© 2020, 2023 by Robert Eaton
All rights reserved

Thunder Bay, Ontario: The Friction of Culture

1. We live longer: Canadians born today will live an average of three years longer than Americans (81 years in Canada versus 78.7 south of the border). Not only that, the gap between life expectancy in the two countries is widening with each passing decade—it was less than a year in the late 1970s.

2. We're more satisfied with our lives: According to the Better Life Index, an international quality of life comparison by the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] each year, Canadians enjoy a higher level of life satisfaction than Americans, scoring 7.4 out of 10, versus 7.0 in the U.S.

3. Saying "Sorry" is good for you: Canadians are mocked for always apologizing, but it's not a character flaw. Saying sorry has been found to boost happiness and strengthen relationships. Researchers at the University of Waterloo even found apologizing to a cop when pulled over for speeding can get fines reduced an average of $51. True, scientists did recently claim that refusing to apologize for your actions leads to a sense of empowerment, but such short-sighted thinking would only appeal to self-centred Americans. (Sorry, that was mean.)

Top three of "99 reasons why it's better to be Canadian," *Maclean's* (June 28, 2013)

Thunder Bay, Ontario, is a tough, energetic, working-class city of docks, shipyards, railroad tracks, grain elevators, lumber mills, ethnic neighborhoods, parks, rivers, and a small university. With a population of 125,000 it is the largest Canadian city between Toronto and Winnipeg—a northwesterly arc of more than a thousand miles—and edges out Duluth, Minnesota, as the largest city on the thirteen-hundred-mile circumference of Lake Superior. Because it functions as the retail and service center for most of northwestern Ontario, it feels bigger than its modest population suggests. A bustling provincial metropolis, it is the Canadian equivalent of, say, Omaha, Nebraska. On a big lake.

The modern city of Thunder Bay is an amalgamation of two former neighboring settlements, Port Arthur and Fort William, which consolidated in 1970. According to local folklore, a majority of citizens wanted to name their new city "Lakehead," but civic leaders so wanted to name the city after the expansive natural harbor that first attracted travelers and settlers here that they split the opposition by including both "Lakehead" and "The Lakehead" on the ballot. Whether or not that story is true, today "Thunder Bay" it is—a resonant, deep-throated name that seems to issue a challenge, like a bellowing moose, to people who venture to the wild, sparsely populated lake-and-forest country of northwestern Ontario.

The two settlements that constitute Thunder Bay have different histories and, even today, somewhat different identities. Fort William, now officially known as Thunder Bay South, traces its roots to a French fort established in 1717 near the mouth of the Kaministiquia River (locally known as the Kam). Then, in 1804, the North West Company relocated its most important fur-trading post from Grand Portage to the mouth of the Kam. The new post was called Fort William, after William McGillivray, one of the Scottish-owned company's prominent members. Its heyday was brief. After the North West Company merged with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, Fort William quickly declined in importance and entered a decades-long torpor from which it awoke only with the advent of large-scale shipping on Lake Superior in 1855, when the first locks were constructed at Sault Sainte Marie. It continued its resurgence in the twentieth century, when it was, for several decades, the largest shipper of grain from Canada's prairie provinces.

Port Arthur, now known as Thunder Bay North, got a later start. In 1870 General Garnet Wolseley landed at the eastern end of the Dawson Trail en route to Manitoba to suppress the Riel Rebellion and named the small settlement there Prince Arthur's Landing. In 1884, after the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed through the area, the growing town was incorporated as Port Arthur. With the railroad came railroad workers, including many Italians and Slavs. Finns immigrated to the area to work as lumberjacks and to fish commercially in Lake Superior, and also, perhaps, because the forested landscape and cold climate reminded them of home. And for most of the twentieth century the Port Arthur

Shipbuilding Company was a major local employer, building dozens of large ships, including corvettes and minesweepers for the Royal Navy during World War II.

Today Thunder Bay is struggling to maintain or reinvent itself. Although the processing of forest products remains an important industry, in the 1980s Vancouver supplanted it as the premier grain-shipping port in Canada, and much of the shipbuilding industry long ago moved overseas. So in recent years Thunder Bay has looked to tourism to boost its sagging economy. And, to a surprising degree, it has succeeded. Outdoorsmen regularly stop in the city for a day or two before decamping for the Canadian bush, and the Ontario provincial government now operates, southwest of the city, an elaborate reconstruction of the original fur-trading post and living-history museum known as Old Fort William—a sort of Williamsburg of the North Woods. Although the two old downtowns are struggling, the newer city is coalescing around a retail shopping district and the campus of Lakehead University, located midway between the historic centers.

But Thunder Bay today is defined not so much by what it contains as by what contains it—the wilderness of the Canadian bush. Immediately east of the city, shielded from Lake Superior's storms and swells by the curving Sibley Peninsula—also known, more dramatically, as Thunder Cape—is the protected anchorage from which the modern city takes its name; immediately south of the city, looming more than a thousand feet above it and forming a natural barrier between Canada and the United States, are the Nor'Wester Mountains; and fifteen miles west, on the Kam, are Kakabeka Falls, touted as the "Niagara of the North." Beyond the city's reach to the north stretch the seemingly endless boreal forests and glaciated lakes of central Canada. The spirit of that invisible wilderness seems to permeate the city. Despite its modern amenities, Thunder Bay still feels like a frontier outpost, a jumping-off point, an edge of the modern, civilized world.

