

Eric Trethewey

Marginal Lessons: A Memoir

The relative prosperity of our technological age has nurtured a nostalgia for ruder times. It is not uncommon to find North Americans paying homage in various ways to felicities, real or imagined, of old-fashioned rural existence. That city life has its drawbacks or country living its considerable advantages, I'm not one to deny. But when an idea or attitude becomes fashionable, people are likely to lose a sense of its relationship to reality. They surrender that sense of complexity nurtured by experience and begin to assume that reality is no more complicated than a currently fashionable myth of it happens to suggest. Though I, like some others, am daily distracted by the weary weight of all this unintelligible urban world that surrounds me, and though I too feel the pull of simpler, bucolic settings, I am suspicious of the sentimental notions that all-too-often inform attitudes toward the rural life of the past—whether the conviction that it was pure and garbage-free, that personal relationships were straightforward and humane, or that one-room schoolhouses were satisfactory institutions in which to learn one's ABC's. What I remember from my rural past is not what is evoked by stylish lumberman's rubbers and bright mackinaws on mannequins in display windows, or neatly stacked hardwood ready for ritual consumption in suburban fireplaces. What I remember in addition to rural blessings is the poverty, the constricting harshness of village life, and an intellectual and spiritual narrowness largely unrelieved by the institution of the one-room school that was its principal gesture toward enlightenment.

Though all of my people were country folk, I was born in a city and spent most of my childhood in army camps. When I was nine, my stepfather was discharged from the army and we moved to the village he had grown up in. A year later, we moved to a smaller, bleaker village where I was to live until I went away to college, the first in our family and one of the first two or three in our village to do so.

It was on Friday, November 13, 1953 that my family moved to the village of Mount Uniacke in rural Nova Scotia. Our house was a ramshackle, ten-room farmhouse that had been built about one-hundred years earlier out of hand-hewn beams and foursided nails. Originally standing at the base of a hill, it had been moved to the top, and that circumstance, combined with the sag of age, accounted for some of the doors not closing, the windows not opening, and the floors tilting in places at steep and crazy angles. It was a shabby house, as shabby as our lives, slumping above its shallow fieldstone cellar, in which you had to stoop to walk, and presenting a broad, vulnerable aspect to every wind that swept across that hill, on which its original inhabitants wisely had never intended it to stand.

The tenants immediately before us had raised Boston Bull Terriers and regularly, over several years, had brought meat scraps and bones home from the slaughterhouse to feed them. They were careless people, these dog raisers, and threw what the dogs didn't eat into the back yard with other household garbage.

Not long after we moved in, we began to see from a kitchen window that we lived next to a large and thriving colony of rats, some of the largest rats I have ever seen. The field behind the house pullulated with their gray bodies slithering through the refuse. My mother and sisters were terrified, and I recall that despite pretending otherwise, I was uneasy about their sinister presence.

We put out poison and set dozens of steel-jawed Oneida mink and muskrat traps. And at lunch-time or after school I would come home, slip around the corner of the house or steal out of the back door and blaze away at the rats with my stepfather's pump-action .22 Winchester. Although it took a long time, we eventually exterminated or drove away most of them; but even now, they remain in my dreams scratching through the squalid debris of that vanished world. Even when I muse on more auspicious recollections from those times, the rats return to add the imprimatur of their vile scurryings to most of what I remember.

Behind the house, about a half-mile distant, ran the tracks of the Dominion Atlantic Railway. In the evenings and during the middle watches of the night one could hear the moan of the engine whistle and the clacking of the cars as the train neared the station a mile or so up the tracks. Perhaps I loved that sound because it filled up the silences of our rural world, but more than likely it was important to me, whether I realized it then or not, as a symbol of escape, the one sure way out of the isolated existence of bitter winters, lonely days and nights, and fat rats at large in their labyrinthine burrows behind our house. I see now, however, that though the midnight wail of a train is

for good reason buried deep in my psyche as a symbol of flight, of freedom from an often severe life, that the actual agent of my departure, for all its limitations, was the school I attended from grades six through nine.

