-nosed girlfriend appeared to be enjoying the limelight.

I mostly kept my trap shut. While I had winced in being introduced as “one of my old friends from Makadumb,” I was relieved not to be asked questions about Dubai...

Meanwhile, I had to be careful of not presenting myself as something other than “one of the boys”. They would have been quick to pounce— just as when I used too many big words thirty years ago...

July 2 (Fosterville New Brunswick-Forest City, Maine)

Coming up for air:



This morning I again begged off accompanying my mother and daughter to the cottage at Makadavic Lake. I insisted that I was making the most of my car rental. Yet I did not reveal my destination...

I felt a little like George Bowling, the protagonist of Orwell's '*Coming up For Air*' (1939). He is the fat middle-aged insurance salesman who secretly revisits his boyhood village for the first time in decades... The Lower Binsfield he encounters is, predictably, a different place than the setting of his idyllic memories...

While neither fat nor a seller of insurance, I similarly headed off this morning in pursuit of nostalgia. My Lower Binsfield was the hamlet of Fosterville on East Grand Lake. About ninety minutes north on back roads, it is the site of a tiny Canada-US border post.

For a few summer weeks in the early 1960s, my father rented a lakeside camp there while on relief duty at both the Fosterville border and the even more remote post at Forest City (population >30), further down the lake. During those summer sojourns, I was seldom out of a bathing suit...

Along with swimming, fishing and murdering frogs with a B.B. gun—I often had use of my father's small boat, fitted with an outboard motor. I explored coves and beaches on both the Canadian and American shores. Every day was a new adventure.

Then came adolescence, when summer was primarily welcomed for opportunities to escape the tensions of home. After the age of fifteen, the very thought of multiple nights in close quarters with a *pater tyrannacus* was suffocating—even at East Grand Lake...



Eight kilometers west of the village, I turned north up route # 630, a gravel road winding between Spednic Lake and more remote lakes of the Chiputneticook chain. Yet apart from the view from the bridge over a thoroughfare called Diggedy (fished numerous times in boyhood) the woods were too thick to catch sight of water. I pulled over once to videotape. I mumbled about the fragrance of spruce and wildflowers until discovered by mosquitoes...

Paved road did not begin until a few kilometers before the tiny village of Canterbury—which bears no resemblance whatsoever with the English cathedral city... Upon turning southwest on route #122, the landscape transitioned from forest to fields—some ripening with hay. In the dooryards of a few of the houses were satellite dishes and gleaming trucks. The prosperity thereabouts certainly contrasted with that of the hillbilly back roads of Charlotte County, just an hour to the south...

Minutes later, I passed the turn off signs for Skiff and Eel River lakes. That marked the entrance to cottage country. Over gently rolling hills was the first glimpse of East Grand Lake. The hamlet of Fosterville, after thirty-five years, was still only a string of houses along the main road.

In the final stretch before the border, there were more lanes than remembered leading off to the cottages. The summer population at the lakes had apparently grown.



At the bottom of the hill was the flagpole of Canada Customs. In the place of the tiny white customs building of old was a high sloping-roofed structure with a wide canopy. Very likely its design was master planned in some office in Ottawa. Across the road, the white clapboard home of the regular customs officer seemed to disappear in a blink. In its place was an empty field.

I parked on the wide shoulder, taking my Sony movie camera as I got out on the passenger's side. Before I reached the canopy, the officer on duty appeared at the door. Boyish faced, he could have been a college kid on a summer job. His eyes went immediately to the glove of my fake hand. I offered a greeting.

"I'm not crossing over the border," I said. "I'd just like to look around right here."

His tilt of head prompted me to say more.

"I used to come here as a kid—when my father worked as a summer replacement officer. I'd like to just take some video from the bridge."

“Really?” He tightly smiled. “Go ahead— but better not go past the middle. There you’ll be entering the USA. Can’t speak for their side.”

“No worries.”

Dangling the video-cam from its strap, I walked out on the bridge. The thoroughfare looked narrower than remembered. Numerous times, I had taken my father’s boat under the bridge— either up to North Lake or down to East Grand. A hundred metres beyond the bridge, the American customs building was still one of solid red brick. I pulled up the videocam and did a slow 360° pan. At that moment, I was probably in someone else’s viewfinder...

Not to arouse further suspicion, I feigned a leisurely walk back to the Canada Customs. The young officer was standing outside. His smile was more relaxed.

“So how long ago was that you said you were last here?”

I took that as his willingness to chat for a few minutes. At a post which probably received no more than a dozen cars a day, I was hardly interrupting his work.

“O, when I was with my family back in the early 1960s. We rented a different cottage every year.”