* * *

Driving from Duluth to Thunder Bay, one follows Minnesota Route 61 northeast for 150 miles along Lake Superior's rugged North Shore to the international boundary with Canada. (This part of Minnesota, knapped to a point by the lakeshore and the international boundary, has long been known as the Arrowhead because of its triangular shape.) Beyond the towns of Two Harbors, Silver Bay, and Grand Marais, one passes through the forested reservation of the Grand Portage Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe and the village of Grand Portage, with its dock for the Isle Royale ferries, and over the granitic shoulder of Mount Josephine to the international boundary, formed here by the chasmed torrent of the Pigeon River.

Although the United States and Canada are geographic neighbors and political allies and share similar histories and a common language, the international crossing gives

one the first indication that things are going to be slightly different north of the border. At the port of entry uniformed officers of the Canada Border Services Agency ask travelers a series of standard questions—What is your citizenship? What is the purpose of your visit? How long do you intend to stay in Canada? What is your destination? Do you have any firearms in your vehicle? Alcohol? Tobacco products?—and if, for whatever reason, one gives less than direct, satisfactory answers, then one's vehicle will probably be searched by an officer wearing latex gloves who is trained to detect controlled substances and other contraband. Although the officer may be unfailingly polite, as most Canadians are, he will also exhibit a steely demeanor that sends a clear message to the casual visitor from the United States: You are entering our country now. We expect you to obey our laws and mind your manners.

Driving into Ontario, one unexpectedly loses an hour on the clock; the speed limit and other road signs are bilingual (English and French) and employ the metric system; and the highway is now called Queen's Route 61. (Yes, Canada is a member of the British Commonwealth, and Canadians are still the Queen's *subjects*.) Nevertheless, one feels comfortable cruising the two-laned highway toward Thunder Bay. The landscape is pastoral, and this is Canada, after all, a prosperous, modern Western democracy, not some squalid Third World dictatorship.

Traffic increases suddenly on the outskirts of Thunder Bay as Queen's Route 61 merges with Queen's Routes 11 and 17 to form the Thunder Bay Expressway, and one begins to see the inevitable signs of American cultural incursion: a Best Western motel, fast-food franchises, a Walmart. Ah, one thinks, Canada is not much different from the United States. And, I suppose, compared to many parts of the world, that is true. But if one spends enough time in the country, then one begins to sense, beneath the surface, a certain resistance to things American. In many respects Canada may share, or have adopted, American capitalist impulses, and Canada's fate as a nation may now be inextricably linked to that of the United States, but Canadians as a people seem to define themselves in opposition to the United States. Like siblings, the two peoples, born of the same parents, have grown differently while retaining a strong family resemblance. The United States is the big, oafish, but still mostly likable older brother—the high school jock—while Canada is intelligent, diffident, and sensitive—the kid brother who reads a lot and can't decide whether or not his older brother is a jerk. But somewhere deep down they know they have the same parents and must live in the same house.

* * *

Because Canada, Great Britain, and the United States have now been staunch allies for so long, it is difficult to imagine that things were ever any different. But in the aftermath

of the American Revolution, the location of the boundary between Canada, still a British possession, and the newly formed United States was the source of nearly sixty years of heated disagreement and occasionally violent dispute. During that period the fur trade was flourishing, and success in the trade depended on access to the interior of the continent, where, particularly in the Rocky Mountains and much of Canada, the rivers and lakes teemed with fur-bearing mammals. This was the era of the voyageurs, those colorful and tough (and, some would add, generally uneducated and exploited) men, usually of French ancestry, who worked for large British companies—principally the North West Company—to reap the continent's rich harvest of fur.

At that time the North West Company primarily utilized the westward route that began on the northwestern shore of Lake Superior at Grand Portage, where the company constructed a large trading-post complex enclosed by wooden palisades. Grand Portage took its name from the initial eight-and-a-half-mile-long portage that climbed more than six hundred vertical feet from the lakeshore to intersect the Pigeon River above its impassable lower rapids and falls. From there the voyageurs paddled and portaged along what is now the international boundary between Minnesota and Ontario to the Lake of the Woods, and then down the Winnipeg River to Lake Winnipeg. At that point some struck out for the lakes, rivers, and distant mountains to the north and west, while others followed the Red River of the North upstream (generally south) to the rich plains country of what is today southern Manitoba, western Minnesota, and North and South Dakota.

At its peak in the 1790s the North West Company's stockade at Grand Portage contained sixteen buildings. Every year in late June the voyageurs rendezvoused here with the company's clerks and *bourgeois*, who had traveled in *maître* canoes (some of them thirty-five feet long and capable of carrying eight thousand pounds of cargo) from the company's headquarters in Montreal via a long and dangerous water route. The rendezvous, lasting most of July, was a raucous affair, as the voyageurs exchanged a year's worth of furs for muskets, traps, and other tools of the trade; manufactured goods like knives and copper kettles for trade with the Indians; brightly colored cloth (the voyageurs had their own distinctive fashion sense); and, of course, liquor.