The school commanded the top of a rise; standing in the ash and gravel schoolyard, you could look off in one direction and see a lake glinting in the sun and in another, a bog that burned red in autumn. The building was a one-room frame structure, weather-proofed with red imitation-brick siding. It had a row of large windows in front facing the road and a tin stove-pipe sticking through the roof. When I read John Greenleaf Whittier's description of a country school, "Still sits the schoolhouse on the hill, / A ragged beggar sunning," I was vaguely curious as to how he, in New England in another century, could have known how my schoolhouse was going to look.

A "ragged beggar" it was, but for better or worse, the years I spent in and around that building shaped my consciousness in more ways than I can hope to fathom. Even now, when my perspective differs from that of my contemporaries, the difference seems often to derive from the circumstances of my early life and education. Few people of my generation went to school under similar circumstances, and mine probably is the last generation to have participated in the cultural phenomenon of the one-room rural school in anything more than marginal and insignificant numbers.

Of course, the one-room country schoolhouse has been part of frontier life since this continent was opened to settlement. The history of education in North America until well into the nineteenth century when consolidation began is the history of the one-room school. Even as late as 1946-47 there were about 100,000 of these schools still operating in the United States. But today it is only in the backwaters of North American civilization, in the remote shore communities of Newfoundland and the Gaspé peninsula say, or in the isolated hollows of Appalachia that such schools still exist. And the days of even these out-of-the-way vestiges appear to be numbered.

My one-room schoolhouse now exists only in memory. But there at least it still stands, invading my dreams and imposing its architecture and sociology on my imagination. When I read descriptions of similar schools, such as Ichabod Crane's or the one in James Still's fine Kentucky novel, *River of Earth*, no matter how detailed the description, it is always my one-room school with the red imitation-brick siding and the tin stove-pipe thrusting from the roof that I see in my mind's eye.

It is strange what we remember and perhaps stranger still what we forget. I forget, for instance, who the teacher was that first year, cannot

even call up the vaguest image, but I recall vividly the first day of grade six. The usual strain of beginning classes in a new school, well into the term, was intensified because I was an outsider in an inbred and insular world. I remember standing awkwardly in the schoolyard before the bell and again at recess, alone, too shy to make advances and too proud to risk being rebuffed, feeling alien, watching the strange new boys and girls conduct their unfamiliar rituals of acquaintanceship. Perhaps being thus immersed in an alien and insular setting, added to the ordinary grief of childhood, has given me a lasting sense of life's desolations. I was alone much of the time, and throughout that late autumn would walk home at lunch and after school, deep in reverie, surrounded by the numinous angularity of hardwoods fleshed down to bone, and once there find nothing better to do than steal out the back door and get in a few shots at the rats before they scurried into their tunnels. It took a long time to make friends in the village, and when I finally did, the friendships were with other marginal residents like us. And despite living there from the time I was ten until I was seventeen and went away to college, I remained something of an outsider.

Having written that I was an outsider, however, I immediately feel the need to qualify the assertion. I was an outsider in that my name was not a local one honored by several generations of bearers. But in another sense, I was like everyone else in that school and that village. We were all fringe-dwellers, outlandish folk of an essentially nineteenth-century rural society being dragged willy nilly into the mid-twentieth-century world of television, computers, supermarkets, suburbs, and fast-food franchises.

The area had originally been settled after gold was discovered there in the 1860's. When the gold petered out, people stayed on to log and farm and occasionally commute to the city for work. Although there were class distinctions between those who owned a mill or a general store and lived in large houses, and those who eked out a living as labourers or by working the land, the life was hard and constricting for all.

Even in the 1950's, many of us lived in houses that had no indoor plumbing and some had no electricity, depending on kerosene lamps for light. Almost everyone used woodstoves for heating and cooking, and on weekends and cold winter nights when artificial heat was required to warm the spirit it was necessary to visit one of several bootleggers, the only way within an hour's drive to obtain beer or liquor. The community had no doctor. Many villagers had never been to a dentist; mouths full of rotten teeth were common. Twenty-five miles or so down the road, in Halifax, a new T.V. station had been built, but reception was still chancy. I remember standing with a group

of boys for hours in the snow outside a house, the inhabitants of which had just bought a television. Night after night we peered in the windows like peeping-Toms, waiting, just as the occupants, bathed in the lurid glow of the future, sat inside waiting for the snow on the screen to assemble itself momentarily into a fleeting image before dissolving again to blur.

