

Every Buddy and Cultural Underdevelopment

by Susan Perly

In his imagination, every migrant worker is in transit. He remembers the past; he anticipates the future; his aims and recollections make his thoughts a train between the two.

**John Berger,
A SEVENTH MAN**

Cape Breton. 1978. The streets of Glace Bay. Hanging around, down by St. Paul's Church, and cruising up and down the road, he's young. Waiting to graduate from high school so he can leave. Or taking off long before that. Maybe to the army, get a trade and some travelling in. Not a bad deal.

Winter creeps in, it's getting cold out. He spends more time inside, in the heat, with tea and the booze. With grandparents, old union fighters, the retired. The generation about to go mixes with the generation that has already been. Boston, Halifax, Toronto.

The generation in between moves constantly across the country. He's in his 20s, 30s, 40s; he looks for work. Sometimes with whole family in tow, usually alone. He follows old footsteps, goes to the mainland, to the Capital, Halifax, 300 miles away, and goes further. Moving West, looking and looking still. Gotham Cities, even Lotus Land don't guarantee jobs the way they used to.

Some guys give up leaving for a while. You might as well be on the pogy in your own house.

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He's busy tying the last lace on his boot, when he realizes there's no point. It's a small enough place, if there were any jobs on the go, he would know about them. He takes off his coat and pulls out a smoke. To hell with Manpower today. He picks up the paper, looks down at his hands. Lazy, is it?

Vertigo. A wide open hole that calls itself the future. He's been thrown into a perverse kind of freedom. No kowtowing to a boss, no clock-punching, no overwhelming exhaustion stretched out in front of the tube.

No money.

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The official unemployment figures grudgingly admit to a figure for Cape Breton of about 15 per cent. When his pogy runs out, when he leaves, when he simply gives up looking, he crosses into a statistical no man's land. The 'hidden' unemployed.

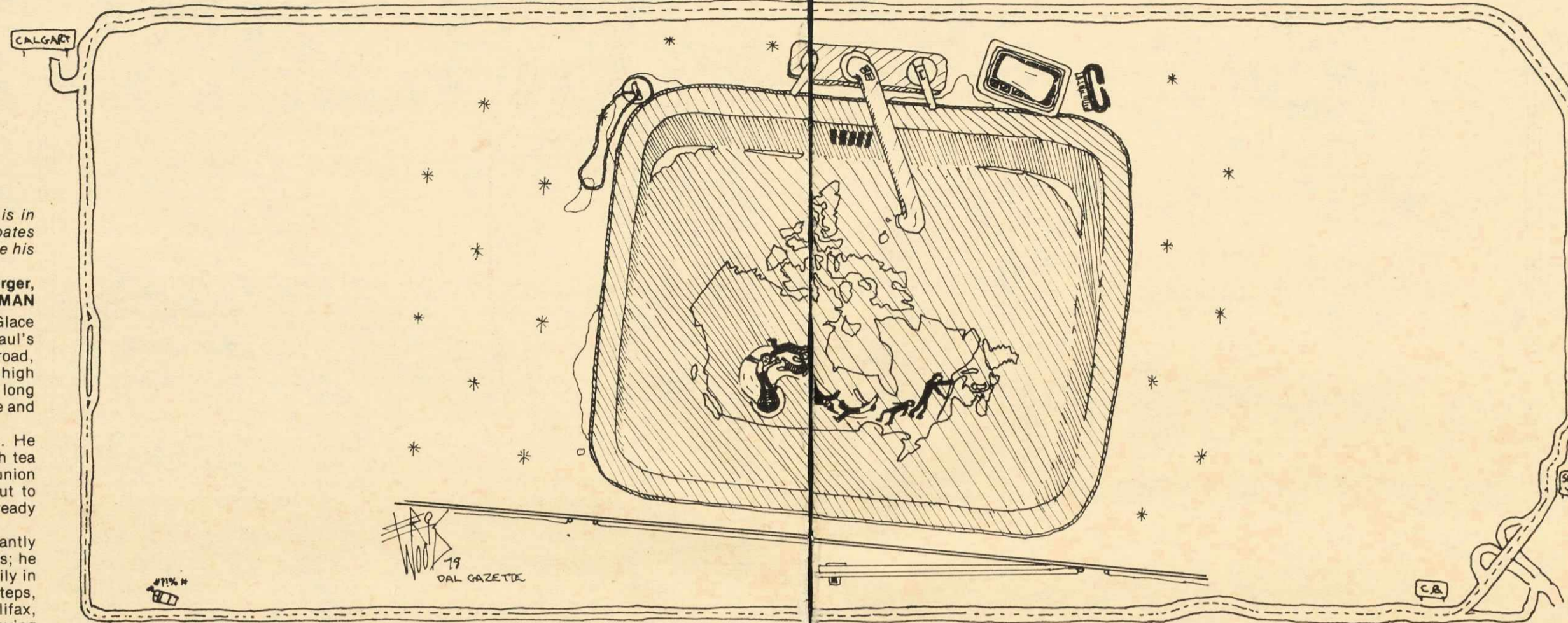
He is invisible, officially. Soon he is afraid no one would care if he were invisible, personally.