But by the 1790s a political dispute was already threatening Grand Portage. In 1783 representatives of the United States and of Great Britain (the latter appointed by "his Britannic Majesty," King George III) had signed the "Definitive Treaty of Peace," also known as the Treaty of Paris, concluding the American Revolution. Article 2 of the treaty established the boundary between the United States and the remaining British possessions in North America. That boundary followed a line through the middle of Lakes Ontario, Erie, and Huron. Through Lake Superior, however, it followed a vaguely described line from Sault Sainte Marie "Northward of the Isles Royal & Phelipeaux, to the Long Lake." The 1755 map of North America used by the commissioners to negotiate the treaty depicted

“Isle Philippeaux” as a large island located southeast of Isle Royal/Royale, and “Long Lake” as the mouth of a broad river flowing into Lake Superior in the vicinity of the Pigeon River. Unfortunately, Isle Phelipeaux/Philippeaux and Long Lake were phantoms—they did not (and do not) exist. Thus there was a substantial question as to whether Grand Portage was located within territory controlled by the United States or Great Britain. Acting in a manner that many Canadians still regard as quintessentially American, the United States began to assert jurisdiction over the site by requiring fur traders there to obtain American licenses and pay American customs duties. (In doing so, the United States ignored a provision in the 1794 Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation between the two nations stating that “[n]o duty of entry shall ever be levied by either party on peltries brought by land, or inland navigation into the said territories respectively.” The United States’ primary motivation in flouting that treaty provision was undoubtedly a desire to give Americans a leg up in their competition with the British companies.)

As a result of fierce competition with the Hudson’s Bay Company, the North West Company’s profit margins were already thin, and the payment of additional customs duties would have been disastrous. In 1803 the company gave up the fight, abandoning Grand Portage and relocating its main trading post forty miles northeast to the site of Fort William. In Lake Superior’s harsh, damp climate the company’s wooden stockade quickly decayed, and today nothing remains of the original structures. Instead, Grand Portage National Monument, located on the trading post’s original site on land donated to the United States by the Grand Portage Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, contains a few reconstructed buildings where National Park Service interpreters in period costume provide a quiet glimpse into a noisy past.

The boundary dispute was not resolved until the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842, which finally established the international boundary at the Pigeon River, while reserving to the citizens and subjects of both countries the right to freely use “all the water communications and all the usual portages along the line, from Lake Superior to the Lake of the Woods, and also Grand Portage, from the shore of Lake Superior to the Pigeon River, as now actually used.” The treaty came too late to save the North West Company, which had ceased to exist in 1821 when it merged with the Hudson’s Bay Company, thus ending a rivalry that had helped open the continent.

* * *

Every city needs (though not every city has) a distinctive place for visitors to stay, a place that in some way embodies the history and personality of the locale. In Thunder Bay that place is the venerable and now somewhat threadbare Prince Arthur Hotel, located in downtown Port Arthur. Built in 1910-11 by the Canadian Pacific Railway, the six-story

brick structure overlooks Water Street, the railroad tracks, the city marina, the breakwater, Thunder Bay itself, and, on the far side of the bay, the distant, palisaded Sibley Peninsula.

Notwithstanding the carefully selected quotations and photographs in its four-color brochure, the Prince Arthur was never a luxurious hostelry. It was built to provide comfortable and affordable accommodations for businessmen arriving in Port Arthur by train and for transcontinental travelers laying-over for a night or two in town. Except for a few minor architectural details, the building itself is stolid and uninspiring; the lighting in the public areas and hallways is dim and institutional; and the furnishings in the recently remodeled rooms are similar to what one finds in midmarket hotel chains. My first stay at the Prince Arthur coincided with the 1998 Canadian Stand-Up Armwrestling Championship, held that year in Thunder Bay, and I often shared the elevator with one or more of the contestants—hulking (but polite) men with bulging, tattooed biceps, wearing tank tops and nylon jackets with beer logos on the back, smelling faintly of cigarette smoke, and often accompanied by their tough-cookie (but polite) girlfriends.

But—how can I explain it?—the Prince Arthur is eminently comfortable in a musty, down-at-the-heels sort of way. The construction, befitting an old railroad hotel, is bedrock-solid, and water gushes out of the bathroom faucet and showerhead as if it's powering a turbine in a hydroelectric plant (truly a novelty and luxury to someone from the American Southwest). Although the hotel is close to the railroad tracks, the solid walls muffle the sound so that the nearly continuous rumble and clatter of the trains provides a soft, pleasant soundtrack to the sights of the city.

But perhaps what distinguishes the Prince Arthur more than anything else are the views from the waterside rooms. Looking out of the tall windows, one can survey the expanse of Thunder Bay from the Sibley Peninsula in the east to Mount McKay in the southwest. The middle view is to the southeast, and on clear, calm mornings the sunlight reflects brilliantly off the ultramarine water, sending quicksilver streams across its rippled surface. Freighters ride gently at anchor, and sailboats ply their way slowly across the limpid liquid medium. Even in fair weather wispy cirrus clouds often trail slowly across the pale-blue northern sky. Twenty miles across the bay, at the end of the Sibley Peninsula, the geologic formation known as the Sleeping Giant reclines peacefully on the horizon. On such days the view from the Prince Arthur is unexpectedly lovely, even sublime.