Most of the boys, when we weren't in school, fished in spring, hunted in fall, and trapped in winter—I got my own single-shot, bolt-action .22 rifle for Christmas the winter I was eleven. Girls cooked, milked, and did housework in the afternoons, and walked the roads in pairs at night, waiting for the inevitable mistake of marriage at sixteen or seventeen. It surprises me now to realize that of the approximately fifty students who passed through the village school from 1953-57, several went to college and two or three graduated. Little in the circumstances of that life pointed toward success in the larger urban world implacably drawing us into its orbit.

In one way, my first year at the school was typical of those that followed and, as I understand it, of one-room schools in general: no one was ever sure there would be a teacher to conduct class. In those days there were never enough certified teachers, and the school board almost always ended up hiring someone who had no training, whose chief qualifications for teaching were a high school diploma and the incidental fact of being unemployed at the time. The pay was minimal and the working conditions bleak enough that new teachers, giving in to the gloom of deepest winter, would leave before the term ended. This happened during my first year at the school. Though I can call up no image of her, I sense, through the mist of almost thirty winters, that the teacher was an older woman from outside the community. Whoever she was, she made it until Christmas and did not return after the vacation.

Through the dark, cold months of the long northern winter, there was no school. I ran my trapline, hunted and snared rabbits, cut wood for the fires at home, and, on bad days, when a blizzard hit or wet snow turned into freezing rain, sat with my feet in the oven reading mediocre Book-of-the-Month-Club novels, to which my mother subscribed, no doubt to help her through the bleak isolation of her winter housewifery. Though I was happy with the freedom, I was lonely much of the time, in the woods or at home with a book. At times, the brooding isolation of rural life—which struck me so powerfully in the novels of Thomas Hardy when I discovered them during high school—became overwhelming. In the dead of that winter my cavalier exulting in liberation from the tedium of lessons wore thin, and I sorely felt the

need for whatever communion association with my new schoolmates might have provided.

With spring came the necessity of some formal resolution to the year of schooling that had not been. The local school board found someone to hold classes for the final week of the year and administer examinations so that students might be promoted. It was frightening to me to take examinations on a half year's work that hadn't been covered, and certain I would fail, I refused to go to school. My mother, who claimed to have learned it from someone in authority, tried to persuade me that the exams were *pro forma*, but I was headstrong and too deeply convinced of my inadequacy. I went fishing instead and failed grade six. The reality did not come home to me until autumn when I was seated in the sixth-grade row while my erstwhile peers moved one row to the teacher's left and closer to the stove.

But I was lucky. The schoolboard had prevailed on the mother of a schoolmate, a good-hearted grandmotherly woman named Mrs. Hanson, to teach. She was a retired teacher—the only certified one we had during those years—and one of the best teachers I have ever had.

Thanks to her, I gradually began to overcome my reluctance to answer questions. Before long I was answering without reservation questions put to our class; and full of new confidence, I would answer silently, to myself, questions put to students two or three rows over toward the stove. I think this was the first time it occurred to me that other people might not know as much as I assumed they did. My failure had shown me, more clearly than success could have, the purely formal nature of so many social relationships and the hollowness of much that is taken for achievement in the world. In the first month of school, I took my place one row closer to the stove.

By this time, I had made some friends and entered into the routine of of the school. At any time there must have been thirty or so students seated in six or seven rows of desks across the room. In the rows to the teacher's extreme right sat the grade sixes and sevens, each row to her left being occupied by the next higher grade. The grade nines made up the final row. The two or three students in grade ten, usually girls, sat facing each other in the corner by the stove. With each succeeding grade there were fewer students and proportionately fewer boys than girls. By grade ten the boys had usually quit school and gone to work.

