

4 Beyond Fredericton is the end of the earth

I was expecting, hoping rather to find a small and cultural community here. A living example of genteel living on the picturesque banks of the St. John's River. A sophisticated centre of government and education: capital of the province, seat of York County, home of the University of New Brunswick and a large teacher's college. With only 25,000 people the city manages to support the Playhouse Theatre and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. Two literary magazines, The Fiddlehead and Atlantic Advocate are published here. Fredericton actually has quite a literary tradition. The first novel by a native Canadian St. Ursula's Convent by Julia Catherine Hart, was written here. Canadian poets Charles Roberts, Bliss Carmen and Francis Sherman all lived in Fredericton.

Fredericton, however, is not what I expected. It is the end of the road. A nightmare of a town. It is like the small town set on a studio lot. What you envisioned when you read Sherwood Anderson or Sinclair Lewis, only worse. Deceptive it is, at first. It looked like my adolescent hitchhiking dream of apple pie pastoral small town America. That town of my imagination which I never found. Main Street, which is Queen Street, on a Saturday night; the town square filled with loungers exchanging their gossip; the Salvation Army band bleating "What A Friend We Have In Jesus" on the court house lawn; dusty pickup trucks at the curb; farmers in overalls walking up and down; Pa in baggy pants and Ma in cotton dress taking the two kids for a stroll looking at window displays. Here the men still have crew cuts and the kids are interested in cars. The shoemaker in his leather apron is bent over his bench as you walk by his ancient shop and stare past the Cat's Paw sign. In the drug store window besides the heavy glass apothecary jars are pictures of The Great Flood of '36 - you see old Fords axle deep in water on Queen Street, which looks exactly the same now. Continue your walk past the two Chinese restaurants, the Maritime Electric office, the feed store, the auto parts place, the dress shops, the haberdashery, the SMT bus station, the Irving service station, the RCMP headquarters. Turn up any residential street. Yes, it's deceptive. The streets are quiet and you wouldn't worry if your sister walked along them alone at midnight. All wooden homes - painted soft shades of yellow, or gray, or blue or the standard white with green shutters - set respectably back from the pavement. Many boulevards with great heavy willow trees their branches wisping at the well kept lawns. Continue up the Smythe Street Hill past Wilmot Park and the harness racing track. Cut over to Regent and cross the railroad tracks. The freight station sits brown and lugubrious in the dim evening. On the spurs are the dull maroon CN cars, their wood floors carpeted with straw and sawdust; they look permanent there, forever assigned a quiet place off the main line. Turn down Beaverbrook to the university, which looks like all dignified universities should look. Red brick in the Monticello style. A Campus of lawns and shade trees. A plethora of fraternity houses. No protestors here. Future doctors, lawyers and forestry rangers. Up on Montgomery Street are solid ranch houses and a few high rise student residences. On the third floor of one of these are the refugees.

Yes, refugees. Behind the pleasant facade, behind the curtains of these quaint wood frame homes, lies all the intolerance of Selma, Alabama or Biloxi, Mississippi or Port Arthur, Texas or Benton, Illinois or a hundred other U.S. cities. Fredericton is an American as apple pie all right. Beneath the golden crust the killing is shot through with strichnine. The small town mentality has been quiet all these years, like standing water in a secluded pond. But now, summer 1971, Fredericton comes of age. The

highway cuts by the pond and the scum floats to the surface. This year Fredericton has its niggers, its campus demonstrators, in the form of "transient youth." Forced by unemployment, boredom, the lure of the road and, in most cases, the prodding of the media to take to the highways. From one hostel to the next, from town to town, and when you get to Fredericton you better just pass on through.

But if you are a masochist imagine yourself struck here. Some dark secret in your past has compelled you to stay, some twist in your psyche. Some lost subterranean claw in your soul has destined you to live out your life here, a victim out of Tennessee Williams. To make it worse you are forced to stay and Create. George Grosz sketching the lechers at the public bath. A demented Balzac madly chronicling the life of the town and its citizens. And this is not Sauk City, Wisconsin; August Derleth would need a prefrontal lobotomy before he could work here. What mad ravings, what explosions of the soul, what perverted themes could be nurtured here. More likely the breeding ground for a Celine, a Jarry, than a Bliss Carmen. If you look beyond mere appearances you see a Fellini movie.