The Prince Arthur also provides a convenient base for exploring the transitional area that is downtown Port Arthur. When I visited in 1998, the local Eaton's Department Store had recently closed, and the only viable businesses seemed to be fitness gyms, tanning salons, and travel agencies, all apparently catering to employees of the Ontario provincial government and Ontario Hydro who work in nearby office buildings. At night transients—many of them Canadian Indians from the nearby Fort William Indian Reserve—roamed the

sidewalks in front of the empty storefronts, lending the otherwise deserted business district an exotic, rough-edged, even slightly menacing air.

When I returned two years later, a "charity casino" operated by the provincial government had opened a block west of the Prince Arthur, and the downtown seemed to be in the early stages of economic recovery. A couple of new restaurants were catering to casino patrons, and the sidewalks, though still not crowded, seemed friendlier. My room was on the fifth floor of the hotel, and after I opened my windows, I occasionally heard sounds of celebration and revelry issuing from the direction of the casino. In some ways I missed the dicey character of the old scene, but I found myself admiring the city's resilient character and I reminded myself that I did not come to Canada to experience the exotic, even if I am sometimes surprised by what I find.

* * *

Today Thunder Bay is reportedly home to the largest population of Finns in any city in the world outside of Finland. By some estimates as many as fifteen thousand Finns live in the city, most of them residing in an Old-World neighborhood near the intersection of Bay and Algoma Streets in Port Arthur. A distinctive commercial district radiates from the Bay-Algoma intersection. The stores here include the Kivela Bakery, Lauri's Hardware and Pawn Shop, Saasto's Men's Wear, Sirkka's Dressmaking, the Finnish Book Store, and, most interestingly, a store called Finnport, where one may buy sauna supplies, exquisite Finnish crystal, and commemorative ceramic plates illustrated with scenes from the *Kalevala*, an ancient, mythic tale generally regarded as the Finnish national epic. The heart of the Finnish business district, at 314 Bay Street, is a three-story brick-and-clapboard structure flanked by square towers and centered on an octagonal turret crowned by a cupola. Completed in 1910, this curious building is home to the Finlandia Club, the Finnish Building Company, the Finnish Labour Temple, and, a half-flight of stairs down from street level, the Hoito Restaurant, one of Thunder Bay's oldest eateries and a genuine cultural institution.

Hoito means "care" in Finnish. The Hoito Restaurant was established in 1918 as a cooperative to provide hearty, low-cost meals to Finnish workers—mostly lumberjacks—who came to Port Arthur from nearby bush camps to relax and socialize. Until the 1970s most regulars purchased meal tickets or paid a flat rate for all they could eat at communal tables. In the 1930s those meals cost sixty cents; in the 1960s, a dollar. In addition to standard diner fare (hamburgers, BLTs, etc.), the menu includes Finnish pancakes, Finnish wieners, fried Finnish sausages, salt fish, *viili* (clabbered milk), and *karjalan piirakka* ("Karelian pie," or rye crust filled with rice pudding or mashed potatoes). The portions are still

ample, and today the full dinners, including beverage, bread, soup or salad, and dessert, cost eight to ten Canadian dollars.

Like many visitors to the city, during my first visit to Thunder Bay I eventually found my way to the Hoito. Eating alone in an unfamiliar restaurant can be an uncomfortable, even unnerving experience, but not at the Hoito. I arrived at the restaurant a bit after 7:00 p.m.—late by Hoito standards—and found a small table near the kitchen door. The communal tables were still crowded, but people had for the most part finished their meals and were simply chatting sociably with their neighbors, producing a pleasant hubbub in the room. Most of the other customers seemed to know each other and to be regulars, but they didn't regard me, a stranger, with suspicion. A few looked up as I walked in, acknowledged me with nods of their heads, and returned to their conversations. My waitress, a trim, attractive woman of indeterminate age—perhaps forty-five, perhaps ten years older than that—had obviously worked at the Hoito for a long time: her dress was feminine but sensible (knee-length skirt, dark stockings, comfortable shoes), her movements efficient but unhurried, her manner reserved but friendly. Her graying blonde hair was pulled into a short ponytail, revealing a lovely Nordic face—delicate features, creamy skin, Copenhagen-blue eyes—and, as if to let her beauty speak for itself, she wore no makeup or jewelry. Her serene demeanor seemed to reflect an inner calm and self-possession. As she patiently answered my questions about the Finnish dishes on the menu, her eyes glimmered with curiosity or mirth, but she asked no questions in return. I overheard her conversing in Finnish with customers at a nearby table, but I never even learned her name. She was probably a native of Canada, but in my mind she embodied the austere beauty and natural grace of her ancestral homeland.