At the back of the classroom, to the teacher's right was a large cabinet with glass doors, containing something I discovered years later to be a Bunsen burner, and an assortment of trays and test tubes, paraphernalia for a science class that never was taught. Perhaps the equipment aroused in some the vague wonder Aristotle says is where

philosophy begins; otherwise it had no active function in our education.

In the other back corner, to the teacher's left, was a wooden stand built against the wall on which rested a pail of drinking water that, since the school had no well, had been hauled from a nearby house. A dipper from which we all drank hung beside the pail from a hook driven into the window sill.

Midway between the front and back of the room and against the side wall to the teacher's left was a squat woodstove. Beside it was a woodbox whose cavernous size could best be appreciated by one obliged day after day to fill it chock-a-block with maple, ash, and birch. And also to the teacher's left, at the front and back of the room, were two doors leading out to a foyer extending the length of the building. This was where we hung our heavy clothes in winter, at least when the schoolroom was warm enough; when it wasn't, we wore them in our seats. And during wet weather, shirts and coats and boots were arranged around the stove, steaming from the heat, drying-out for the return home. From the foyer one door led outside.

When school was in session, the teacher moved from row to row across the room, hearing lessons, introducing new concepts, and giving assignments. It was often chaotic. The geography or history lesson the grade nines were engaged in might be far more interesting than the penmanship exercise or the sentence parsing given the grade sevens. It was almost impossible to concentrate on a dull task when there were exciting doings two rows to the right.

And this was to say nothing of the problem of discipline. While an inexperienced, usually female, teacher tried to explain how to divide decimals and fractions to the fidgeting ten- and eleven-year-olds on her right, the big, uncouth fifteen- to seventeen-year-old boys on her left, bored by Tennyson or George the Third, would be goosing the girls and snorting like moose in rut. Or worse, they would hatch some demented schemes to bedevil the poor teacher and send her wild with frustration and despair back from whence she had come.

I recall live reptiles smuggled into the teacher's desk and dead skunks stockpiled under the schoolhouse steps, but one persecution of Mrs. Hanson remains clearest of all. While she was instructing the grade six students, one of the older boys near the stove reached over, opened the hinged door, and threw in a handful of .22 cartridges. The conspirators briefly muffled their chortling before the bullets began to pop like firecrackers, creating fright, shock, and bewilderment in the class.

When the noise stopped, we could see several of the miscreants over on their side of the room trying desperately and unsuccessfully to hold

their hilarity in. Mrs Hanson, Valkyrie-like, strode across the room to confront these oversize culprits clad in their doeskin shirts and WW II army jackets

“Who put the bullets in the stove?” she demanded, stern but visibly flustered. There was silence and an awkward shifting in the desks.

“I said, who put the bullets in the stove,” she repeated. “If someone doesn’t speak up I’m going to punish every one of you,” meaning that she would strap the whole row.

When no-one spoke up, the poor woman, my grandmother’s age, led all the hulking boys in the grade nine aisle to the front and, one by one, strapped them hard on each hand. They were obedient, silent, and grinned provocatively, foolishly, at her the whole time as her face bloomed crimson and her blows came harder. Later that day, in the afternoon, when the stove rocked with an explosion strong enough to loosen the stovepipe elbow and wilt the pipe, jar the stove door off its latch, and shower the room with ash—a .10 gauge shotgun shell had been detonated this time—Mrs. Hanson barely held back the tears as she dismissed school for the day.

One of our favorite games at recess or after lunch was a war game in which each side tried to rout the other by lobbing stovelengths of hardwood into their midst fast enough that the opposition could no longer return fire. It was a stupid, dangerous game, and I marvel that none of us was badly hurt.

I suppose that boredom was responsible for such games. There was an open field beside the school, but it was small and, having been scraped to provide topsoil for lawns in some distant suburb, it was full of rocks and holes. Some of us brought a ball and bat to school with the intention of playing softball, but the ball would roll into the trees or down into the bog behind the school, and we couldn’t run without watching every step. We tried to play hockey, using a tin can for a puck, on the gravel driveway, but that too was small and uneven, and blood usually flowed as a consequence of falls. Our best invention was a piece of pipe between the walls of the foyer we used as a cloakroom. The bar served as a highbar for gymnastics, but only one of us could use it at a time.