Hippies, freaks just in town, walk heads bent along the sidewalks averting their eyes from the smirks and sneers disfiguring the faces of the natives. New Brunswick is the last bastion of the crew cut, the flat top and the butch. Suddenly you feel like 1960. The men rub their bellies and their balls and grunt at you; the women shake their heads and snicker. The less aggressive ones stand on the sidewalks and gape. They are astonished the males grow their hair below the collar. That women don't wear bras. The hippie, the freak, is often ignored in restaurants and forced to walk out fighting back his rage. The town folk sit in the same restaurants watching the passing throng, eyes alert for the symbol, The knapsack. Before they see the hair or the person they see the knapsack. "There's one!" The shout carries across the dining room and heads pop up. I sat in a restaurant and watched two blue-haired, blue-veined, parchment skinned old ladies perched before the window, so close that their breath made steam on the glass, and listened to them cluck, and shake their heads and grow indignant and crane their necks at main street and bemoan the state of the world. They of course can be ignored but there are carloads of rednecks who patrol the streets looking for the kids spilled for from the Trans-Canada.

The big attraction of Fredericton for transients is the hostel itself, probably the most generous in the country. Located in an off-campus highrise it offers clean rooms and all the food you can eat for 50 cents - if you have it. The whole project is financed by Opportunities for Youth, directed by an invisible youth-worker-bureaucrat named Dave Lambert who signs everything but never appears and managed by a harried and increasingly disillusioned Mike French.

French has to suffer the complaints of the town folk as well as that inerradicable trait of the Youth Culture - The Rip Off. He reminds one of a man floundering in the middle of a swift flowing river, the victim of unexpected and opposing currents. One problem ironically is too much money, another is that the Revolution just isn't where he assumed it was. He can hide his hostel from the eyes of the town but its destruction looks like an inside job.

Any hour of the day the common hostel kitchen is filled with people. Very few it seems, venture to town. Those that have braved downtown come back soon to huddle in the protection of this highrise. And its a very comfortable middle-class highrise, the rooms comparable to those in a Holiday Inn. The people who haven't been downtown usually are dissuaded by the stories of harrasment. The hostel has an unenforceable limit of three days for guests. Some come and stay for weeks. There are part-time paying jobs available but no one takes them. The dining room table is constantly covered with cigarette butts and hot dog wrappers and smeared with jam and peanut butter. The pans in the kitchen are crusted with grease and egg stains, the brand new refrigerator is already smudged grey, the elements on the stove are encrusted with food and they stink when turned on. The walls seem to breathe with grease. Down the hall the sinks are filled with hairs and the toilets stopped up with shit and vomit. When French shows up to organize work crew to clean the rooms, empty the trash, mop the floors - everyone disappears. He can't even find anyone to help him carry the free food up in the elevator. At most he has one or two occasional helpers. When people finally do leave the hostel many of them stock their knapsacks full of white bread and peanut butter for the road.

At night everyone gathers around the kitchen table in silence waiting until someone starts a conversation. When this finally begins it takes the form of a complaint. Then all the frustration spills out. Everyone vents his anger and it's directed at each other. Someone brings up the Revolution and mentions how we're all together. Then the battle begins. Some believe in the spiritual revolution, the personal revolution, some the anarchist revolution, others the Marxist, and some maintain the one and only answer is Jesus Christ, which doesn't particularly please the kid who is a scientologist, or the girl who claims Zen will save the world. Some people say we have to free the black man, before doing anything else, some say the French Canadian deserves our priorities; surprisingly enough no one has anything good to say about the Indian. At one point a young blond guy clears his throat and begins to lecture: "There is a French philosopher. His name is Camus. His philosophy is individualism . . ."

Whereupon a young woman breaks in, "What do you mean! Shit! Individualism!" She dismisses him with a smirk.

"Yeah, well how do you know it isn't?" he demands. "You ever read any Camus?"

"Hah! I just finished The Plague today!"

Everyone thinks he alone is on the right road. Suddenly the scene is like a Russian novel. A meeting of lost souls.

Hours past in argument. As the night wears on the pressure lessens and some of the more angry ones have gone to bed. People drop their guards. There seems to be less to prove. One becomes aware of affinities. For the first time togetherness assumes a real meaning. A wacky camaraderie develops because you're here and out there is Fredericton.

by Jim Christy

Dear Sir:

Just received your article. I thought it was a very personal response, I was surprised about it. Anybody ever, Mr. C. lacks credibility, his fuzzy logic.

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