On another visit I ate breakfast one Sunday morning at the Hoito's W-shaped counter. The counter is the domain mostly of older, single Finnish men with bronze complexions and brush-cut hair—more Hoito regulars. On this morning, however, I sat next to an amiable chap named Ken, who works as a machine oiler at a paper and pulp mill in the town of Red Rock, about a hundred kilometers northeast of Thunder Bay. Ken has thinning hair, an aquiline nose, and careworn, friendly eyes. He drives to Thunder Bay every weekend to spend a day with his twelve-year-old daughter, who lives here with his former wife. Ken has worked at the mill on and off for many years but has drifted from job to job—at the mill and elsewhere—and seems vaguely dissatisfied with his lot in life. Between jobs he has returned to school several times to try to earn a degree—he struck me as someone who would be an enthusiastic but unfocused student—but has reluctantly given up that idea. Now he seems preoccupied with the usual concerns of middle-aged men: his daughter's education, his health, his retirement savings. When he learned I was from the United States, he became quite animated, his manner expressing equal parts curiosity, respect, and envy. The United States, for Ken, is an almost mythical land of better jobs, higher wages, and

warmer weather—the tantalizing land of milk and honey that, with the current exchange rate, he can't afford even to visit for more than a day or two. I suddenly felt sheepish about my own good fortune—the accident of my birth. But I was relieved to see that Ken apparently was unaware of my discomfiture. As we ate our breakfasts, he continued chattering about his life in a self-effacing, almost neurotic manner—quite charmingly really—and I soon found myself sharing his everyday concerns, nodding at his modest ambitions, and feeling an unexpected kinship with him.

* * *

One of Thunder Bay's most attractive features, for me at least, is its proximity to wild places. I am not a paddler and so am not referring to Quetico Provincial Park and the rest of the Boundary Waters west of the city. And I am not a fisherman or hunter and so am not referring to the myriad lakes and vast boreal forests of northwestern Ontario (located in large part on publicly owned "Crown Lands"), where men and women engage in an atavistic battle of wits with wild animals. But I am an avid camper, hiker, and trail runner, and I enjoy watching wildlife. So when I visit Thunder Bay, I always set aside a couple of days to spend on the tip of the Sibley Peninsula, at Sleeping Giant Provincial Park.

Ontario maintains an impressive system of provincial parks that often combine the best of two worlds: frontcountry with well-tended campgrounds and recreational facilities; and backcountry that is extensive, wild, and relatively untended. The campground at Sleeping Giant is located on the forested, ferny shore of Marie Louise Lake, a large inland lake with a sandy swimming beach and a near view of the palisades of the Sleeping Giant itself. In the evening, if one is lucky, one hears, across the water, the loon's otherworldly call. But the campground itself is a relatively civilized place, with a large, modern visitor center and comfort stations with flush toilets, hot showers, and laundry facilities. Despite the amenities, its summer season is short. When I've camped there in late September, the visitor center and comfort stations have already closed for the year; several of the camping loops have been barricaded; and the notices of interpretive programs posted on the bulletin boards are a couple of weeks out of date. The park rangers—or wardens, as they are called in Canada—are invisible, perhaps taking a break after the busy summer season, and the entire campground has a deserted, melancholy feel.

Even in late September, however, the popular campsites on the shore of Marie Louise Lake tend to fill by late afternoon. Because I adhere to the rule that when staying in a developed campground, one should stay as far away from other people as possible—campgrounds are generally close quarters, and I have no interest in observing my neighbors' peculiar personal habits (or in having them observe mine)—I tend to camp on higher ground, in the woods above the lake. There, sitting quietly at my picnic table in a thicket

of balsam fir, paper birch, mountain maple, and round-leaved dogwood, I've glimpsed a red fox (with a strange, mottled coat), a black-bear cub, and an unidentified fur-bearing mammal that might have been a marten or fisher.

Sleeping Giant also has an extensive trail system that, even more than the rest of the park, is deserted in late September and that draws me into the backcountry. I particularly like to run slowly out the Kabeyun Trail along Tee Harbor and Lehtinen's Bay before scrambling over car-sized boulders and climbing up a chimney in the hard, diabase cliffs to the bent knees of the supine Sleeping Giant. The flat summit, with a forest of wind-stunted trees (mostly balsam firs, white spruces, and aspens), tufts of windblown grass, and outcrops of lichen-encrusted rock, has an open, airy feel, similar to what one experiences at timberline in high mountains. From that vantage point, about eight hundred feet above Lake Superior, one can look south to Isle Royale or, pivoting to the west, across the bay to the city of Thunder Bay on the far shore. The passage from the lake into the bay between the feet of the Sleeping Giant and Pie Island resembles a broad fjord. On a breezy day, with the watery scent of the big lake in the air, it is an invigorating prospect.

Today the provincial park occupies most but not all the Sibley Peninsula. Near a point of land on the peninsula's southeastern side is the small settlement of Silver Islet Landing, once a raucous mining town and now a picturesque seasonal community of refurbished miners' cabins and modern vacation cottages. During the summer the original Silver Islet Store, located adjacent to the community dock, still sells groceries and other supplies, but otherwise the town is blessedly free of commercial development. Silver Islet Landing takes its name from a small island composed of Animikie slates located about a mile offshore. Historian Grace Lee Nute evocatively described the island as resembling "a human skull, about ninety feet each way." At its highest point it rises only eight feet above the lake's normal level.