When conversation in the schoolyard was not about the superior character of Fords, compared with Chevs, talk turned to sex. As are most rural children, we were precociously aware of sex and crudely ignorant of any appropriate attitude toward it. Boys showed interest in the girls by suddenly grabbing them by the crotch, and the girls showed their interest in return by the relative intensity with which they struggled to get free.

Once, two of the boys, having peered in a window of a house belonging to a man who had been in the community only several years and who was thus an outsider, claimed to have seen him having sex with his daughter, one of our classmates. From then on, a current of leering and innuendo ran among the boys who crudely concluded that because this girl was no longer a virgin, she could be easily had. Buxom, with a sweet demeanor and a pretty face, she was friendly to all, but none of us, that I know of, ever got her.

As with more modern schools, in our school a good deal of student activity revolved around the bathrooms. Our "bathroom" was a double-sized wooden outhouse behind the school, one door for the boys, one for the girls, with a partition between the cubicles. Because smoking was not permitted, the older girls would crowd by twos and threes into their side of the privy to be out of sight of the teacher. The smell of stale cigarette smoke and several years' ripe manure were, no doubt, a sordid revelation to the nostrils. The boys, wiser in this at least, always went into the woodshed or down in the forest behind it.

There were always signs, on the boys' side of the partition, of attempts to gap the joints between the boards with pocketknives. As soon as a crack was opened, it would be stuffed immediately with paper or wood by one of the girls on the other side. The pocketknives were also used to carve gross and humorless graffiti into the rough boards.

But mostly what I remember about the outhouse is an incident that occurred one noon-hour. The outhouse was built on one side of the hill on which the school stood. Behind the buildings, the land dropped sharply from the granite outcropping down into a bog that stretched for several miles. The lower boards on the back of the privy had been ripped off, and boys hiding in the bushes behind and below the structure could see up through the hole into the compartment itself. If the girls were smoking and talking, one could eavesdrop and occasionally discover amazing things. If they actually used the hole, one got a clear view, and there were boasts by several boys that they could recognize any of the girls just by "counting the pimples on her arse."

From time to time there were competitions. A would-be aficionado of asses, camouflaged in the bushes behind the outhouse, would keep his tally while a few other boys, inconspicuously stationed in view of the door, would verify who was coming and going.

This amusement came to an abrupt end, however, because of overreaching ambition. One of us, not content merely to listen to and watch the girls perform their bodily functions, used an alder switch to tease and tickle. One of his victims soon deduced that the annoyance to her bottom was neither a spider's web nor the erratic flight of a dazed fly,

and the game was ruined forever. There were mass strappings and the following week the back was again boarded up and doubly reinforced.

Fights were numerous and savage, even among the girls. One of the earliest memories I have of the school, from that first year in grade six is of a bitter fight between Myrtle Moore and Edith Nichol, apparently over a man in whom both were interested.

"I have better things to do than worry about a cow like you," one said.

"Oh, so you think I'm worried about you, do you?" You sloppy whore," said the other.

The two were possibly sixteen or seventeen, big girls, women really, with full ripe bodies, and they came to school wearing perfume, makeup, and jewelry. We were standing around the school yard watching them, brought up short by the strident anger of their voices. Suddenly they were shrieking venomously at each other, and then they were slapping, pulling hair. I had seen drunken violence at home and had been in fights myself, but I had never seen women stand toe to toe and slug it out. I remember the incident clearly, because of the sudden eruption of violence and also because it was a dramatic illustration of a principle I have since seen assert itself repeatedly; human behavior is often far other than one's preconceptions concerning it are likely to prepare one for. This is a commonplace, of course, but like most commonplaces, one that means little until experience reveals to us its truth.