I rambled on a few minutes about my last sojourn. It was in August 1964 or 1965. I mentioned that the cabin we rented was in a cove a few kilometers down the lake. Not remembering the exact location, I told him that the camp was at the far side of a beach where some prominent families had summer homes. One belonged to the brother of New Brunswick’s former premier.

“You stayed down on Trout Cove?”

“Well, I don’t remember that name,” I said. “But it has a sandy beach. I do remember that right in the middle was the big cottage of the O’Neill family. Are they still there?”

I could not resist asking about the O’Neills. They were an Irish-Catholic clan from Carleton County. The family had at least a dozen brothers and sisters— some with kids of their own. The family was headed by a gray-haired doctor and a diminutive matriarch.

The officer said that as far as he knew, Mrs. O’Neill was there at her cottage with a couple of her middle-aged children and their families. She was now well into her eighties.

Shifting the subject, I asked when the customs building was replaced, and how long ago the regular customs officer retired. I also asked whether there was still sports fishing for bass and landlocked salmon in the lake.

I might have continued in the cordial ‘Q and A’ mode, but I had a lot of driving ahead. I was about to mosey back to the car when the first vehicle since my arrival came nosing down the hill. Instead of proceeding to the bridge, the battered station wagon pulled over behind my car.

"Speakin' of the O'Neills," chuckled the young officer. "Here's Peter!"

A silver-haired fellow in mirrored sunglasses got out. He opened the back hatch and took out two red plastic jerricans. Several years my senior, he was not one of the O'Neills I remembered...

Hand extended, I approached. "Hi there. I think we may have met many years back."

He hesitated. "Oh yeah, I think I remember."

His glance at my right side suggested a blurry memory of a one-armed boy jumping from the diving board of a buoyed float...

"I also remember a couple of your brothers from U.N.B.," I ventured.

"Was it Bill?"

"I think so. Wasn't he the youngest of your brothers?"

"Yup, that Bill. He's up in Perth-Andover now. Was a teacher but moved up into the superintendent's office."

"That's really something. What about your other brother who was at U.N.B. around the same time—the one who was an amazing water-skier?"

"John Paul?"

"Right."

"O, he's teaching up in northern Ontario. Doin' fine." His cluck suggested some familial disappointment.

We continued talking while he filled his water jugs from the tap on the side of the building. The customs officer stood behind.

In our ten-minute exchange, I gathered that he was an accountant and lived in Saint John. He remembered meeting my sister there several years ago. I did not bring up the fact that she had passed away in Ottawa a year ago... I neither volunteered any information about myself—apart from being on my way to Forest City...

Bidding goodbye, I got into the car—reversed—and drove back up the road away from the border. The last sight of the pair was in my rear-view mirror. Until I dropped out of sight over the brow of the hill, they were still watching...

In driving up to the Forest City Road turn off, I recalled my fascination with the O'Neills. Their 'cottage' was the biggest in the cove. The cars of visiting older children and their kids crowded the back of their compound. They had badminton competitions. The boys swooped around the cove on slalom water-skis. The younger daughters (a little older than me) were not stunningly attractive but were tanned and athletic. Laughter rang from the O'Neill compound by day. By night there was often singing from firelit hootenannies—Michael rowed the boat ashore accompanied by strumming guitars...

Along with my mother, I visited the O'Neill 'cottage' a few times. On the visits, I sat in the corner, watching the comings and goings. Their big, happy family was so very unlike my own. To me at thirteen, the O'Neills seemed as stylish as the Kennedy clan of Hyannis Port...



My mother said she knew Mrs. O'Neill from the late 1940s. She met her in the first summer my father was assigned to the border post in Fosterville. The O'Neill matriarch's kindness to a younger woman, also from Carleton County, may have had a touch of noblesse oblige. Mrs. O'Neill even looked a little like Rose Kennedy....

Several years later at the University of New Brunswick, I sometimes saw the younger O'Neill brothers. They both lived on campus and in the same residence as did a friend. We always nodded in passing but never spoke. We mutually regarded one another jerks...

It was interesting to hear that those boys became schoolteachers while their older brother a bookkeeper. Weren't the Carleton County Kennedys all destined to be doctors, lawyers or politicians? Oddly enough—that tidbit of news seemed worth savouring...



After the turn off I was back on gravel. Within a few hundred metres, I was passing several private lanes on the right, all leading into the cottages. I was tempted to drive into one that led down to Trout Cove and the sandy beach. I slowed to a crawl and rolled open the window on the passenger's side.