For about fifteen years, beginning in 1868, Silver Islet was the location of the world's richest silver mine, as miners followed a twenty-foot-wide vein of pure silver from the island's surface to more than twelve hundred feet beneath the lakebed. Even by the standards of the day, the work was extraordinarily hazardous. Coal-fired pumps worked constantly to dewater the leaky shafts, and because swells occasionally washed over the tiny island, the mining company constructed a large cribbed-timber breakwater, ten times the size of the island, around its most exposed sides. Inside this sheltered area the company erected an elaborate complex that included machine, blacksmith, and carpenter shops; storehouses and boardinghouses; private quarters and clubrooms; offices; a lighthouse; and ore-shipping docks. By the time the mine closed in 1884, reduced to unprofitability by high overhead and diminishing yield, it had produced $3.25 million worth of silver—more than $100 million in 2023 dollars.

I haven't visited Silver Islet, but I've sat on the community dock at the landing on a brisk fall day, looking at the choppy water in the nearby channel, water stirred to an aquamarine hue by a cool breeze off the lake; and I've pondered the mysterious geologic processes that injected a molten stream of silver into fissures in an inert mass of gray slates; contemplated the time that passed as the valuable lode solidified in its secret, interstitial space; imagined the prospectors' euphoria when they discovered the treasure's eroded hiding place, and the miners' fatigue and fear as they performed their back-breaking work in dark, frigid passages beneath the lakebed; considered the possibilities of accident, explosion, hypothermia, or drowning—the quickness of death in these northern climes; and reflected on the brutal reality of men risking their lives to extract from the earth's crust the precious metal from which other men—those dining on white linen tablecloths in faraway cities—derived their fortunes.

* * *

Just east of Thunder Bay along Queen's Routes 11 and 17 is a rest area, situated on a small hill above the highway, offering distant views of the city and bay. The rest area itself is dominated by a larger-than-life bronze statue of the young Canadian man after whom it is named, Terry Fox. In ways difficult for an outsider to understand, Terry Fox looms large in the Canadian psyche, and even today, more than forty years after his death, his story resonates deeply with the Canadian people.

Born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and raised in a suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia, Terry was a healthy, active boy who grew into a shy, hard-working adolescent. He applied himself diligently to his schoolwork and dedicated himself to his favorite sport, basketball. If anything distinguished him, it was his extraordinary determination. Although he was less than six feet tall and had little natural ability, by virtue of long, hard practice he starred on his high school's basketball team and later, as a college freshman, walked on and made the team at Simon Fraser University.

In 1977, after his first year at university, he was diagnosed with bone cancer, and his right leg was amputated six inches above the knee.

On the night before his leg was amputated, his high school basketball coach brought him a magazine with an article about an amputee who had run the New York City Marathon. That night Terry decided, in his own words, "to meet this new challenge head on and not only overcome my disability, but conquer it in such a way that I could never look back and say it disabled me." Terry's particular vision was to run across Canada, raising $1 million for cancer research along the way. He was haunted by the people he had met in the cancer clinic, the ones who survived and the ones who didn't. "My quest would not be a selfish one," he wrote to prospective sponsors. "I could not leave knowing these faces and

feelings would still exist, even though I would be set free from mine. Somewhere the hurting must stop . . . and I was determined to take myself to the limit for this cause."

After undergoing sixteen months of chemotherapy, Terry began training for what he called the "Marathon of Hope." Although the Canadian Cancer Society was initially skeptical of his proposal, his persistence eventually earned its sponsorship. On April 12, 1980, he dipped his artificial leg into the Atlantic Ocean at Saint John's, Newfoundland, and began running west. His prosthesis thudded on the pavement, his gait was awkward and unbalanced, and his face often betrayed the strain of his effort, but on he ran, averaging forty-two kilometers a day—a marathon a day—for 143 consecutive days. His route took him through Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Québec, and Ontario. News of his epic run spread, people began to line his route, and donations poured in to the Canadian Cancer Society. On September 1, 1980, however, just outside of Thunder Bay, he grew weak and was forced to stop. He had neglected his scheduled check-ups—perhaps he had sensed the inevitability of his disease—and doctors discovered that the cancer had metastasized to his lungs. Ten months later, on June 28, 1981, one month short of his twenty-third birthday, Terry Fox died. Before his death, however, people had contributed more than $24 million to his Marathon of Hope—about one dollar for each Canadian alive at the time. In the decades since, hundreds of millions of dollars have been donated for cancer research in Terry's name.

Terry Fox's story is inspirational in the best sense of the word. Here was a likeable young man struck down by a fatal disease. Here was a young man who literally expended his life's energy fighting the disease that afflicted him. His undisguised suffering seemed to be symbolic of the suffering of the human race, and his attitude and determination in the face of that suffering were quietly heroic. But that, by itself, does not adequately account for his place in Canadians' hearts and minds. With his vision of running across Canada in the cause of combating human suffering, Terry Fox ignored the political and linguistic barriers that divide modern Canada—rendered those barriers inconsequential—and unwittingly tapped into a nascent Canadian nationalism. Terry's personality seemed to be a distinctively Canadian type—quiet, hard-working, and self-effacing—and the fact that he was born in a prairie province, was raised in British Columbia, and began his run in Newfoundland enhanced his Pan-Canadian persona. Canadians everywhere embraced him as one of their own, held him up as an exemplar of what was best in their culture and nation. Terry Fox became the mythic Canadian Everyman. That image has persisted. In a 1999 poll sponsored by the *National Post*, responders selected Terry Fox as Canada's "greatest hero."

