

16. Reminders and Memories of Past Times in Amherst, Nova Scotia: May 10-13

When, leaving New Brunswick, you enter Nova Scotia by car on the Trans-Canada Highway—in fact this is the only point of entry by car as well as by rail into mainland Nova Scotia—you will have a good view on your left of the town of Amherst, most of it rising on a slight elevation overlooking the Cumberland Plain and the Tantramar Marshes and strategically positioned, halfway between the Bay of Fundy and the Northumberland Strait, on the narrow isthmus joining the two provinces. This is the first Nova Scotia town I saw in late April, 1975, as I was travelling by train from Toronto to Halifax, where I would be met by my classicist friend Peter, who would drive me to his nearly 200-year old former farm house in Upper Canard in the Annapolis Valley, where he and his family lived.

In Toronto the signs of spring had been everywhere, and in Montreal, too, spring was in the air, but after the train passed Quebec City late in the evening and we were passing through a series of cities and towns on the St Lawrence River, I could see from the banks of snow lining the illuminated streets that winter was still reigning here. As the train progressed through New Brunswick the next morning, the snow began to disappear and as it entered Nova Scotia it had completely gone. But how wintry-bare still looked the fields and the trees, and how bleak seemed Amherst; real spring had to be still weeks away. From a train you never see built up areas at their best, certainly not in Canada: shabbiness, even dereliction, leap into your eye—probably more of it then, over forty years ago, than now. This was the mental image I had of the town when my to-be partner Scott, whom I met in Vancouver five months later, told me that he was born and raised in Amherst.

Fast-far forward now to July 1978, when Scott and I, on our way by train to Wolfville, Nova, where I had accepted a tenure-track appointment to teach at Acadia University, got off in Amherst in order to spend a day with his parents; it would be my first of many visits thereafter. Frank and Amelia Druet lived in a part of town which Scott had warned me beforehand about “was on the wrong side of the tracks” but his dad had chosen it decades earlier to settle his family there because it was so cheap to live there—although, as Scott had added emphatically, he certainly could have afforded a much better neighbourhood. His parents' house was indeed small and the red-brown asphalt siding which covered its wooden frame had seen better days. However, it had a garden with bright flowers, a large expanse of lawn, and at the back a big vegetable garden with lots of potato plants. Indeed, too, the Druet home itself, which was meticulously clean, had a cheerful look with its cozy furniture, its knick-knacks, and its plants. Nearly all of the houses in the neighbourhood were equally modest, a few, to be honest, bordering on shabby, but the wide open spaces with their grasses, trees, and flowers more than compensated for this. The elevation on which most of Amherst was built was highest in this neighbourhood and so afforded a panoramic view of the lowlands beneath. A strong fresh breeze was continually blowing which made this warm midsummer day especially invigorating for me, accustomed as I was to Toronto's hot humid summers. (A good friend of mine who has periodic occasion to stop over in Amherst is certain that the town has the most salubrious air of all of Nova Scotia.) All in

all, when Scott and I boarded the train the next day to continue our journey, I left with a favourable impression of Amherst.

I have visited Amherst many times over the past thirty-nine years. When Scott and I had a car, Amherst was the starting point for many an excursion, usually taking his mom along, to the shores and red-sand beaches of the Northumberland Strait, the great fossils site at Joggins (now a UNESCO World Heritage Site), the family cottage on Sutherland Lake in the Cobequid Highlands, and even, hundreds of kilometres away, the Cabot Trail, and Fundy National Park. My visits continued even after I split up with Scott in 1995. I attended his mother's funeral in 1995 and his father's in 2000. When Scott died in Halifax in 2009 I came to Amherst for the funeral and have made twice- or once-a-year visits since then, enjoying now the generous hospitality of his older brother Charlie and sister-in-law Pat. Over all these decades, Amherst has become for me a place of deeply felt memories, of happiness mingled with loss and sadness. Making sure to keep in touch with Scott's family, especially with his older brother Charlie and wife Pat and with Scott's slightly older sister Sheila, is no different than continuing to cultivate my bond with family and close friends. The time I take every visit to put flowers on Scott's grave—the small marker of his ashes is situated right in front of his parents' headstone—is filled with an aching feeling of loss but also with a kind of solemn, almost joyful pride that Scott and I continued to hold on to our love for each other, and that our love indeed continues *sub specie aeternitatis*.

My emotional attachment to Amherst has gained a lot of lustre from the fact that the town still carries visible reminders of the glory days of its past. From the second half of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth, it was a populous and prosperous place, the second largest manufacturing centre (after Halifax) in the Maritime provinces, blessed with dozens of smallish factories which turned out everything from pianos to women's corsets, even motor cars for a short while in the 1910's. It was thus known as “busy Amherst.” That all disappeared in the course of the twentieth century as Maritime industries shut down due to obsolescence or to competition in the much greater consumer markets of Ontario and Quebec. The defence industry of the Second World War brought a slight economic revival which gave Scott's dad some years of employment there, but this petered out after the war. The absolute end came when Robs Engineering, where Scott worked for a while, shut down in the early seventies. Since then the town has been successful in attracting some new manufacturing into its new industrial park, the most notable being a factory that turns out LED bulbs for street lights. However, Amherst will probably never be again the same kind of “busy” town it was a century ago.

It is a sign of Amherst pre-eminence, next to Halifax, in Nova Scotia already one-and-a-half century ago that it produced no fewer than four of the so-called Fathers of Confederation, those men who negotiated and finally put their signatures to the agreement that united four former British colonies in eastern and central Canada to form the Dominion of Canada. Economic prosperity created a social elite of high-cultural tastes and interests which was able to elicit a lecture from Oscar Wilde during his 1882 tour of the United States and Canada, Amherst being one of the only four Canadian

cities—Toronto, Montreal, and Halifax being the three others—that hosted him for this purpose.

The impressive red-brown sandstone public buildings, including a church, and the neoclassical bank with its magnificent Ionic columns, close together in the downtown, and farther out along Victoria Street East, the splendid large mansions, are striking evidences of Amherst's glory days. One cannot but hope and indeed justifiably expect that these will be lovingly preserved and maintained.

The signal reminders of Amherst's past days of glory merge in my mind with my vivid memories of the many and almost all happy times Scott and I spent together there even after we had split up and he was living with his dad before moving to Halifax. They subtly blend to become a mental continuum of desire, joy, loss, and mourning. But, thank God, for me there is no cry of "emptiness, all is emptiness," as it is in the book of the Hebrew scriptures I wrote about in an earlier essay; rather, for me reminders and memories together ultimately beget a luminous, even if a still at times somewhat agnostically tinted hope for the future.