I tried to catch a whiff of the air breathed when I was thirteen:

Could I even begin to list the olfactory arousals of that summer? There was pine and wildflowers, woodsmoke from camp stoves, mud squishing between toes; gasoline from outboard motors; ozone after a thunderstorm... Even the earthy odours of an outhouse in shady woods was almost erotic...

Still, there was nothing on my list to compare with the fragrance of Proust's madeleine cake. I had to chuckle....



Hardly a moment later, there appeared at the side of the road just metres ahead—an old woman. She was standing behind a sign lettered 'Sandy Beach Lane'. She seemed to be watching for oncoming cars. Could she have been the O'Neill matriarch herself?

It was possible that Peter O'Neill had phoned his mother from the customs office—telling her about our encounter. In which case the old lady would certainly be interested in asking about my mother. I had barely three seconds to decide whether to stop.

As I slowly passed, the old woman did not wave—but looked directly into my eyes...

Around the bend I pulled over, watching dust rise in the rear-view mirror. I came close to reversing. Would it not have been common decency just to stop and say hello? But had I stopped, she would certainly have invited me in. I would have had to respond to uncomfortable questions. I could not have avoided mentioning the recent deaths of my father and sister... It was also quite possible that the old woman by the roadside was someone else...

I touched the gas pedal in a trill of regret...



True to its name, the sixteen kilometers to Forest City was mostly through woods. There was no mountainous terrain in passing through Green Mountain and scarcely any settlement around Pemberton Ridge. That place name was remembered as having once been a refuge of a few deserters from the Union Army during the American Civil War. Hence it had been referred to 'Skedaddle Ridge'. Any descendants of the deserters had apparently themselves, long ago skedaddled. The only evidence of human activity in the area was tree harvesting equipment parked in a lay by along the gravel road.

There was an expansive view of East Grand Lake on the hill before the border, a counterpart to the 'Million Dollar View' on the west side of the lake. That was

remembered from once stopping on the way up to Fosterville through the American side. I pulled over for a minute and took some video though the passenger side window...

From that point, it was only a couple of minutes to the border and over the one lane bridge into the U.S.A.

The American border guard was sitting in a bench in front of his post. He was a chubby fellow about my age whose glasses looked unusually thick for his authority role. Leaning in my passenger's side window, he asked the standard questions in a southern accent. He then threw in the usual tricky follow-ups ('*Where'd ya say ya'll comin' from right now?*').

Although I had nothing to hide, I realized that the residence visa in my passport for the United Arab Emirates contradicted my claim of visiting from British Columbia. Fortunately, he accepted my B.C. driver's licence as ID. He took a few minutes in his tiny office—presumably checking my name on his system...

"This here car's rented?" he asked, leaning back in the window.

"Yes, sir," I said. "I'm visiting relatives in New Brunswick where I grew up."

It was no surprise that a customs guard who received even fewer cars a day than the customs back at Fosterville would be thorough. Still, his smile when he handed back my ID eased my apprehension in asking permission to take video from the bridge.

"Why, ya'll just take your time down there!" he said before sitting back on his bench.

Just as at the other bridge, I panned the view while droning a brief narration.

The Canada Customs office was the same little white clapboard as remembered in the last visit, thirty-three years ago. The nearby cluster of white houses that comprised Forest City, New Brunswick, also looked much the same despite the entropy of decades....

My main focus was the stream running below. It is the source of the Ste. Croix River which flows south to Spednic Lake and eventually into Passamaquoddy Bay. I zoomed in on a tangled bank about a hundred metres downstream:

In that very location on an afternoon in late August 1965, I was on the bitter verge of giving up after hours of tangling my fishing line in bushes and snagging lures on sunken logs. Yet I waded chest deep into the chilly stream and retrieved a snagged spinner. I tied it on and tried one more time: dropping my line in a deep pool recessed into the shady bank. Therein, I caught two of the fattest trout I'd ever hooked. In contrast to my many lost lures rusted away on the bottoms of local lakes and streams—that memory of rewarded persistence still shines...



When I got back to the American border post, the officer was in the shade of the awning, sharpening a hunting knife.

In the minutes that followed I could not determine whether the garrulousness of this “Virginia redneck” (as he described himself), was borne only of cabin fever.

Compliantly, I stood by nodding while he worked his whetstone and loudly opined. A few of his nuggets, as recalled:

“...Terrible gun laws up in Canada! Say a man gettin’ far along in years wants to pass on the Luger he brought back from whoppin’ the Germans in World War Two. He can’t even give it to his own son as an heirloom. Terrible!”

“...I don’t like Hitler—but I got this poster of Hitler sayin’ that he supported gun control. So did Stalin...”

“Nope, don’t think I’d wanna put myself at the mercy of the critters in the woods around here. We got coyotes big as wolves. Livin’ up here, a man can’t do without his guns...”