As far back as I can remember, my family had always been going to live in new places; invariably, one of the first lessons I learned, or re-learned, in each new locale was that there were bullies to be dealt with. I have since thought, many times, that adults generally underestimate the extent to which physical intimidation and the fear of violence permeate the worlds of children and adolescents. Perhaps I now underestimate it myself, but then I understood it perfectly. In addition to the fact that I was an outlander, I must have presented myself in other respects as an ideal target: I was quiet, introverted, and, with strangers at least, polite to the extent of appearing self-effacing. But despite, or perhaps partly because of my outward disposition, I had to come to a conscious decision, as early as age seven or eight, that the way to confront physical intimidation was to fight back fiercely and without regard for the consequences. I willed myself to do this, and what I learned very quickly was that victory was to a remarkable extent simply a state of being, that by appearing fearless, and meaning it, I could cow boys who were bigger and stronger or in groups, all those who had not yet learned the lesson that to preserve themselves they had to risk losing themselves, had to chance the bloody nose, the blackened eye, the knocked-out tooth. This is not an apology for

violence, only for a way of dealing with it, which for the children of the poor is often the only way.

I had many boyhood fights but only one at the Uniacke school. One day, not long after having moved into the village, I was walking home in the afternoon with a group of boys my own age when we encountered an older boy, Joey Messervey, on the road. A few times already I had been shoved around by older students, but each time I had shoved back in a convincing enough manner that, believing I would continue shoving back, they had left me alone. This time was different. It was a cold evening in late fall, the threat of early dusk hovering in the evergreens, when he came up from the opposite direction and crossed the road to us. I no longer remember what the argument was about, but I knew that he was angry when he walked up. It had something to do with his younger brother, one of our group. I suppose I must have said or done something to attract his attention because suddenly he was standing right in front of me, sneering in my face and bumping me with his chest. Though not much bigger than I, he was two years older and one of those boys who give the impression—at least to those younger than themselves—of being knowledgeable and in command. He lived across the road from our house, and had taken me under his wing, in a remote fashion, the first few days of school, disposing me to regard him in an older brotherly fashion. But now here he was livid, cursing, pushing me back with his hands and chest. Sick with shock and fear, I stepped back, but he came on, threatening, glowering, and bumped me again. When I hit him it came as a surprise to both of us. He tried to hit me back, but he was off balance and his blow did nothing but sting my lip. I charged into him then, both hands flailing, and immediately, to everybody's surprise (mine above all) he was on the ground, blood streaming out of his nose, saying over and over again, "I quit. I quit. I quit." Then he got up warily and walked in the direction of home, by himself. At school, the bullying and physical intimidation went on around me as before, but for the rest of my student days there, I was left alone.

When I think of the narrowness of that world, and the negligible part that reflection or introspection played in it, I wonder that there was not more violence and brutality. Our community, in its insularity, its refusal to accept the thing that is different, was I think, typical of rural life in general. One memory in particular remains with me as an illustration of what was likely to happen when an outsider entered the village. The year I entered the eighth grade the school board hired a young man, the only male teacher I had in those years. He appeared to be in his late twenties and had been, rumor had it, a newspaper reporter in the city. He seemed to know a great deal about everything

and would talk endlessly about his experiences in the world beyond our village. But he drank, and though he always appeared on school days and conducted classes effectively, many mornings he would come to school hungover, the smell of liquor rising off him like fumes off a gasoline tank on a hot day. He had a strange way of talking, very exaggerated in his elocution, and, like Sherwood Anderson's country schoolmaster, Wing Biddlebaum, an exaggerated way of moving his hands.

The reason I remember this teacher so vividly is not primarily his teaching, his drinking, or his hands, however. His role in a crisis involving my family impressed itself on my imagination and underscored for me the unfairness of the manner in which he was finally dealt with in the village. In the spring of that year a forest fire swept through our part of the county. Our house on the hill, though in an open field, was directly in the path of the flames. Because it had been a particularly dry May, showering sparks from the sizzling hackmatacks caught in the previous summer's dead grass. Smoke engulfed the surrounding fields, and before long someone was shouting that our house was on fire.