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In the morning, she swings her feet off the bed onto the cold hardwood. He must have got up early again, why can't he sleep? And smoking, drinking too much. She feels his blocked energy grind around his back. By hours, all night. He must be down with his tools in the basement, puttering, not even building. Just fiddling with wood. She puts water on for coffee, calls down the basement stairs. He doesn't answer. She tightens the belt on her robe and goes downstairs. What she sees will become the measure against which everything else in her life will have to stand. The need for explanations and answers overwhelm her. None will ever suffice. Her husband has hung himself.

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Theory by necessity generalizes the human condition. Statistics by necessity reduce the human condition. Each of them is important for understanding a totality. Other forms are crucial for explaining historical process, if it is to be known as process and not stasis. Forms that can touch personal presents and local histories.



He has the newspaper in front of him and he watches her move around the kitchen. He wonders why it has never turned out the way they said it would. He takes it out on her, she knows it, she can't stop herself from retaliating. Living on the same planet, the newspaper headline lies on the table, absorbs their voices, never touches their lives.

The feel of the land. The names of people. Memories idle like engines humming. He left. Was it sameness and boredom? He stayed. Was it familiarity and comfort? He left. He felt isolated, suffocated. He stayed. He felt part of a collective dream.

Shaped by present economics, past experience, his life is determined. True, sometimes not true. From nooks and corners of consciousness, spring resistance and originality.

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Jobs are in jeopardy, that's a place in the West. Buddy's stuck here, along with the rest. You know who he is by the eyes in his head. A man lives in fear when he fears for his bread.

October, 1977, Friday. The Pub, College of Cape Breton, Sydney. The place is jammed by 8:30. Buddy and The Boys are back. They haven't played a gig in six months. They've been missed. Their album is due to come out any week now.

Buddy and The Boys.
Leon Dubinsky: chief songwriter, on piano and guitar, rag bandana around his head. Sheep farmer in Englishtown, C.B. Leon has been to Gotham City, a.k.a. Toronto, played and wrote music for the film, "The Harder They Come". His song from that film, Every Mile, is an unofficial anthem at the Pub.

Ralph Dillon: long wavy blond hair, wire rims, his fingers are intense and they amaze on both piano and guitar. He weaves in and out of melodies with erratic energy.

Berkley Lamey: Like a lot of bass players do, Berkley provides a subtle but powerful backbone for the group. At its best, Berkley's playing is tense and insistent. His sounds feel like the walls of the pub bend.

Max MacDonald: his red hair tucked under the familiar cap, tartan scarf, Max is lead singer. He moulds intelligent, honey thick interpretations from the songs. You can't take your ears off him.