“...If I knew I was a goner—had some incurable disease—think I’d go over to Palestine and kill Yasir Arafat, Gadhafi or one a’ them evil Muslim hombres. I’d go out in a blaze a’ glory!”

It occurred that if he wasn’t merely bored, he could have been cagily trying to tease out something of my politics. No matter how presumably innocuous my appearance—surely any videotaping of one of the most remote border crossings in North America had to be fishy!

Seeing my passport stamps certainly would not have helped in dismissing the possibility that I was doing reconnaissance for a human trafficking operation... But the passport had been successfully concealed. In driving away, I felt a tiny satisfaction similar to that of smuggling a few cans of beer across the border, thirty years ago...



As the crow flies, Forest City is straight across Spednic Lake from my native village—hardly more than forty kilometres. Yet the drive back though Maine took more than ninety minutes. The route was south on Maine #1 through Brookton, and then east at Topsfield on the winding ‘washboard’ of Maine #6. My only stop before the Canadian border was at a pull off above a bridge over Tomah stream. That was one of the many waters wherein I’d cast a fishing line and only got tangled up...

Also, on the drive back I thought again of George Bowling in *‘Coming up for Air.’*. His encounters in revisiting the village of his boyhood make mockery of his erstwhile ‘golden’

memories. In one scene, he enters a shop where he suddenly realizes that the frowzy shop-keeper's wife was his first girlfriend. She does not even recognize the porky middle-aged fellow he's become. Yet his greatest disappointment is in finding that the deep secluded pool he always hoped to fish has become a garbage dump...

So back on the porch of my mother's house, I recognized that none of the predictable letdowns in my little day trip down memory lane were as cruel as those depicted in '*Coming up for Air*'... Still, rather like George—I was embarrassed to reveal where I'd been or whom I'd seen. When my mother asked about my day, I only said that I'd gone for a drive "across the border."

At supper, MT, chattered on about the great day she's had at the lake with her nana. Makadavic Lake will very possibly be my dear daughter's Lower Binsfield...

July 4 (Eastport Maine)

The rocket's red glare:



On the last day trip in the rented red Chevy, I was joined by old buddy C.C. He came out from Fredericton and stayed overnight. Even with the beery chatter on the porch until 11:00 PM, we got an early start. Since it was Independence Day, we decided to visit an American town on the coast. With C.C. starting off at the wheel, we drove south to the St. Stephen-Calais border.

At the American border, we unluckily got a sour-faced guard in dark sunglasses. Since I was the renter of the car, I got the grilling. While C.C. stared calmly out his window, I scrambled to show my passport and the car rental agreement.

As the back seat and the trunk were searched, I supposed it was the United Arab Emirates residence visa which drew the extra scrutiny. Still, I wondered whether the bush-whacked red neck at Forest City had sent a message across his system: *'Alert: one-armed man driving rented Chevy. No contraband but odd behaviour... Took video of bridge and border.'*

"So, what's your employment, sir?" was the guard-dog's final question, drilled hard into my face.

I hesitated in my reply. "I'm a teacher."

"Where do you teach?"

"In Dubai—I'm on summer vacation."

He gave a curt nod and dropped the passport into my lap.

"Maybe he thought I could be spying for Saddam Hussein," I mumbled as we pulled away. "Fucking bastard!"

"He was just doin' his job," said the practical C.C. to the impetuous F. "You should try not to act so nervous."

It would not be the last time in the day that we would default to old roles.



About a half hour after the border, we arrived in Eastport, Maine. Its welcome sign proclaims it to be the easternmost *city* in the continental U.S.A. While it obviously dwarfs Forest *City*, Maine—Eastport's year-round residents cannot be half the population of the New Brunswick *village* from whence we started the drive. Yet today the 'city' was decked out with July 4th bunting and bustling with holiday celebrants. The main attraction was the battleship anchored at the dock...

After parking on a side street, we ambled along the short main street. Many in the crowd were gnawing on hotdogs and lobster rolls. After last night's drinking, I was not tempted... The crowd seemed to be steadily moving towards the dock. Seeing the line shuffling onto the gangplank of the gray-hulled ship, we decided to join the queue for the tour.

Within fifteen minutes, we found ourselves on the deck of the U.S.S. Stephen W. Groves. The frigate was crewed for that day by fresh-faced sailors in training.

Along with a dozen others, we were assigned a cadet as our guide. From our cluster, we craned necks as the young sailor rattled off his prepped introduction. The ship's home port was Pascagoula, Mississippi, but was built in the shipyards of Bath, Maine. Most proudly for Mainers—it was named after a son of Millinocket, Maine, who was a heroic navy fighter pilot shot down in the World War Two battle of Midway...