Repeatedly, members of our rag-tag band of fire fighters dashed into the smouldering house, coughing through the smoke, some of us squirting the walls with puny back-pumps, and others carrying outside whatever belongings could be salvaged. In the desperation of that hour, it seemed strange to see my schoolteacher, slight and small, standing amid the smoke of our burning home, giving commands, and wrestling furniture through the narrow doors. I also remember my mother expressing her gratitude that in the beginning he had thought to shut off the electricity and to roll a barrel of kerosene away from its place beside the house where it had been resting on a wooden stand. For though severely gutted, the building was saved. After several months we moved back in, and to the scurrying forms of rats, and the moaning wail of trains was added the inescapable pungency of charred wood to season our memories and our dreams.

When school began the next year, however, the young teacher with the exaggerated gestures and manner of speaking was no longer with us. In late spring of that year, just at the conclusion of school, he had—the rumour went—been drinking with one of the young men in the community and had said something the other had taken violent exception to. The story was repeated at the general store and elsewhere. Our teacher was not hounded out of town as was Wing Biddlebaum in Anderson's story, although I do think there was some violence. His contract was not renewed, and until Mrs. Hanson was

eventually persuaded to come out of retirement once again, we were without a teacher.

The year Mrs. Hanson returned was the year I became the school janitor. I was thirteen, going into grade nine, and the ten dollars I received at the end of every month was a considerable sum of money. (With my first paycheck I bought a new doeskin shirt, a hunting cap, several coils of rabbit wire, shotgun shells—and still had change coming.)

The job required me to go to school an hour early, light the fire in the woodstove, and fetch fresh water in a bucket from the well next door. After doing these chores, I often walked the mile back home for breakfast before returning for school. It was also my job to keep the fire going throughout the day, and, when school let out, to sweep the floor, fill up the woodbox with hardwood, and split kindling for the next morning.

Apart from the smell of dustbane, for which I developed a lasting detestation, the job was not unpleasant. I was proud of my responsibility, though I felt guilty during the bitter, winter days when the wind tore through the weather-proofing and no amount of fire in the stove could keep the room warm. On those days, when Mrs. Hanson was forced to arrange the few students who had come to school in a tight semi-circle around the stove and sometimes, when hands grew too numb to hold a pencil, to send us home, I felt the despair of failing to do what everyone depended on me to do.

There was another circumstance associated with the job that I remember. In late autumn and in winter when darkness came early, I was deprived of the brief daylight time after school in which to hunt or tend my traps and rabbit snares. Long into the dusk, surrounded by the cold cawing of crows, I would sweep and split and carry wood for the next day's fire and by the time I had finished, usually it was dark. Then, after locking-up the school, I would walk alone along that country road, the house lights burning and blinking in the distance and, despite being on my way home, I would be overcome with melancholy and close to tears to think of my own smallness, and of the insignificance of the lives of all I knew under the spreading immensity of the night. I remember those evenings without regret, despite their promise of sorrow.

Most of the rural grotesquerie I have described no doubt illustrates what Marx called the idiocy of village life. Walter de La Mare observed that the past is the only dead thing that smells swell, but when one becomes more particular, begins to sift through the unsorted piles of dead events, other odors obtrude that are perhaps truer emanations. Thus, the image of the little red one-room schoolhouse nestled in the

trees, is for me, wherever I find it, not only a cue to take me back in time to the nostalgia of a vanished world, but also a permanently charged emblem of stultification and hardship.

But for all the bleakness of existence I have described, for all the stupidity and cruelty of our diversions, there were good moments. The father of one of my friends was a Micmac Indian named Joe Sack who had left the reservation to make his way in the world. He had found a job in the shipyards in Halifax and had married a white woman, whose younger brothers were also my friends. All of us were in awe of Joe's prowess as a hunter and woodsman, his expert knowledge of baseball, and his ability to sing country songs while accompanying himself on the guitar. Joe gave us tips on how to hunt, fish and set our traps. Sometimes, he even bought our raw furs for resale to the traders.