One of the greatest qualities which Buddy

and The Boys share is the energy they bring to live performance. Max's presence, always surprise how seductive it is—Leon's pure delight in dancing his fingers across the keyboard—the strength, the talent of musicians like Berkley and Ralph. And lately, the quiet, logical addition of drummer, Edd Harris. The humanizing, magical and iron potential in their music is fulfilled only when they feed it to the folks in the audience when the folks feed it back. Their album good (although some of their best material awaiting Buddy #2 album) but until you heard them live, their album doesn't resonate half as well.

Buddy is the metaphor of the decade. A decade where transience is permanence.

Buddy and The Boys. In the fall of 1978 "Buddy" is born. Buddy is a set of songs created by Leon, Berkley, Max and Ralph. Buddy is Cape Breton's Everyman. Buddy hangs around on the pogy, Buddy spends days drinking too much beer and wine, Buddy heads down at 6 a.m. to catch the train to head on down the line, Buddy works at this and that in Gotham City, Buddy says screw it, where the ocean and the country and my friends.

Buddy comes back, back to pink billow pollution from the steel plant, stuck between choking to death, or starving to death if Ste pulls out. (As it did in 1967 when Hawk Siddeley left, and the province had to create SYSCO—the Sydney Steel Corporation). Buddy decides to try and make a go of being a Wood manager trainee. Buddy loathes it. Flavour! Buddy's life, there's women, booze, fights over women, prison.

Buddy is the story every Caper has known forever, but has never heard told like this before.

Buddy is an instant success.

Gypsy Man, me in a mirror, Never too long in just one place I'm lucky to be loose in the life dream Gypsy Man, me face to face I've got good friends all over the county Hey how ya doin', it's me on the line Well, I wish I was there, but you can't everywhere You can only live in one world at any one time

It is Cape Breton in the 1970s, and Buddy, a metaphor for the decade. A decade where transience is permanent. Buddy and The Boys

are part of what's being called a cultural revival or renaissance in Cape Breton. Their sound combines elements from the old cultures, the Gaelic, the fiddle, the imperative good time of a Ceilidh, together with good old rock'n roll (The Boys hover on one side or other of 30), and C&W Cape Bretoners; they are also children of Yorkville, Nashville, Woodstock, L.A.

You hear these musical strains in the rock blues of the Minglewood Band, one of the best performing rock bands in the country, working out of C.B., just finished a cross country tour. They've stuck firm to roots, refusing to dilute their sound to fit discos, or pseudo-Irish pubs. That Friday night in the College Pub, Max MacDonald dedicates a song to the Minglewood band who are somewhere around Timmins heading on. As Minglewood travels (and especially in Alberta) the audience core is expatriate Capers coming for a taste of home.

The 'renaissance' includes other members of the Cape Breton musical family like Don Palmer, born in Sydney, studied jazz in New York and 20 years later is back. And musicians working in more traditional Scottish and Irish forms, like Kenzie MacNeil and Ronnie MacEachern. Ronnie, for example, uses old folk tunes or ballad forms and writes lyrics about contemporary issues, such as the seal hunt and the spruce budworm spraying controversy. It's a striking contrast to hear part of Buddy's story told in Ronnie's style. Go Off on Your Way is a lyrical, alphabetical recital of all the well-known Cape Breton names, the names and names of people who have left and left. The list grows on Ronnie's lips and the room almost sways in a chant. You feel very sad and moved.

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Last summer about 20 unemployed actors, musicians and students got some government grant money to create a play. Improvising satire and drawing on local history, they created The Rise and Follies of Cape Breton Island. The production ran for a soldout week in Sydney and was brought back later in the summer. It was the first time that an original, homebrewed revue on a professional scale like that had been seen on the College of Cape Breton stage. For a long time the dominant attitude was that plays by Ionesco, Albee, or American musicals like Carousel or Oklahoma were what the audience of industrial Cape Breton wanted. The Follies proved that wrong.

It was made into an album, which like Buddy, was an instant success.

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The ritual of leaving, living in limbo and coming back to leave again. This has been a backdrop, a mood thread in a lot of writing out of the East. Hugh MacLennan's **Each Man's Son**, Percy Janes' **House of Hate**. But it's been a taken for granted factor, not something explored in and for itself.