We shuffled behind our guide though a number of stations on the ship—fore and aft, above and below deck. At each station we were given a short introduction by another cadet. The descriptions of mighty firepower were clearly meant to stir the spirit of 1776.

At one station, a cadet pointed out torpedoes and guided missiles. He patted an artillery shell like it was an obedient pit bull.

"This shell reaches MACH 2 before it leaves the casing."

Steadying my video cam, I asked: "Does this ship carry nuclear missiles?"

"That's classified," he chirped.

Some of the navy boys were a little nervous rattling off their memorized statistics, but all were confident in the wizardry in their sacred charge. They were proud to show fellow Americans technologies that could pulverize any enemy, foreign or domestic... Our fellow tourists (presumably all American) munched on their fried treats, assured of the republic's uber-supremacy...



Strange it was— just thirty minutes after the grilling at the border— to be on the bridge of a frigate aiming a video camera at the luminous operations screen... In most countries getting too close to any miliary installation is strictly forbidden. In more than half the world, taking photos of a battleship would land one in jail... Yet in America, without showing ID and without a pat down, a foreigner (even a non-admirer of the republic) was free to film the interior of a navy warship. Incredible!

Yet it struck me that the ‘casual’ regard for security could be taken as evidence for just how invincible Americans presumed themselves to be. In that spirit, the wide openness of the U.S.S. Stephen W. Groves on Independence Day was a celebration of the imperium’s supreme (over?) confidence...



I took the wheel on the drive back. We went by a different route— starting with the ferry that loaded just a few blocks from where the frigate was docked. We stayed inside the car on the twenty-minute passage to Cummings Cove on the south end of Deer Island, New Brunswick. To get back to the mainland, we had to take another car ferry from the north end of the island. Its sailing time was a little longer, but it was toll free.

From the landing at L'Etete, the first few kilometres north was through bog and scrubby woods dotted with dead conifers... Noting the bare ditches, I was reminded that Cape Gagetown was not far to the east. It was there that Agent Orange and other defoliants were tested before their use in the Vietnam War...



“If you ever wanna move back— you could probably buy a house around here on your VISA card,” C.C. joked.

“No thanks,” I said.

Whether it was due more to the long day or last night’s drinking— we didn’t talk much on the drive back.

In one of the few breakings of silence, C.C. cautioned: “Didn’t you see that thirty kilometres an hour sign back there? Yer goin’ close to sixty!”

“Sorry!”

As of old, I acceded to an old buddy’s practical advice...

July 10

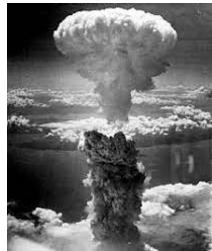
Farewell to the old cold house:



Luckily, I got the rental car back to Budget without any scratches... There are now three days to go—bereft of wheels.

In the last week and half in the old house, I have slept every night on the musty porch. My excuse has been a preference for cooler air. The couch where I have laid out my sleeping bag is usually the bed of old Cleo, my late father's pooch (The old mutt is now groaning in her sleep on the living room rug).

Meanwhile, my mother sighs about having prepared the upstairs bedroom with fresh sheets. For not a single night here have I slept in the bedroom that I once claimed as my own...



It is hard to believe that I lived in this old house—the setting for so many nightmares—for less than seven years. Yet those seven years encompassed the Cuban missile crisis and the Manson murders—my years of transition from childhood to late adolescence...

Upon first moving here in October 1962—even in the shadow of the mushroom cloud—I was delighted with the full bathroom and a bedroom with a door. Yet the novelty of those conveniences vanished with the first cold snap. Just as village rumour had it: the old house was "cold as a barn".

In the first winter, I often woke shivering in the middle of the night. Many such nights, I left my bed, inched across the icy floor and crept down the stairs to nudge up the thermostat. I would then crouch over the floor furnace, teeth chattering until the electric

fan clicked on. The sensation of warm air (albeit diesel-fumed) caressing goosebumps was near ecstatic...

In the very coldest nights, I often slept on the cot in the tiny room beside the bathroom. It was wallpapered with Mounties on horseback. Possibly used by previous occupants as an infant's nursery, it was the warmest space in the house. The single window faced south and the corner floor vent was directly over the kitchen water heater. In later years, the little room was usually unavailable. It was taken over by my father, who stopped sleeping in the master bedroom...

In those final years, my bedroom across the hall (windows facing north and west) was my refuge even in the icy months of winter. Therein I had a desk and a record player. Although its sanctity was routinely violated, behind the shut door I was first entranced by '1984' and the '*Songs of Leonard Cohen*.' Therein I burned incense cones and first chronicled my days like a Robinson Crusoe, stranded in the Twilight Zone...