When the high-skyed days of October rose up in a splendor of red maples and yellow birches, we were all consumed with baseball fervor as the World Series began. Joe lived in a small frame bungalow next to the school, about a hundred yards away through the trees. On those days we would go to school in the morning, walk home for lunch, and, on our way back for the afternoon session, inconspicuously turn aside into Joe's place. When a series game was to be played Joe would either not go to work at all or he would come home early. And not having a great deal of book learning, he was not fully convinced of the damage a few days less of it was likely to do us. Because he was a true baseball fan—he even had a genuine American League baseball, a foul ball he had caught during a game in New York the year he had gone there with his wife to attend a Jehovah's Witness convention—Joe understood better than any parents we knew that listening to the World Series might in the long run be far more important to a boy than several afternoons of classes. So on those afternoons we would all sit around the tiny front room of the cramped four-room bungalow, guns on the wall along with an assortment of stuffed squirrels and birds, and a stuffed wildcat Joe had trapped years before snarling at us from the corner. We would draw close to the little plastic radio, listening with hushed devotion as the announcer gave the lineups, and then play by play carried us into the drama of those Yankee/Dodger games of long ago. Sometimes, after the games were over, we would go out into the slanting late-afternoon October sunshine to throw the baseball in the driveway, Joe showing us how to throw a knuckleball or how to finger the seams to throw a big, roundhouse curve. The announcer's words would be echoing still in our ears and we would all be Don Newcombe or Allie Reynolds bearing down, or Clem Labine coming in to put out the fire in the sixth. Sometimes Joe would drive us to a field by the lake and hit fungos to us. Then, the announcer's words ringing yet in our

ears, Joe would be Yogi Berra blasting bad pitches and we would be Duke Snyder or Carl Furillo playing caroms off the walls of Ebbet's Field, or Mickey Mantle surrounding high fly balls in deep centerfield. Afterwards, when our scuffed and aged ball was no longer visible in the gathering dusk, we would go back to Joe's house. In the time before supper, if we were lucky, he would take out his old Gibson guitar and pick out the "Guitar Boogie Shuffle" or "The Johnson Rag," before getting serious and singing, at our insistence, "The Ballad of Albert Johnson," the Mad Trapper of Rat River, or tunes such as "Waiting For A Train," made famous by Jimmie Rodgers. Those were good times then, and in the spangled light of those afternoons and the shadows of those dusks, the rats and the rotting bones, the endless fields of snow and the whine of the January wind were far away. So it is that one of my fondest memories of the schooldays I have set out to chronicle is of playing hookey. Who is to say, given the nature of the circumstances, that this is not as it should be?

The year I graduated from grade nine, a new rural high school capable of enrolling over 500 students from the western part of the county had been completed. Despite the long bus ride twice a day that attending this new school entailed, I think we were all happy with the change and with the new opportunities before us: regular classes and exposure to a variety of new subjects; the chance to compete in interscholastic sports, to act in plays, sing in the Glee Club; and perhaps the opportunity to go to college and enter the twentieth century. I am thankful that my education in a one-room schoolhouse ended when it did. Of course, I have been writing not simply about my school, but of a whole way of life of which the one-room school was only one institution. When in the autumn of 1957 I travelled by bus to the new brick rural school, I was leaving behind an essentially pre-industrial world that had managed to remain unaffected in the interstices of the industrial matrix in which it was imbedded. Although there were other hard times coming, I was leaving behind a marginal economic existence, the narrowness and insularity of village life, for the possibility of prosperity and intellectual growth in the world at large.

Much of what I have learned about life, its potential meanness and vulgarity, its hardships and desolations, I learned in that rural existence as a part of the pedagogy of adversity. And because of this, I want to resist the tendency to dishonor the past by making it seem better than it was. In saying this, in refusing to sentimentalize the rural past, I do not wish to validate the urban and suburban present in which the decent hardships and honest crudities of rural culture have been replaced, to a large extent, by the slick mendacities of a commercial civilization. My education in the country, in a one-room schoolhouse

was limited, at times galling, crude, and benighted. But though the seeds of education are bitter, as Aristotle says, the fruits may be sweet. I did learn, after all, something of the seasoned joy to be found in autumnal things, possibly the one joy that is almost never too late to know.