One author who has come near to touching Buddy's day to day life is David Adams Richards, who writes about the Miramichi area of Northeast New Brunswick. In his two novels, **The Coming of Winter** and **Blood Ties**, he describes small town growing up, limited choices, bombing around town, getting blessedly polluted drunk. Richards shows how the tedious daily encounters at the same time forge

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a love for friends and place. It is this contradictory feeling that Buddy feels tugging as the train pulls out. He thinks back to the crazy all-nighters, booze, the cops, fights with girlfriends and his thoughts mellow with miles and they soften to nostalgia.

As the train crosses to the other side of The Canso Causeway (a frank symbol: one of the Boys' tunes is Kissin' the Causeway) and hits the mainland, it's not too far from the Guysborough Shore. Guysborough County shares a lot with rural Cape Breton, the subsistence rural, farm, fish and wood based economy. And the attitudes. And the leaving. The best telling of those emotional and economic pulls, to me, is Charles Bruce's **The Channel Shore** (1954). Bruce left the Guysborough Shore to become a well known poet, journalist and head of Canadian Press. His son, Harry has come to live in Nova Scotia, although he grew up in Toronto. **The Channel Shore** transmits a sense of history, the tides of time, the inevitability which battles with human persistence.

The Mulgrave Road Show doesn't refer to a travelling circus or 'road show'. It refers to Charles Bruce's **The Mulgrave Road**, a poem learned by most Nova Scotian school children. Mulgrave, once a thriving community a few miles from the Causeway, servicing the ferry across the strait, now is a community in

decline. Again with government grant money this summer, four young actors put together a collage of scenes and some witty, biting songs about the history of Mulgrave and the Guysborough Shore. The people there loved it. Who had bothered, in recent memory, to research their story and tell it back to them? The economic underdevelopment imposed on communities in the East has taken its toll on cultural development too. A well known fact is that the bright lights leave.

But resistance and originality do spring, and not all the bright lights are leaving. Newfoundland is the province of largest outmigration and highest unemployment. Yet ironically (maybe because of it) cultural alternatives seem especially developed. Take the theatre troupe, The Mummies. Their earliest production, Gros Morne, was sketchy, but its rawness and the fact that it sprang from a real political confrontation, made it work. Gros Morne told the story of communities being expropriated for the building of a national park, Gros Morne, and told it to the communities and for (that is against) the politicians. From that point the Mummies have had internal ups and downs, but they have

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stayed close to Newfoundland politics and issues with plays on the mining towns of Buchans and St. Lawrence, the 1958 loggers strike, the fishing industry (The Price of Fish), and east end St. John's. They recently completed a play on the annual seal hunt. The Mummies' first priority is Newfoundland. Because they have stuck faithfully to that, they have a wealth of fans at home and great respect from Mainlanders. The sense of place and self, which smothers at the worst of times, at the best of times means confidence, and a style that barges through, and emerges new.

A moment:
Every buddy's fate, fragile, interchangeable. Tonight the beer lingers in drops on his lips. Those lips that cursed the cold, thumb out over the New Brunswick/Quebec border; those lips that mouthed the lyrics to a new tune tried; those lips bleeding in a fight in East End Toronto; those lips, kissing her goodbye.

The moment that is this Friday night, the moment of fate fragile and interchangeable is as tender and frightening as her kiss. More frightening. It is the touch of someone who holds your heart in her hands and whose hands you are squeezing white because you don't want to go.

You embrace the music like the last night in her arms. Nothing matters, who the hell knows what's going to be coming around the corner in the morning, could be a car, could be a pink slip. Let your cares fly buddy fly like a dolphin flies from the ocean, the goddamned ocean that keeps drawing you back here, roar dragging back, and rise strong as the electronic base buddy feedback, the hard hit piano chords, precise fingers on guitar frets.

No drunk mumbling against a corner. The Boys have taken you on a trip away and back home. You're safe. You're not dead yet.

The coda will be in her arms.

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