I hung a succession of posters on the dull walls: one of Bob Dylan and for a time even one of a hippie Jesus. Yet slightly out of sync with typical adolescent consumers of pop counterculture was the hunting knife suspended above the bed. Perhaps also atypical was the graffiti scrawled in black enamel paint on exposed wood under the broken mirror on the wardrobe door: '*cogito ergo sum*'.

While the room was a refuge, there was no escape from the totalitarian spirit of the house itself. There might well have been an Orwellian telescreen facing the bed. A mother regularly ransacked for dope and a father sometimes burst in—especially when drunk...

The most memorable intrusion was a Saturday night in October 1967, when I lay in the dark listening to The Doors' spooky evocation of '*The End*'...

It was just after Morrison intoned: '*Father?*' '*Yes, son.*' '*I want to kill you!*' that the door burst open. A silhouette swayed before the bed. Its fist shook at the record player.

"Don't you realize that you are brain-washed—*brain-washed*? Are you that goddam feeble-minded?"

Distinctly recalled is the spray of saliva that accompanied the raving voice. It was soon thereafter that the hunting knife was hung above the bed...



Like every house in this village, this one has its peculiar odours. Apart from the doggy smells of the porch, over the last ten days I have not caught any whiff of what I once regarded the old house's characteristic smell. That smell used to be most evident in summertime when first opening the door after the house had been a few days unoccupied. The odour was like wet—and slightly mouldy—bread. I used to recoil from it—even in the realization that it could be the smell of my own skin...

Over the last few days, I have been leery of drinking the tap water here. However irrational, my queasiness arises from my mother's seemingly obsessive reports of cancer. Several of her friends and neighbours have succumbed to malignancies of the lungs and stomach, the prostate and breasts; of the bowels...

It is not that the deaths just eighteen months ago of the old soldier—and of my elder sister—have numbed me to the tragedy of other untimely deaths... Yet even in allowance of my poor mother's ongoing grief, I find it hard to listen to her details—especially at mealtimes...

“Poor E.—I know she smoked too much—but it’s so sad how fast the cancer went through ‘er. Now it’s in her liver... Doncha just love those new potatoes?”

Yet I do wonder why the incidence all manner of tumours in this village are so uncommonly high. Given that there is no industrial pollution in the vicinity (in fact, little industry at all), this statistical outlier is undeniably odd...

The subject came up over the beers on the porch last week with old buddy C.C.:

“You heard about the high cancer rate around here?” he chuckled. “Lots of people think it has something to do with the leaching of embalming fluids from the graveyard into the water table.”

“Maybe that’s just the start,” I bantered back. “The next thing could be zombies rising from the graves.”

Even before that morbid wise-cracking—I had been using bottled water to make tea. Not in my mother’s presence, of course...



Curious to test any resistance to claustrophobia acquired over thirty years— this afternoon I went down to the cellar.

That setting of innumerable nightmares was relatively empty. My mother must have cleaned out decades of accumulated junk since the old soldier's passing. Yet unchanged was the smell of mouldy potatoes and the dim overhead light. It still eerily swayed like the light over the mummified corpse in the basement at the climax of '*Psycho*'...

In the semi-darkness, I crouched behind the furnace and peered into the crumbling earthen foundation. Shivering, I recalled the teenager who more than once hunched in the same place, taunting himself. He vowed that crawling back into that recess, curling up and falling asleep forever would not be as cruel as being trapped here: never leaving the house; never leaving the village...

This afternoon, I got up within seconds. I creaked back up the steps and squeaked closed the trapdoor—forever.

Three more nights...

July 13th (Saint John, N.B.)

Of an indefinable grayness:



Gantry cranes across the harbour against a gray sky provided the backdrop. The muzac was hard rock, blaring out into the near-empty market wharf. Over the gazebo where the speakers were set up, a drooping banner with a Pepsi logo, spelled out the letters of the local radio station which was live-broadcasting the event. The DJ behind a portable console had his head down.

The beach volleyball competition outside Market Square yesterday afternoon was obviously aimed at drawing foot traffic into a failing mall. Such strategies are employed (in varying degrees of desperation) in cities everywhere. Yet the scene at Market Square seemed quintessentially Saint John...

In a court-sized sandbox, two young men lobbed a volleyball back and forth. Between plays, the competitors hopped and hugged themselves in the Bay of Fundy chill. Their only spectators were two fat girls. From one of the (otherwise empty) picnic tables across from the fenced in court, the fat girls by turns preened themselves and leered at the bare-chested players...