When I ask my young, hip, well-dressed waitress at Bistro One in Thunder Bay what two or three things a visitor to town should be sure to do, she pauses and bites her lower lip pensively for a minute. Then she answers quietly, in a voice edged with emotion,

“You should visit the Terry Fox overlook. Do you know who he was? What he did may not seem like much to an American, but to us Canadians, it’s pretty important.”

* * *

Each time I visit Thunder Bay and stay in the Prince Arthur Hotel, I try, at least one morning, to get up early and drive northeast along Cumberland Street, past the derelict mom-and-pop motels built during the post-World War II travel boom, to Boulevard Lake Park, where I like to run slowly on the paved trail that encircles the lake. On weekdays the park is deserted but for a few neighborhood walkers, and the morning stillness is broken only by the sounds of ducks quacking sociably on the water and Canada geese milling warily along the shore.

Near the southern end of Boulevard Lake Park are three modern apartment buildings, six or seven stories high, whose architecture recalls many other institutional buildings in Thunder Bay and, indeed, throughout Canada. Their common design is uninspired and monotonous—the exterior pattern of small windows and cramped porches indicates that each apartment has the same floor plan—and their exterior facades consist of painted cinder blocks. The cars in the parking lots tend to be older-model sedans, their fenders and wheel wells perforated by rust. Although I’ve never confirmed this fact, the buildings appear to be smaller versions of the monolithic public-housing projects one finds in larger cities in the United States. The buildings’ relatively small scale, however, renders them less forbidding than their American counterparts and reminds me that today Canada has a population of about thirty-five million people, or about one tenth as many as the United States. (The United States had a population of about thirty-five million at the end of the Civil War.) Although thirty-five million is a substantial number and although I am suspicious of simple explanations of complex phenomena, Canada does not yet seem to have crossed that demographic line beyond which a modern governmental bureaucracy must treat its citizens as fungible goods to function effectively. In Canada an individual human life still seems to matter.

The apartment buildings near Boulevard Lake Park also reflect certain socialist tendencies that seem to be more prominent in Canadian than American culture. From national health care to enhanced educational opportunities to subsidized housing, the Canadian government does more to assist its citizens to attain and maintain a high quality of life than the American government does for its citizens. Canadians are justifiably proud of the fact that the United Nations has consistently rated Canada as having the highest quality of life in the world. All of which causes me to think about the significant cultural differences between two nations that, geographically, historically, and linguistically, have as much in common as any two nations in the world.

The United States and Canada have closely intertwined histories. Both were born of the centuries-long rivalry between England and France for dominance in world affairs, a rivalry that manifested itself in the New World as a struggle for control of the area between Hudson Bay and the Ohio River. Although the first European settlement along the Saint Lawrence River was French—Samuel de Champlain established a trading post at Québec in 1608, one year after Captain John Smith and a group of English colonists had founded the settlement at Jamestown, Virginia—and although French influence remains strong in eastern Canada, France formally ceded to England most of its possessions in the New World east of the Mississippi River in 1763, after the French and Indian War. Thus, at the time of the American Revolution, all of eastern North America, except Florida (which was claimed by Spain), was in British possession. During the revolution, however, British colonists above the Great Lakes remained loyal to the British Crown, and nearly forty thousand Tories fled northward from the rebellious colonies. After the revolution there was residual antipathy between the United States and the remaining British possessions to the north. During the War of 1812 American forces tried several times unsuccessfully to invade Canada, finally sacking York (Toronto) out of frustration.

The Dominion of Canada was created on July 1, 1867, when the British Parliament recognized the federation of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Lower Canada (Québec), and Upper Canada (Ontario) as a self-governing entity. Like the United States, the new nation grew quickly, purchasing the Hudson's Bay Company's immense western territories in 1869 and securing British Columbia in 1871 with a promise to construct a transcontinental railroad. Today Canada is a federation of ten provinces and three territories (including the Inuit-governed Arctic territory of Nunavut, carved out of the Northwest Territories in 1999). Geographically it is the second-largest nation in the world and shares an almost four-thousand-mile-long border with the United States.

I don't know enough even to speculate about the continuing antagonism between Canadians of British and French ancestry. Rather, the question that interests me, especially after several recent visits to Canada, is why British colonists in Canada remained loyal to Great Britain during the American Revolution, and why Canada has remained a part of the Commonwealth, while the British colonists in America rebelled against the mother country and founded a new, independent nation. And why Canadian culture has retained a more European flavor than American culture. In so many ways—from its treatment of its native peoples to its low violent-crime rate to its government's focus on the health and well-being of its citizens—Canada is—dare I say it?—more civilized than the United States. (I recall a conversation with a Canadian family at Pukaskwa National Park. The oldest boy, aged twelve, interrogated me relentlessly about Americans' fascination with handguns. Do you own a gun? he asked. Do you know anyone who does? Why do they have guns? What are they afraid of? I felt like a visitor from a distant, violence-ridden planet.)

