MUSQUODOBOIT*

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MY home town is named Musquodoboit, Middle Musquodoboit to be precise, for it should be carefully distinguished from Upper Musquodoboit, Lower Musquodoboit, and Musquodoboit Harbour. The middle town is not the oldest or proudest of the four, but it is universally acknowledged to be their centre of culture. As the names imply, these notable places are distributed evenly along the length of the Musquodoboit River, which springs from the granite backbone of Nova Scotia and deigns to marry the Atlantic Ocean some thirty miles east of Halifax. No really informed person will admit ignorance of this eminent river; for it appears on page 211 of Mr. James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, in which epic the Musquodoboit takes rank, as it should, with the Mississippi, the Amazon, the Shubenacadie, and other mighty streams. If you are not impressed by the name as Mr. Joyce was, you might look up *Hansard* for the year 1900 or thereabouts, in which Musquodoboit figures as the theme of a lively midnight debate between Robert Laird Borden and Sir Richard Cartwright. On that occasion the Ontario knight is said to have cursed Musquodoboit with an awful curse, though his exact language seems to be off the record. All this should bring home to you the fame and importance of my home town.

As I have said, Middle Musquodoboit is central in point of place, and also because it is the heart of a whole alluvial culture. Its merits are those of quality, not of size. In 1890, there were 185 persons in our main school district, according to a strict census taken in my memory. But four suburbs neatly placed at the main points of the compass would probably double that number, so that you can imagine an area of 10 to 12 square miles teeming with 370 souls. I use the word "teeming" advisedly, for the families were large.

At the middle town of which I speak, the valley of the Musquodoboit is or used to be half-a-mile to a mile wide, more or less—a level of meadows (we called them intervals) between gently rolling hills. The upland fields were stony, as my hands remember well, and most of the best land lay on the river-silt of the intervals. Unfortunately, it was risky to cultivate them

*A radio broadcast, for C. B. C., 18th July, 1939.

very much, since, if you did, a spring freshet was liable to deposit your farm several miles down stream or sweep it out to sea. You therefore left the intervals to grow what hay they would, and as many elm trees as chose to take root. In my day the village was proud of those elms, as I hope it still is. There grew, on my great grandfather's meadow, a monster more than five feet in diameter, which visitors were taken to admire. And an alien labourer who proposed to one of our neighbours that he save grass by cutting down a famous elm grove was firmly and finally shut up. But, lovely as these trees are to remember, I have always felt that their somewhat sentimental grace needs a bit of landscape corrective. This was amply supplied on our uplands by the athletic rock-maple and the dour sobriety of black spruce. In my fancy this union of interval grace and upland severity suggests my home town's dominant chord.

Now that I think of it, it is more than mere fancy. Musquodoboit's working-day swung between interval and upland, so that they gave us folk not only our chord, but our living rhythm. You sweated in a 90° heat, raking hay down by the river in late July, and at six o'clock some morning next January you were bob-sledding through the darkness and a crackling 10° frost on your way up to the Glenmore wood-lots. The July sun was wholesome, but I must admit that one schoolboy preferred the shade of the hazel-nut bushes masking the Big Bend of the river; and, although the dawn was beautiful as it strode over the snow on Glenmore heights, I myself had a fancy for the beauty of the kitchen fire. Only now that I have escaped both heat and frost, do I feel safe in acclaiming the dignity and discipline of youthful labour.

There are no reservations, however, in remembering the *fun* we boys had in the Musquodoboit of the 1880's and '90's. Through it swung the same rhythm of interval and upland as boys had swung to a century before us. Our school-teacher had trouble with the attendance when April high-water brought the log-drives down stream. It was a lovely and enviable sight to see my friend Sam Morris acrobat on a rotating spruce; I tried it once myself, but the results were ignominious. Later on, you went hunting mayflowers in Jim Kent's pasture, or yellow dog-tooth violets around the elms by Watson McCurdy's gully; and if you felt unusually grown-up and wicked (and totally unobserved), you grubbed for a bit of dry elm-root to smoke. This was supposed to give you jaundice, but I never got anything more exciting out of it than a belly-ache. There

were snap-turtles, also, on the under-side of which you carved your initials if you had a jack-knife—an operation which was said to be essentially painless. Once, down by La Prairie farm, I caught a two-pound trout, not to speak of an eel, all on one day; and in the mists of a very early summer morning I clumsily netted a whopping four-pounder for an anxious and irritated grandfather. Best memory of all, I have seen a twenty-pound salmon lazying in Bob Kaulbach's swimming-hole, ebony-backed and vibrantly motionless.