The girls could have been the granddaughters of slatterns who ogled passing sailors from the stoops of south end tenements, a half century ago. One could imagine such a scene depicted in an early Miller Brittain painting...



“I’ll bet all this looks different,” said nephew M., doctoral student in chemistry, visiting his parents from Montreal.

“Sure does,” I said.

My primary question in our walk uptown yesterday was: even with the ongoing architectural facelift—how much has changed in the spirit of Saint John?



I remembered that like many others, the first word that used to come to mind in describing Saint John was *gray*... Maybe that association first came from the nineteenth century poem: ‘*The ships of gray St. John*’. Like many school children who had to memorize it, that poem did not endear me either to native son poet, Bliss Carman, nor to Saint John...

For first time visitors up to a generation ago, the grayness was immediately evident in the armpit whiffs of the pulp mill—especially in chilly summer fog. For those more widely travelled, the city’s smokestacks could have been reminiscent of the “dark satanic mills” of an industrial city in the north of England. It was not that Saint John was any uglier than scores of other industrial cities in North America—it was the sense that there was something indefinably grayer in the very *character* of the Loyalist City...



When I arrived in 1969 to finish high school, old tenements around the harbour were being torn down... Dock St., once known for pawn shops and trollop-trolling sailors, had already been demolished to make way for the new harbour bridge. The patches of empty land were as much of an eyesore as the ramshackle south end, still untouched by ‘urban renewal’...

While Saint Johners in 1970 obviously dressed differently than those depicted in Miller Brittain's depression era paintings (e.g. his stevedores in slouch caps) some of the faces passed on the streets could have been from the depression-era. The characteristic Saint John grimness was in the faces of grizzled pensioners at the entrance of the City Market. It was even in the faces of stringy-haired girls loitering in Kings Square...

I would come to appreciate that "marks of weakness/ marks of woe" tended to be superficial. Underlying the grimness was often a blending of the rough and the gentle; the resilient and the vulnerable...



Slowly, my nephew and I walked from Market Square up King Street. My daughter was with her aunt, half a block behind... While we went up the sidewalk, they were taking the inside walkway to the City Market. My thirteen-year-old wanted to take some video. My elder sister, as a long-term resident of greater Saint John, was glad to point out features of the city's new look.

In this first visit in a decade, the lower end of King Street was almost unrecognizable. Apparently, the uptown renewal accelerated in the mid-1970s after the construction of the new City Hall. The giant hanging Lego-like blocks (red, yellow and orange) over the entrance were probably intended as a bold strike against the gray... Further up King Street, where the half block-long MRAs' department store once stood, was another failing mall called Brunswick Square...

My nephew drew my attention to these features with little commentary. During much of our walk we maintained a mutually respectful silence. I assumed that he was reflecting on a different Saint John than the one I remembered from adolescence—his teen years having been a generation after mine...



Meanwhile, my thoughts were crowded with images forged in those uptown streets, nearly three decades ago.

Back then, like many adolescents, I was open to engaging with anyone who asked for a cigarette or a light... As a boy from a village, perhaps I had the 'dangerous' tendency to catch eyes, rather than instinctively looking away. It might even have been my scruffy appearance that put fellow misfits at ease. Among the ghosts that flittered up from the fog:

...There was the purple-nosed rubby sometimes seen outside the SMT bus depot. For a cigarette, he would recite a dirty limerick ('*There once was a hooker named Sue/ who filled her vagina with glue*')...

...There was the guy who looked like Jimi Hendrix with a missing tooth who once startled me on the corner of Charlotte Street. I had heard of his reputation as a ruthless gangster. Yet after he asked for a light, we began to chat. That south ender who seemed to share my tastes in music, had a disarmingly warm laugh...

... Then there were the immemorable chance encounters in King's Square. Typical was the one was with a guy who looked like a hippie with grayish hair. He claimed he was recently back from Yorkville in Toronto, where he had played bass with a then 'famous' band, The Paupers... Along with a high school friend, I accepted his invitation to listen to some records at his place. We were led to a cabbage reeking walk-up in the south end.

During the brief visit, the fellow's aged parents limped in and out of the musty sitting room, scowling at the noise from the record player... When later describing the encounter, another classmate scoffed: "I know that old guy—he's a bullshitter. He works as a dishwasher. He's never been out of Saint John!"

...Also from the south end, was a quiet fellow with whom I was thrown together on a few bored Friday nights. He had the gaunt face of childhood deprivation but was exceptionally generous. He usually had a pellet of hash in his wallet which he was glad to share... I cannot recall his name but can never forget the story of how he ended his life, a few years thereafter. While stoned, he apparently jumped off the Digby ferry in the middle of the Bay of Fundy...