One obvious reason is demographics. Settled predominantly by conservative, white, middle-class British subjects (including many Scots), English-speaking Canada today is predominantly a conservative, white, middle-class country. The eastern seaboard of the United States, on the other hand, was settled by a diverse—some might say motley—assortment of British colonists—well-to-do planters and merchants, political discontents, religious refugees, indentured servants, and debtors. And that diversity only increased as the United States acquired Spain's and later Mexico's territories in North America north of present-day Mexico. Moreover, perhaps partly in reaction to its southern neighbor's relatively open immigration policy and the chaos that policy occasionally engenders, Canada has historically regulated immigration more closely than the United States. Until recent years the huddled masses were not particularly welcome north of the border. Finally, Canada's climate doesn't support the cultivation of cotton, rice, or tobacco, the three labor-intensive crops that flourished in the American South and that fueled the slave trade in this country. As a result of all those factors, Canada today is more racially and ethnically homogeneous than the United States. Racial and ethnic homogeneity tend to encourage cultural conformity, which, although it doesn't eliminate criminal behavior, often acts to suppress it. On the other hand, America sometimes seems to me less a melting pot than a vat of volatile chemicals. At times the chemicals combine magically to produce beautiful, surreal colors; at other times they react in violent explosion.

Another reason, also obvious but often overlooked, is climate. Because most of Canada is located north of 48° latitude and because its interior provinces are located far from the ocean's moderating influence, its climate is marked by dramatic fluctuations in temperature, both diurnally and seasonally. As everyone knows, Canadian winters are long and frigid, occasionally even life-threatening. (White River, Ontario, fifty miles northeast of Lake Superior, proudly—or perversely—advertises itself as the "coldest spot in Canada." In 1935 the temperature here reportedly plummeted to -72°F.) During the country's formative years, when people lived closer to the bone, Canada's extreme climate undoubtedly imposed on them subtle pressure to cooperate to survive. And just as surely its influence continues today, even with modern technology to help insulate people from the climate's rigors. If people occasionally must impose on their neighbors to jump-start their cars in the winter, then they are probably inclined to treat their neighbors politely and to reciprocate as necessary. Common hardship fosters cooperation, which in turn encourages civility and a sense that we are all in this thing together. Is it really so difficult to believe that climate affects our social behavior?

Certain cultural developments have also served, unintentionally, to differentiate the two nations. In the United States mass media—particularly television and popular movies—have perpetuated and exaggerated America's image of itself as a nation of tough-talking, rugged individualists. The media (and, I must add, various politicians) have

mythologized Americans' desire for political independence and personal freedom—an integral part of our origin story and national identity—and co-opted it for their own purposes. Meanwhile, Canada has evolved in a more orderly and less flamboyant fashion, respecting an Old-World tradition that values social cohesion and the political commonweal. In America, the individual was and is supreme; in Canada, the community.

In the end, though, no one—not the most knowledgeable historian or sociologist, and certainly not I—can adequately account for the cultural differences between Canada and the United States. Just as siblings may grow apart while retaining a family resemblance, so sometimes do nations. Genetics and environment both play significant but ultimately indefinable roles in the differentiation of individuals. It must be enough for me, then, to mark the differences here, to try to be sensitive to them, and to bear them in mind when I venture across our northern border.

* * *

During my last visit to Thunder Bay I went in search of a gift to take home to my wife and ended up at a store called Take a Hike in downtown Fort William. Take a Hike is owned by a woman named Diane Petryna and sells sportswear and outdoor accessories primarily for women. The store's interior is decorated to evoke a peaceful natural scene: the ceiling is painted sky blue, and colorful murals on the walls depict lush mountain landscapes. Toward the back of the store, in an area framed and furnished to resemble the interior of a log cabin, Diane also sells outdoor-related gifts: moose and bear figurines, CDs of music inspired by the natural sounds of the North Woods, scented candles and soap. On the day I stopped in, the store was being tended by Diane and one of her employees, a shy young man named Sean. Sean is a student at Lakehead University and had recently finished a stint as a seasonal warden at Sleeping Giant Provincial Park. As I was looking at some women's jackets, he and I chatted agreeably about the park and his work there. (At one point, when I looked toward the gift-shop area of the store, Sean smiled sheepishly, shook his head, and, glancing at Diane, whispered, "I try to avoid going back there.")

Sean needed to unpack some new inventory, so I soon found myself in Diane's capable hands. Diane is fortyish, with a round, pretty face; a creamy complexion; short hair the color of maple syrup; and warm brown eyes. She seems genuinely—and I use this word reluctantly, because I do not intend the blandness and condescension it often connotes—nice. And in that way she seemed to me representative of many people I had met in Canada. Her politeness was not a mere business affectation but seemed to flow from a natural wellspring of feeling and belief: gratitude to her customers; respect for other human beings; faith that people are, at bottom, decent; and a conviction that one should treat other people as one wants and expects to be treated. It is a mode of human interaction that demands time

and energy and that is necessarily diminished or lost in a setting or society that prioritizes business efficiency, transactional volume, and profit margin.

Diane showed me several stylish jackets that, she mentioned with obvious pride, were made in Canada. But I had trouble making up my mind, so she finally offered to model them for me, because, as she said, sometimes it helps to see how they look on a real person. Then she put on the jackets one after another and walked slowly into the middle of the store, smiling self-consciously as she turned and with deliberate movements placed one hand on her hip, so that I, a stranger and an American, could appreciate the patterns of the fabrics—North Woods designs of moose and fir trees and snowflakes—the quality of the materials, and the cut of each garment.

# # #