There was plenty to do for fun on the uplands also. Cock-partridges—so we called them—were to be heard drumming in the juniper woods up toward the abandoned Anglican church; if you were careful, you might even see them at it. (Pleasant they were in their lives, and how very pleasant divided on a platter, with bread sauce accompanying!) My cousin snared rabbits on the snow-trails behind his father's pasture, but gentle souls like me, who preferred a cozy bed to a frosty trail, waited to find blue hepaticas there. I still insist they are never really true blue anywhere else. Far up the Mountain on the old Lower Stewiacke road, I have found a big rosy lady's slipper, which my teacher told me was a fine specimen of *Cypripedium Acaule*, and so initiated me into the love of learning.

It is fatally easy, I know, to go on sentimentalizing like this. But after all, these are the things that got into the young bones of four generations of men, to emerge in dream fifty years later. Literally, they are the stuff that dreams are made on.

So, you may judge, life in my home town was even and placid enough, like the general course of the river itself. It is true, there were plenty of rapids in the stream, but they usually didn't do more than twitter like swallows or chatter like blue-jays. Besides, there were plenty of deep holes into which you could blunder with surprising suddenness. And after the spring and fall rains, the old man took the bit in his teeth and careered down the valley with amazing speed and strength. If you care to, you can find in all this a little allegory about the life of most of our people—at least those 370 who lived in our part of the river course. It may suggest—or I want it to—that life in my home town was not unvaried, and had a certain modest strength and depth to it.

For one thing, the Musquodoboit of my day had a profound sense of community. No special credit, I suppose, is due to its people on that account. For this sense had grown out of the mere necessities of living there for a hundred years or more.

A self-contained and self-dependent society necessarily breeds inter-dependence among neighbours. Its members are members one of another, in a way even more fundamental than St. Paul knew when he coined the phrase. The farmer was the central figure of the community, of course, but he needed the clergyman, the doctor, the carpenter, the blacksmith; they in their turn depended on him. Nobody could get along without everybody else, and of that fact all were profoundly if mutely conscious. No doubt all this made Musquodoboit life very parochial and self-satisfied and stodgy, but at the same time that life simply had to strike its roots deep into real earth. I know that many others have told just such a story of Canadian home-towns, and recorded the vast social changes that have occurred in them. But the tale still seems hard to believe. Our bodies act in 1939 while our minds belong to 1880.

Like so many other people, I love to live in the good old days—strictly in memory and sentiment, that is. Like the American tourist in *habitant* Quebec, I love to dwell on the "medieval independence"—so I have heard it called—of places like Musquodoboit fifty years ago. How primitive! How quaint! How amusing! And indeed Musquodoboit was all of that, when you look back on it—especially amusing. Some of my neighbours still ate bread from wheat which they had grown themselves and which had been ground into flour at Mill Village, four miles away. Locally made boots and larrigans still came to Middleton school on the feet of my fellows. I myself have worn grey homespun pants—and how I hated them! —which originated on the backs of my grandfather's sheep, were woven on my grandmother's loom, and were finally made into fearful and wonderful shapes by Aunt Harriet Peter Clark. (She "allowed" two inches on every measurement, "for growth".) As for my grandmother's blankets, they remain to this day like old soldiers of the late war: they never die, they simply fade away. Woven in Musquodoboit in the late 1880's, they have seen thirty years' service in Vancouver, and they would still be going strong if they hadn't become objects of reverence. No evidence of immortality could be more cogent.

Even more durably entertaining to remember than boots and blankets are our people. When I first came across Juliet's nurse, I felt that Shakespeare hadn't much that was new to tell me, for I observed that she had come to life again in the person of my great-grand-aunt Eliza. It is a joy to recall dear old Bobby Kaulbach cursing the meagre harvest on the edges

of his potato patch and vowing to God he would never again plant an outside row. And it was my weekly privilege to hear Uncle Zenas Bell pray for "the young and raisin' generation who are posterin' down the road to ruin among the gay and the giddy of the world". Uncle Zenas didn't really mean that Musquodoboit indulged in lurid night life: he was probably recalling with considerable zest what he had seen in some West Indian sea-port.

I often wonder what a first-rate novelist would do in the way of a realistic "regional novel" about Musquodoboit. Provided, that is, he dared to write or publish it without expurgation, as no Canadian novelist has yet dared to do. Certainly he could use Aunt Eliza and Bobby Kaulbach and Uncle Zenas Bell for comic relief. He might even use his experiences in Middleton school-house to give his pages a pungent local smell. And if he really wanted to, he could find in his memory plenty of tragic circumstance that had a definite local colour; for Musquodoboit was not always even and placid. Some day, perhaps, that novel will be done. But the novelist had better leave for the South Seas just before publication.

They tell me that railways and electric lights and so forth have invaded my home town. They even say that everybody has a motor car, and covers what used to be a whole day's journey in an hour. It is hard to believe. But I do know that when my young cousin Angus gets his evening chores done, he and his girl drive thirty miles to Truro to see a movie. The principle, if not the mode, seems familiar. It moves an old fogey to spout the inevitable platitude:—the more things change, the more they remain the same.