Finally in the silence of the walk beside my nephew up King Street, I remembered the tragedy of FM, who had been a friend of my friend and classmate, LG... Because FM had died months before my arrival in Saint John, I never got to meet him. Yet I felt I knew him.

I first knew of him through his appearance on 'Reach for the Top', a TV quiz show which featured local high school teams competing in general knowledge questions. The competitors were usually nerdish, but FM stood out in having long hair. In the sessions when his team competed, he correctly answered almost every rapid-fire question in multiple categories. The camera was seldom off him.

About a year later, I recognized the name of the long-haired quiz-show wizard as the author of an article in a newspaper of the New Brunswick chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society (The 'new-left' newspaper was passed on by a village friend's older brother attending the university). In the lengthy report, FM described his trip to Washington DC in October 1967, where he attended the anti-Vietnam War protests. Just as writer Norman Mailer— who famously wrote about the event— FM described being tear gassed and beaten by cops...

FM might have gone on write his own '*Armies of the Night*'... Yet back home over the next year or so (as related by LG), he got strung out from sniffing solvents. One night he wrapped bare wires of a lamp cord around his wrists and plugged himself into a wall socket... Thirty years on, the current that stopped his heart still jolts hearts of the living...



Walking silently along, my nephew and I crossed Charlotte Street into King's Square. My nephew looked back towards the entrance of the City Market where we assumed MT and his mom would emerge.

"Let's wait for them on the other side," I said. "They'll see us."

We walked past the bandstand stopping a moment to watch two dogs jumping in the fountain.

A block below us were the hanging golden balls outside the head offices of the Irving corporation. It was strange as always to be reminded that an almost feudal control over the province's industry was exerted from such modest headquarters...

Suddenly, I felt more like talking.

"We're not far from where I first lived with your mom and dad," I pointed across the street, "before you were born."

"That was on King Street East, wasn't it?" my nephew smiled.

"Yes, in the fall of 1969."

We crossed Sydney Street and waited at the corner of the Loyalist graveyard. We could see MT and my sister just starting across King's Square.

"It looks a lot tidier," I said, remembering the broken tombstones and the alkies drinking out of brown paper bags. Now the Loyalist graveyard had patterned black metal fencing with arching gates.

There used to be a jail over there." I pointed across the street.

"That's the old county courthouse—a heritage building."

"Well, there must have been a lock up on the top floor."

I hesitated—remembering hearing about a terrible fire in a Saint John jail back in the 1970s. There were so many fatalities that it was reported on BBC World Service radio. I thought better of asking if he knew about that.

"I remember guys waving behind bars," I said instead, "and wives and girlfriends holding up babies and waving back from right where we are standing."

My nephew chuckled.

"We were very close, your mom and dad and me that year."

As the young man's face brightened, I went on. "In fact, when she was expecting you, I was the first person after your father whom your mom told."

"Really?"

Assuming genuine interest, I continued.

"I remember rocking your bassinette with Bob Dylan on the stereo."

“Did you?” His chuckle was a wee patronizing... Had I been coming across like a nostalgia-besotted middle-ager?

Fortunately, MT was crossing the street—just in time to save her cousin from more of my blabber. My sister, holding a paper bag, walked alongside, smiling.

“Dad, I got some video of live lobsters. Poor things: their claws are all taped up.”

Before circling back to my sister’s car, all four of us walked a block further down King Street East. It looked much shabbier than it had in the fall of 1969.

When the St. Josephs’ Hospital and the surrounding church spires came into view, MT asked me and her cousin to pose for a few seconds of video. Down the street, an old woman was watching a little girl on a trike from the steps of a tenement... It was one more scene that the Goya of Saint John could have painted...



**Photos of paintings of Miller Brittain are from galleries and from the family estate. 1960s photos of Saint John are from Ian MacEachern ('Portrait of a Lost City').*

July 14th (in the plane ascent from Fredericton airport):



“Did you have a good time?” I asked MT.

“It was really nice to see Nana,” she murmured, “and spend time at the camp.”

I squeezed her hand and looked out the porthole. The dark green forest was disappearing under the scuttering clouds... Though jaundiced my own regard for it—I will always be grateful that my daughter holds such affection for my native soil.

Final Note:

My daughter and I spent a week on the west coast before flying back to Dubai. After a few days rest, we flew on to Zimbabwe to join my wife and our other two children already visiting extended family there.

I did not travel back to New Brunswick for another thirteen years. In that 2011 trip, I spent only a few hours in my native village—attending my late mother’s memorial service...

I have no further expectation to go back...

-2022